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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES

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Special Issue

on

Rewriting History

with a focus on South Asian Literature & Cinema



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Introduction

Corinne Alexandre-Garner and Geetha Ganapathy-Doré wish to sincerely thank the CREA (Centre de Recherches en Etudes Anglophones) of Paris Nanterre University, IDPS (Institut de droit public, sciences politiques et sociales) of the Sorbonne Paris Nord University and the Society for Activities and Research on the Indian World (SARI-France) and Prof. Mohanan Baskaran Pillai from the Department of Politics and International Studies, Pondicherry University for their staunch support to this project. Without the spirit of inter-university cooperation and solidarity, these volumes would not have seen the light of day in these difficult pandemic times.

Such completeness and potential finality, which were unknown to former times, are the dangers that arise out of the modern manipulation of facts. Even in the free world, where the government has not monopolized the power to decide and tell what factually is or is not, gigantic interest organizations have generalized a kind of raison d'état frame of mind such as was formerly restricted to the handling of foreign affairs and, in its worst excesses, to situations of clear and present danger. And national propaganda on the government level has learned more than a few tricks from business practices and Madison Avenue methods. Images made for domestic consumption, as distinguished from lies directed at a foreign adversary can become a reality for everybody and first of all for the image-makers themselves, who while still in the act of preparing their "products", are overwhelmed by the mere thought of their victims' potential numbers.

- Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics", *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967.

The history teacher had chosen to illustrate his lesson, reflection and the class debate with some caricatures from the well-known satirical weekly paper *Charlie Hebdo*, « not to the taste » of some fundamentalist parents and militants. Meanwhile, on the same day, in the Paris Assize Court, the trial pertaining to the 2015 terrorist assassinations of most of the journalists of the editorial board of *Charlie Hebdo* and of the clients of a casher hypermarket was taking place. The contiguity of those events cannot be ignored, all the more so because the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad were presented as the pretexts for both barbarian crimes, in 2015 and in 2020, and a man had been killed for doing his job as a teacher, helping his pupils to analyze, understand and practice their freedom to think, talk and write the debate over libels, blasphemy, and political cartooning goes back a long way, so does the discussion around the freedom of the press and nowadays academic freedom. Those issues had been anticipated by talented writers, for example, by Githa Hariharan in her novel *In Times of Siege* (Pantheon Books, 2003) precisely describing how democracies can become 'illiberal' and schools and universities can become ideological battle-grounds and territories of hypocrisy, self-censorship, lies and hatred instead of institutions of complex peaceful debates, enriching exchanges, honest research and priceless teaching.

Today, the scientific study of facts is being contested in the worlds of politicians, the media and education. However some former enemy countries such as France and Germany have succeeded in working together to come to terms with the former diverging versions of historical facts and have even produced a common history book revisiting and reconciling their different historical perspectives on the unfolding of the Second World War for French and German pupils in their own language, while some progressive professors from Israel and Palestine have tried to do the same. There might be a will to revisit and rethink important historical facts, without erasing the most unpleasant aspects of the past and without glorifying selected events in order to rewrite History positively, creating a more complex and inclusive narrative of the past, nevertheless not forgetting the global picture. The memorial laws in France have opened a deep chiasm between the historians who rightly think that they only have the tools to analyze the past and the members of Parliament who were attempting to make History fit their own political goals.

If few democracies have succeeded in remaining immune to that kind of debate, illiberal democracies are prone to fighting anyone they think is tarnishing their growing nationalism and nationalistic pride. On February 9th 2021, two renowned academics Professor Barbara Engelking, director of the Research Center on the Holocaust of the Polish Academy of Science (PAN) and Professor Jan Grabowski from the University of Ottawa were condemned by Polish Courts, because their research was considered to have offended the reputation of Poland.

Thus there are two ways to think about 'Rewriting History'. One way is to broaden the perspective of the perception of the past to add new information or in-depth perception and to explore aspects or points of view that had remained in the shadows until then. But more often than not, rewriting History implies distorting real facts so that the fabricated fake facts suit the beliefs, political programmes and sensibilities that one wishes to shape and impose. Rewriting History often means to impoverish it and reduce it to a simplified ideological narrative, a one-dimensional story, for example, minimizing the weight of the Mughal culture in Indian history textbooks or in Hariharan's novel instrumentalizing Basava's biography for nationalistic purposes. This falsification can be found all over the world in different forms in the transformation of iconographic documents, the pulling down of statues, the renaming of streets, the preventing of the opening of a museum (Gdansk 2017), the enacting of new laws on how to teach history, the altering of history (Amit Shah) or the amending of the constitution to deprive certain groups of their citizenship (Assam 2019). Meanwhile textbooks are rewritten to correspond to the new political myth generated and further research is forbidden.

In the Swiss daily newspaper *Le Temps* on January 21, 2020, Catherine Frammery discussed how a most respected institution, the American National Archives, recently deviated from their role as guardians of American memory by modifying the photos of the Women's March in Washington on 21st January 2017, the day after the inauguration of the 45th president, erasing from the pictures exhibited all the hostile slogans displayed on the placards held by the demonstrators. If the National Archives have apologized since, this kind of manipulation of the iconographic archives in America recalls the somber times of Stalinism when retouched official photos made all the leaders, who had gradually become "enemies of the people" in the eyes of the Soviet dictator, disappear from the picture.

Created, not by historians with respect for historiography but by revisionist politicians who wish to glorify specific aspects of the past, these narratives are only a falsification of History. In 1949, when he published his dystopian novel 1984, George Orwell portrayed a main character forced to falsify the contents of past newspapers as and when 'Big Brother' so needs it. Winston rewrites, transforms, and crosses out names or erases them; he renames things on demand; he also changes the dates, manipulating the narrative of historical events at the request of the State. In the novel, the main character is rewriting History and the State can then affirm that certain events or certain people simply never existed. "IT NEVER HAPPENED". Thus lies or fake events are transformed into reality and the truth of History, in the context of the novel. The sentence "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" may belong to the fictional world, it rings true however even today in the real world.

Literature and the arts have not only depicted and predicted events and feelings as they will develop later in time but also enabled the reader to approach new understandings of the human mind and the complexities of its responses to events of the past and present. The arts have included, reproduced, mocked and transformed former narratives and world views; they have also questioned reality and History.

For postcolonial thinkers and theorists, the rewriting of History (Guha, Chatterjee, Pandey) essentially aims at decentralizing perspectives and forms part of an attempt to reclaim power and autonomy by postcolonial subjects who wish to re-territorialize the space they were dispossessed of. Thus were explored the problems of the subalterns, i.e., poor peasants, women and Dalits. Other researchers have looked at another dimension - the transmutation of memory into history or the duty to remember, notably around the trauma of partition (Butalia, Hasan, Jalal). But writing, and particularly writing fiction, has engendered a new space where the exploration of trauma and its devastating effects on both individuals and societies can take place.

On the one hand, Indian writers have always intertwined myth, biography, history, art history and metanarrative accounts of the writing of their novelistic récits with their plots (Rushdie, Tharoor, Sealy, ...). On the other hand, Indian directors, who have favored the distinct genres of myth, epic and historical fresco, are in the process of reviewing their ways of depicting ancient or contemporary history by resorting to hybrid strategies (Bhansali, Das, Kashyap, Ratnam, Gowariker, Mehta, Sivan ...).

The six papers presented in this volume explore the topic of Rewriting History through literature and visual media (TV serials, Cinema). Both literature and the visual arts attempt to rehabilitate women's place and perspective, trying to be more inclusive, yet they open new interrogations on the creation of new communitarian points of view. The retrospective analysis of canonical texts or founding events through fiction opens up new interrogations on the role of the arts for the understanding of History both at the global and individual level.

Cécile Birk's sobering analysis of Arudpragasam's memorial narrative of Sri Lankan civil war highlights the poignant and long lasting impact of a brief day and night in a refugee camp. Hannah Freundlich explores how Chitra Banerjee Divakranni manages to weave a modern narrative out of the much rewritten history of the epic heroine Draupati. Could the roots of Renaissance lie in India rather than in Italy? Maria-Sabina Draga outlines this alternative perspective thanks to her original interpretation of Rushdie's *Enchantress of Florence*. The focus shifts to the New World in Geetha Ganapathy's Doré's reading of Rushdie's latest novel, *Quichotte*, where he takes on Cervantes to propose a fictional antidote to the end of history. Lydie Le Moine takes up Channel 4's *Indian Summers* to deconstruct the paradoxical coexistence of Raj Nostalgia with postcolonial agenda in Paul Rutman's TV serial. Madhura Joshi and Himabindu Timiri's comparison of *Hidden Figures* and *Mission Mangal* investigates the ways in which both the movies foreground the act of inclusion of women in the space race. Spanning three continents and several epochs, these papers throw new light on the more individual and less apparent aspects of our common human past and indeed our probable extraterrestrial future.

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¹ <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/archives-nationales-americaaines-veulent-reecrire-lhistoire>

“Either be killed in the shelling, or conscripted and then killed in the fighting” — memorial narration in *The Story of a Brief Marriage* by Anuk Arudpragasam

Cécile BIRKS

Abstract

*In his debut novel, **The Story of a Brief Marriage**, Anuk Arudpragasam accomplishes a poignant revisitation of the haunting times of the Sri Lankan civil war. His visceral narrative bravely chronicles the intricacies of a single day and night in the life of a refugee fleeing both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eeem and government forces. His aesthetic project takes shape in the form of a deceptively simple, daring diegesis that brings together a fraught political-historical moment and the bleak, fable-like, intimate story of a briefly married couple; looking into atrocity, it also explores what it means to try and remain alive in most extreme conditions.*

Rather than discussing the complex political and ideological framework that shaped, stifled and fractured the society and culture the protagonist grew up in, the novel, often lyrically, rewrites history by both depicting and deconstructing several strata of life in a refugee camp, as well as their lethal set-up that eventually led to the final disintegration of the Tamil resistance struggle. This memorial narrative gives visibility, as well as a place in history, to the anonymous and long-forgotten innocent victims whose lives were wiped out by war.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Civil War, Tamil resistance, refugee, marriage, existence

*No poem or play or song,
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured¹.*

MOST CHILDREN HAVE two whole legs and two whole arms but this little six-year-old that Dinesh was carrying had already lost one leg, the right one from the lower thigh down, and was now about to lose his right arm. (Arudpragasam, 2016, 1).

The horrifically graphic opening lines of Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* set the tone of a debut novel that accomplishes a harrowing revisitation of the barbaric times of the Sri Lankan civil war. This visceral narrative bravely chronicles the intricacies of a single day and night in the life of a refugee fleeing both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eeem and government forces.

Arudpragasam's aesthetic project takes the shape of a deceptively simple, daring diegesis that brings together a fraught political-historical moment and the bleak, fable-like, intimate story of a briefly married couple; looking into atrocity, it also explores what it means to try and remain alive in most extreme conditions. Indeed, rather than discussing the complex political and ideological framework that shaped, stifled and fractured the society and culture the protagonist grew up in, and rather than looking for a verifiable historical truth, Arudpragasam opts for an often lyrical depiction and deconstruction of the multiple strata of life in a refugee camp before the final disintegration of the Tamil resistance struggle.

A tragic fable

The narrative focuses on a young man, Dinesh, who has been a refugee for a year and been living for three weeks in a camp in the Northern Province during the final days of the war, trying to remain alive by helping to transport the wounded to a makeshift clinic and bury the dead:

They had accrued there, many tens of thousands of them, over a period of a few weeks. A few of them had been displaced recently from nearby villages, but most of them were refugees from villages to the north, south and west who had abandoned their homes long before and been on the move for many months, some, like Dinesh, for almost a year. (9)²

As the title of the novel indicates, the main narrative thread is the marriage that a debilitated and widowed father, named Somasundaram, wishes to have performed between his daughter Ganga and Dinesh, with the rather superstitious hope that having his daughter married to a stranger will spare her from torture through rape by government soldiers:

In truth he didn't want to get her married, he only wanted to keep her safe and close beside him, for now that the rest of his family was gone he could hardly bear to lose her too. He hadn't given marriage even a moment's thought till the day before, he said wiping a tear from his cheek with a dirty thumb, but as soon as he'd seen Dinesh in the clinic he'd known it was his responsibility, that it was something he had to do for the sake of his daughter. (7)

The narrative motif of hasty marriages to strangers is the direct transposition of practices that took place in the late 90's as young women, occasionally young men, formerly under the control of the rebels, suddenly fell under the control of government soldiers and were raped as a form of torture and psychological violence:

Parents had been trying desperately to get their children married in the past two years, their daughters especially, hoping that once married they'd be less likely conscripted into the movement. By this point the married were just as likely to be recruited for the fighting as the unmarried it was true, but many continued trying to marry their daughters even so, believing that if they ended up in the hands of the government the girls that were married were less likely to be defiled, more likely to be passed over by the soldiers for other spoils. (8)

Dinesh accepts the proposal and despite the death of the Iyer (officiating priest) and Ganga's silent resistance, the marriage is expedited – they are blessed and declared married by Ganga's father with no further ritual:

He held out the thaali to Dinesh, who took it uncertainly in both hands, and he motioned for Ganga to sit down before Lakshmi. She squatted down, careful not to dirty her sari, and sat there gazing listlessly at the goddess. (...) For a moment their eyes met. (...) A light breeze brushed past their ears. They were married. (52)

But tragically, as the title itself foretells, removing all possibility of surprise, being married to Dinesh will not protect Ganga from the bombs. The inciting point of the boy-meets-girl pattern will lead to no positive resolution but to a horrific ending that leaves Dinesh overwhelmed by yet another essential loss:

Ganga was lying on her stomach a few feet from the entrance [of her tent], her arms stretched out in front of her. Her feet were crossed at a strange angle, and her pink frock was drawn up above her knees, leaving bare the coffee-colored skin of her lower thighs and calves. (...) The right side of her head, which seemed somewhat swollen, was pressed upon the ground. Her left eye was half open and the right corner of her parted lips was kissing the dirt. (183)

The marriage thread however, as simple as it is, structures the plot and opens up spaces for undramatic moments of non-story to expand. Apart from occasional, fundamental flashbacks, the timeline is simple and linear, subtly crafting the narrative pace, oscillating between fast accelerations and ellipses, and very slow, almost still moments that dwell on details and minutely designed lyrical pauses. For instance, Chapter Five drastically slows down the narrative pace, zooming on Dinesh's solitary silent walking through the camp where the refugees are fast asleep. Stretching over almost ten pages, this rare, valuable moment of respite before the shelling starts again dilutes the action into a beautiful poetic prose and highlights the ordinariness of sleep in between bombings:

Careful not to disturb the pervasive stillness, Dinesh began walking quietly through the periphery of the camp. Most of the evacuees were inside their tents, together with their families and things, but many were sleeping under the open sky, on the ground and in uncovered trenches, individually and in groups of up to four or five. Observing them as he passed into the more populated sections of the camp Dinesh found himself filled, slowly, with the sacredness of being awake in a place in which everybody else was asleep. (100)

Further on in the chapter, Dinesh's washing in the well, his careful soaping of his shirt and sarong, cutting of his hair, clipping of his nails or his using an old toothbrush are other examples of how the author delves into the vernacular of the life in the camp so as to often poetically depict what remains of it when one is not dead yet:

He stared at the package of dead bodily matter for a while, and seeing all of it so neatly and tightly packaged he felt somehow invigorated, as if the elimination of his hair and nails had freed him of some burden, heightening briefly his sense of being alive. 109)

Not dead yet – bodies in the refugee camp

Bringing the protagonist momentary solace, these basic activities are also part of the physicality of the narrative. They show the ultimate limit of life when one is not dead yet but when bodies are reduced to mere functioning and effectively grasp the withering of humanity inherent to the living conditions during any major violent disaster. Graphically detailed physical events, such as sleeping, excreting, washing, attempting to have an erection, or simply breathing, convey the minimality of life in the camp. In the novel in particular, it is radicalized to mere behaviorism and the writer chronicles the most primary aspects of Dinesh's physiological existence in the course of a single day and night, only to show how hollowed out his body has become:

He felt an urge, suddenly, to empty his bowels. Not so much a bodily urge, for he'd hardly eaten anything in the last few days, hardly enough for there to be an excess, but more of a psychological urge, an urge he might nevertheless satisfy physically, he felt, since after all it was only a matter of pushing hard enough. (20)

Beside the limitation of life to mere bodily functions, the withdrawal of humanity also affects language and communication. Dialogue is sparse, poor, often automatic and rarely meant to be meaningful. What is said by Dinesh or Ganga matters little and their rare conversations have more to do with mere behavioral responses to the contingency of the marriage situation than with the cooperative sharing of meaning that proper communication usually requires:

He hadn't taken into consideration the fact that he and Ganga could talk, that they could communicate, and that being married would mean or at least involve speech. He couldn't think of any examples, it was true, but there could be no doubt that marriage involved not only the occasional sharing of information but also conversation, speaking simply for the sake of speaking. The thought troubled Dinesh vaguely, since he didn't really know what they would be able to talk about when the time came, but most likely, he knew, he was troubled only because he'd gotten so used to being silent in the recent past. (40)

The act of speaking that Dinesh feels has become unnatural is simply what allows action to unfold and plays no part in the brief intimacy of marriage that the newly wedded couple suddenly experiences over a few hours and in the sexual tension that transiently builds between them. In this unique moment, the nuances of the narrative are rather focused on the eye contacts and the slow movements of the two characters' bodies when, for instance, they are in the rock bed:

They moved closer and closer, held each other tighter and tighter, and then suddenly Ganga's body seemed to fold forward and tilt downwards and instinctively Dinesh's body followed it too, his arms loosening their hold but not letting go, so that they both fell together sideways onto the bed facing each other, their heads overshooting the earthen pillow by just a little, their bodies exposed to each other full on for the first time, chests touching but only very faintly and their waist also and their feet. (144-45)

The unaccomplished sexual intercourse matters less than what transpires between these two consciences and the convoluted sentence plunges the reader into Dinesh's hesitant train of thought as he wonders how Ganga is going to respond if he moves his body in a way or another. Yet the non-accomplishment of love making remains a fundamental motif in Dinesh's tragic itinerary as it both results from the decrepitude of his body and the symbolic emasculation that the war has produced.

Solipsistic wanderings

Quite often too, the writer spins the graceful descriptions of the ordinary into meditative pauses which gives the reader a glimpse into Dinesh's mindspace after several months of solitary existence. The range of Dinesh's thoughts, speculations and imaginative scenarios can be regarded as a telling panorama of how living in a refugee camp can impact on a person's inner life. The novelist indeed not only deals with the issues of displacement, with the breakdown of communities and families, but also with the isolation and fragmentation of the self, the dangers of the obliteration of both self and the world of other selves, which are major issues in war times. Articulating narrative and philosophy³, the novel dramatizes the famous Berkeleyan subjectivist premises "*Esse est percipi* — to be is to be perceived" — through the situation of subjective deadlock Dinesh finds himself in and the limit of subjectivity when, having lost his mother and all his fundamental bearings and not relating to anyone anymore, there is no dialectic relationship with sociability left and nobody to perceive him any more:

He'd been isolated from his home, family, friends, and possessions so long that such a separation could no longer feel painful or even unusual. It was more than just disconnection from once familiar people and things that he felt, more than just a sense of being isolated; above all it was the disintegration of his body that came to mind at such times, the disintegration of his hair, his teeth, his skin. His nails no longer growing, his skin no longer sweating. He sensed acutely the fact that soon his body would begin breaking down, sensed in fact that the process of becoming permanently separate from it had already begun. All his life he had used his hands and feet, his fingers and toes, and knowing that soon he'd no longer be able to rely on them made him feel abandoned suddenly and alone, as when at train station or the seaside, about to emigrate far away, you must say good-bye to the friends and family you thought would be present all through your life. (20)

Yet, this situation of radical solitude paves the way for a singular encounter with an injured black crow Dinesh does not know whether or not he should, or even could, kill. The narrative pace drastically slows down through no less than eight pages and the minutiae of the pause brings together the presence of the animal and a meditative reflection

on sympathy or compassion for the embodied other that the bird comes to represent:

Why it had expended so much effort calling out to begin with, and what it thought another living creature could do for it now, Dinesh couldn't say. He had no food to give it, no way to treat or heal its wounds. He could only either put it out of its misery, or simply let it be. (...) The crow blinked slowly and Dinesh caressed it once more, as if to reassure it that he would stay with it a while longer. (157-58)

This moment of sympathetic recognition with the animal being conjures up a previous encounter with a gecko that Dinesh, then a teenager still undamaged by the war, had intentionally injured with a pencil and had left “incapacitated on the floor” (161). Whereas there was, in the case of the gecko, a failure of sympathetic recognition with the animal other that ultimately lead to a cruel act and a passive contemplation of the animal's last moments, the encounter with the crow prompts Dinesh's imaginative understanding of his own situation of isolation in the camp and what sort of ultimate resolution can be anticipated:

The two situations must have been different in some subtle way, for unlike the gecko it didn't bother Dinesh at all now to remain beside the wounded crow. He didn't feel the urge to end its existence or to move away from its presence and in fact he was even calmed by the crow, comforted by its nearness. Perhaps it was the desperation in the gecko's unblinking eyes and rapidly throbbing abdomen that had made the gecko so difficult to be next to, a desperation that was less prominent in the crow, or perhaps, on reflection more likely in fact, the two situations were actually more or less the same, and it was simply he who had changed. (162)

This pondering presents interpretive challenges and one can remain divided about its significance. Yet, what seems to surface clearly is that Dinesh's sympathetic identification with the suffering crow is all the stronger as his own situation is now eminently comparable to that of the injured bird who has been hurt but is not dead yet.

In that respect, meeting the crow acts as a turning point in Dinesh's mental itinerary and marks a momentary stop in the subjective disintegration abandonment and not being perceived anymore have progressively provoked. The episode subtly shows Dinesh's solipsistic inclinations that lead him to think that he is the only mind that exists and that he has grown independent of the world outside him. The sympathetic recognition with the animal leads him then to perceive his self as whole and to reconsider the outside world as unnecessary and independent to his being:

It was easier to find his way back than he'd worried, and moving silently beneath the lightless canopy Dinesh began to feel strangely calm, peaceful in a way that he hadn't for some time. It was as though an airtight space inside his rib cage were sheltering some small, fragile item, something so precious that the rest of his body, his eyes and ears and his hands and feet, existed only in order to sustain it. All the possibilities he needed were contained inside this thing, he felt, and by means of it he had become autonomous and self-sustaining, independent, somehow, of the world outside him, more and more with every step he took towards the clearing. (163-64)

Existence in this brief moment is everything that he comes to experience, namely the crow and its injury he identifies with, and constitutes his egocentric, self-contained mind out of which nothing can be proved to exist.

The rather enigmatic final pages and lines of the novel lead to no unambiguous interpretive resolution since, after the death of Ganga, Dinesh seems to have eventually resigned himself to the fact that the world holds nothing left for him to lose but nonetheless

seems to sustain the idea that, his body being not dead yet, he is still part of the world and there is perhaps an option other than anticipating the worst, “[being] killed in the shelling, or conscripted and then killed in the fighting” (11), as he formerly did before marrying Ganga:

Dinesh leaned forward, slowly, and placed his hands on the ground in front of him. Gazing down he began to caress the soft dirt, tenderly and rhythmically, slowing to a stop, as if a thought was occurring to him, then resuming, slowing to a stop, and then resuming. All the while his chest continued to oscillate, to rise and fall independently of him, accepting and renouncing, as the atmosphere continued entering and leaving, the small volume of air it was still able to hold. (193)

War trauma

Beyond a philosophical pondering on the isolation of the self that living in a combat zone provokes, Dinesh's mind-wandering is more fundamentally a metaphorical imagery of the long-lasting physical and psychological stigmata war has left on him. Several novels, such as Shehan Karunatilaka's *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew*, Nihal de Silva's *The Road from Elephant Pass*, and Naoyomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* have grappled with the psychology of warfare, with representations of the legacy of the civil war to Sri Lankan society or have looked into the complexities in both camps, trying to understand why some people might take up the arms or become suicide bombers. But Arudpragasam's approach is radically different to these as, rather than analysing the ideologies at stake in the conflict, it unremittingly examines the traumatic damages of the war on the victims. In this respect, the handling of the historical context is instrumental to his aesthetic project. Apart from the references to Ganga's village, “Adampan. In Mannar” (37) and to Jaffna (168), the allusion to Dinesh's brother joining the movement (159) or the mention of Deepavali (111), there are few references, whether historical, geographical or cultural, to the external world and to history in the making. Asked why the historical context was kept so intentionally in the background, the author explains that he did not aim at writing the historical truth of the civil war and that he kept the diegesis pure and powerful, untarnished by too many verifiable historical facts and elements, so as to focus on the characters' inscapes:

In everything I write, I think of the elements of the external world—people, places, histories, situations, events—as a kind of anchor that allows me to get close to the elements of inner life that most interest me. The external world, at least when I am writing, is like an anchored boat from which a diver enters the water, confident that however far or deep she dives there will be a reference point on the surface to which she can safely return. (Zuckerman, 2016)

Besides, the handling of time is another major element in the examination of war trauma that the novel performs. The narrative often slows down to a standstill so as to have the reader plunged into the characters' petrified minds where thoughts and emotions have been numbed by the shocks and there is an abundance of unbearable, clinical vignettes that lead the reader to come closer to a visceral comprehension of war trauma:

The two main characters were highly traumatized, estranged from their own minds as a result of what they'd been through, so they didn't really have access to their thoughts and feelings. As someone engaged in trying to understand, from a very different context, what being in such a situation is like, this posed a challenge: How can you try to glean the inner life of a person cut off from their inner life? So the novel begins where it does, with an old man suggesting that Dinesh marry his daughter. This proposal forces Dinesh to come to terms with all that has happened to him, to try to become intimate again with his thoughts and feelings. The novel takes place during a small window of consciousness within a much larger period of alienation from oneself. (Zuckerman, 2016)

Dinesh is the privileged and perceptive focalizer of a narrative that unceasingly delves into barbarity and that prominently mobilizes an extremely modern clinical knowledge of trauma; there is indeed a vast array of medically accurate descriptions of the post traumatic stress syndromes that affect the characters, whether main or minor, who suffer from memory, identity, emotion, perception, behavior or sense of self problems, as war trauma can potentially disrupt every area of mental functioning.

The characterization of Ganga⁵ in particular is a vivid illustration of what the contemporary clinic of trauma calls post traumatic stress disorder. Through the text the young girl, who has lost all the members of her family and whose father has supposedly been killed too, is consistently portrayed as emotionally absent, silently and mechanically performing her chores, cooking food for her father, then for her husband, but as having no personal engagement or sentiment in the marriage prospect, as if her mind was elsewhere. Her brain has been numbed and keeps shutting down whenever confronted with emotional engagement:

Are you happy we're married?

Ganga stopped moving.

Perhaps she hadn't heard him. Gently, he repeated the question.

He waited for her to respond but she remained silent.

Are you happy that we're married?

Ganga drew her head back a little.

What do you mean?

Are you happy that we're together here?

Their bodies were still pressed together but were now completely rigid. The warmth and moisture of Ganga's skin emanated up, and seemed to hold everything still.

What is there to be happy or sad about?

Dinesh's arms loosened very slightly around her back.

Things just happen and we have to accept them. Happiness and sadness for people who can control what happens to them. (147-48)

Highlighting the irrelevance of Dinesh's questions in this lacunary and listless conversation between the spouses, the unresponsiveness and immobilization of Ganga are the manifestation of the freeze responses and stupor that trauma almost systematically provokes:

After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system. The survivor's energy now becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos, at the expense of spontaneous involvement in their life. (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p.53)

Even if, contrary to Ganga, he is marginally able fantasize the marriage prospect and the possibility of a sexual intercourse, Dinesh too, after months of loneliness, feels overwhelmed by fragments of traumatic memory, images or sensory details, that he fails to piece together and make sense of:

Recollections of that life did come back to him now and then, but only in brief traces, in silent images that came of their own accord, that could not be connected with other things, and that were gone before he had time to recognize them. They left behind only a vague sense of vacancy, like a childhood home one returns to years later and finds emptied of all its contents, only nails remaining where pictures were once hung (...).

All he was really in a position to understand at that moment were the ten or eleven months since the evacuation had begun, just as all he could really hope or plan for was restricted to the few hours left in each day, and perhaps, in an amorphous way, the few days or weeks before that abstract point at which he too would be killed. From the hemisphere of his mind devoted to the past and the hemisphere devoted to the future great swathes had been shaved off. (112-13)

Not only has the memory of his life before it was shattered by the war been badly damaged but his comprehension of what has been going on since he and his mother had to abandon their home is severely impaired:

Confronted with horror — especially the horror of “inescapable shock” — the system of normal memory becomes overwhelmed and breaks down. (...) As a result, the imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations. (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p.176)

The prolonged exposure to an unsafe environment has severely affected his thinking and altered his nervous system, and his neuroperception of the world has become faulty, leading to a complete separation between a rational purpose and the possibility to execute it. On many occasions, long, drawn-out sentences, with many coordinated or juxtaposed propositions, stylistically reproduce his painful sense of wandering aimlessly through the camp:

A strange feeling always came over Dinesh as he wandered around in the silence after the bombing. Even if he had some specific task to do, if he was digging a grave for the dead or helping transport the wounded to the hospital or clinic, still he felt he didn't quite know what he was doing or where he was going. For a long time he would wander around the burned and disturbed camp lost, disoriented, like a leaf detached from its tree and blown haphazardly over barren land, without link to any living thing. (19)

The people in his surroundings often seem unreal to him and despite the fact that he

had seen dozens of amputees with similar stumps in the last months, (...) he was still somehow unable to believe in the reality of all the truncated limbs ; [they] seemed, in some way, fake, or illusory. (2)

Besides such moments of derealization, Dinesh is also depicted as being subjected to severe dissociative symptoms that erupt whenever there is a raid, involving an experience of depersonalisation as if he was outside his body — he stares blankly and absent-mindedly at the shelling, dissociating the noise and the tremor from his sensory system and not feeling any fear:

He would sit there for what seemed like hours staring at the ground before him. The wood creaking with each new explosion, gusts of hot air rushing in and then receding through the gaps between boat and ground, slackening his body instead of tightening it so he could feel himself tremble as the earth shook. He felt at such times always disembodied, as though observing himself from the outside, watching as his two hands clasped each other tightly and as his chest expanded and contracted, as air went in and out of his mouth, and he stayed that way, breathing in and out, long after the shelling had stopped. Not everyone reacted this way naturally and neither did Dinesh in the beginning, when his mother was alive and he was less resigned to all was happening around him. (15)

Dinesh grows progressively aware of the decrepitude of his body and the final realization of his impotency eventually triggers off the psychotic images of a sexual organ separated from his body, leading him to succumb to intense crying.

What adds to Dinesh's acute feeling of estrangement is that most people around him display severe post traumatic stress syndromes too. For instance, during the amputation of the young boy's arm, the doctor's coping manoeuvre is characteristic of the defense mechanism of dissociation that disconnects the psyche from the body:

His face remained impassive, even as the knife began to grate against the bone, as if the eyes that looked on at the scene belonged to a different person from the hands that did the cutting. How the doctor kept going on this way, day after day, Dinesh had no idea. (2-3)

This is of course a process that Dinesh himself has already experienced:

Dinesh had done his best to understand what it must be like to lose a mother and brother simultaneously. A similar thing had happened to him earlier in the war but it was hard to tell exactly, for he was so long cut off from the feeling. (30)

Several close-ups show Dinesh wandering through a hazy no man's land, surrounded by strangers displaying spectacular post traumatic stress syndromes. In one of them, an amputee, overwhelmed by phantom sensations in his amputated arm, is seen frantically looking for his missing part:

Dinesh had once seen a man with an amputated arm wandering around after the shelling as if in search of his missing body part; he picked up the different forearms he found on the ground and tried each one on like he was shopping for new clothes, pursing his lips with dissatisfaction at each mismatch of size or complexion. (18)

Another emblematic vignette shows women collectively subjected to traumatic dissociation, replaying over and over again the violent events they have lived through self-harming, crazy feelings and mad reactions⁶:

If they learned somehow that someone they knew was killed in the bombing outside, the women would begin to hit themselves and scream. They beat their heads against the dugout walls and pulled wildly at their hair till it tore from the roots, so that at the end of each spell of shelling many of the dugouts were full of clumps of long, dirty hair. If a relative was hurt out in the open they would run out from their shelters screaming and crying, and raising their pleading faces to the sky they would try to drag the wounded body back to safety, hauling it by a shirt or trouser leg, by a hand or foot or even a few strands of hair, even if it became clear the person had died. (16-17)

Memorial storytelling and testimony

Adding to the minute insight into the psychological aspects of trauma, there are also many graphic, unbearable descriptions of injured or maimed bodies. These shocking images stem from the writer's conscious intention to testify to mass murder that he witnessed only indirectly through TV footage. He was all the more able to identify with the young people who had been arrested by the government soldiers, since, had he not been able to leave Sri Lanka in 2006 when he was eighteen, he could have been one of them:

And, both before and while writing this novel, I did spend much time thinking about those last months of the war, traveling to the places in which it took place, listening to interviews on South Indian television with survivors, reading testimonies of survivors collected by psychiatrists and independent researchers, and, above all dwelling silently on all the pictures and footage from this time. (...) I prefer not to call this “research,” though, because the term “research” suggests that this kind of inquiry or learning is merely a means to a separate and pre-formed aim, the writing of a novel. In fact, the same impetus that impelled me to write this novel also impelled me, simultaneously, to engage in this inquiry or learning or dwelling. It was not separate, and was not conceived of as a separate process, or as a means to some other end. It came from the same impetus, which has to do, as I said, with who I am. (Zuckerman, 2016)

With this relentless inward gaze, the narrative strategy is to intentionally infuse, almost to a point of saturation, the imagery with distressful descriptions which are painful to read, so as to leave no doubt that war crimes had been perpetrated and that their consequences on civil populations were necessarily traumatic and most of the time unnamable. For instance, despite his habituation to carnage, having become “accustomed it was true to lifeless bodies and to body parts over the course of all the fighting” (104), Dinesh's attending to the boy through multiple amputation leaves him stunned:

There was no surgical instruments in the clinic, no anesthetics, neither general nor local, no painkillers or antibiotics, but from the look on the doctor's face it was clear that there was no choice but to go on. He motioned for the nurse to hold down the boy's left arm and leg, for Dinesh to hold down the head and right shoulder. He raised up the kitchen knife they'd been using for amputations, checked to make sure it was properly clean, and then, nodding at his two assistants, placed its sharp point just below the right elbow. Dinesh readied himself. (...) The doctor continued cutting through the flesh, not with quick efficient strokes but with a jagged, sawlike motion. (2-3)

Thus Arudpragasam's literary project constitutes first and foremost a formal response, in the form of an imaginary archive, to a situation he did not witness and was unable to do anything against, but that he had a duty to remember and felt compelled to write about. Written in the aftermath of the war, the novel forcefully addresses the fictional challenge of representing the war and questions the reciprocal relationship between fiction and the representability of political conflicts. With utmost gravity the novel makes the reader imagine the worst.

Despite the limited reception the novel might have received in Sri Lanka due to the fact that it was intended for an anglophone readership, this memorial narrative looks back at some mechanisms of warfare and re-territorializes the terrain of the war, giving visibility, as well as a place in history, to the anonymous and long-forgotten innocent victims, mostly the poorest Tamils whose lives were wiped out. And despite the absence of openly political opinions in the novel, the text is however endowed with an obvious political dimension simply and solely because the act of writing a novel about a conflict, such as the civil war in Sri Lanka, is inherently a powerful political one as J.M. Coetzee argues regarding fiction writing in post-apartheid South Africa:

Everything that one writes, it seems to me, in South Africa nowadays, has a political aspect. If it doesn't have a political aspect, the absence of it is a political aspect. But it also seems to me that the novel is a way of saying an extremely complex and subtle thing, if one wants to be complex and subtle. (Ilope, BBC documentary)

By so emphatically hammering home the message that the civil war in Sri Lanka left no one unscarred, what the rewriting of history in this uncompromising text operates is the harrowing testimony that war and mass violence represent the ultimate breakdown of communication, relationships, and societal systems. Therefore, beside the remembrance of crimes past that the text holds, what also seems to be at the core of Arudpragasam's militant intention is to demonstrate that what the official governmental narrative still euphemistically calls a necessary "rescue operation" was actually a genocide⁷:

The Sri Lankan state's official story of that period is one of war heroes and terrorists – of a humanitarian operation to "rescue" Tamil civilians from the Tamil Tigers. But this narrative cannot hold in the face of the overwhelming evidence that has emerged since 2009 – of indiscriminate shelling, the targeting of hospitals, and the sexual assault and execution of surrendered Tamil Tigers. (Seolghe)

Fiction writing may not be able to bring atonement, truth, justice or reconciliation, as Seamus Heaney sorrowfully regrets in the epigraph, but far from impoverishing or simplifying the history of his country, the novelist's voice of dissent complicates the official narrative of the Sri Lankan authorities with great subtlety and does a work of public utility since

the general public are not aware of the true consequences of violence...This ignorance is profoundly dangerous, since without a true awareness of its consequences, violence can seem an attractive way of dealing with conflict, competition or threat. (Fay and Smith 5)

In his novel the author does not write or report the events of the war, nor their sociopolitical context but nonetheless rewrites history, not by trying to impose a militant, and necessarily biased, historiographical narrative but by choosing to wander into a rather virgin terrain that Sri Lankan literature has so far kept relatively unexplored, namely that of war trauma and its multiple enduring consequences. His text-as-story may be read therefore not as a historical fact but as a response to what the official account of the conflict has wished to keep silent. The historical outrage the Sri Lankan state was responsible for is thus not left outside language and this fiction reflects the novelist's concern with the conjunction of the political and the fictional that transmutes history into story. By encapsulating so intimately the clinical reality of war trauma, this fictional piece lays the groundwork for a necessary rewriting of Sri Lankan history.

Looking into the inscape of war and brilliantly articulating storytelling and history, this tragic fiction ultimately proposes a broader insight into recent mass atrocities, such as the Indian Partition and the bloodbath that ensued, the Bangladesh Liberation war or indeed the ongoing contemporary wars.

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Endnotes

¹ Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy*.

² The quotations from Arudpragasam's novel are indicated in the body of the article just within brackets.

³ Anuk Arudpragasam holds a degree in philosophy, which can be felt in Dinesh's elaborate pondering on philosophical issues, such as the relation of the self to the world.

⁴ The writer's parents are from the Jaffna peninsula in the largely Tamil northeast of Sri Lanka.

⁵ Ganga's condition is strongly reminiscent of the self-estrangement Saraswati, the Tamil girl in Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, goes through after her rape by Sinhalese soldiers, entering an altered reality from which fear and pain are ejected, and is unable to recognize her own self and image in a mirror: "In Amma's cloudy mirror, I catch a glimpse of a girl. I know she is me, only because there is no one else in the room. She is big eyed, bruised, with a wounded, torn mouth. (...) The flesh has dripped from me. The hair that Amma combs every day hangs limp like oily curtains on either side of my face. I want to draw them shut. Close off the view of this terrified, wide-eyed creature who looks out of my eyes." (Munaweera, 2012, p.157)

⁶ "The overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical related to the trauma take on a life of their own. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived. As long as the trauma is not resolved, the stress hormones that the body secretes to protect itself keep circulating, and the defensive movements and emotional responses keep getting replayed." (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 66)

⁷ The novelist recalls the official denial of the genocide by the Sri Lankan government in an interview with Leslie Jamison.

Between History and Story: the Rewriting of an Epic in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

Hannah FREUNDLICH

Abstract

The link between epics and actual history has always been seen as blurry and vague. Archaeological research tends to prove that some of the events depicted in the epics, and especially some battles, did take place, but a large part of those stories belong to mythology. I wish to study the double rewrite of history that occurs when a modern writer decides to take charge of that already rewritten history in a new version. The purpose of this article is to study the rewrite of the various versions of the Mahabharata epic in the novel The Palace of Illusions (2008). Through the novel, the author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's intention is to give Panchaali/Draupadi's point of view about the events narrated in The Mahabharata. Is it possible to stay fully faithful to the epic, with such a committed project? What changes, how and why? These are the essential questions that will be dealt with in this article.

Keywords: Epic, Rewriting, Feminine writing, Mahabharata.

The link between epics and actual history has always been seen as blurry and vague. Archaeological research tends to prove that some of the events depicted in the epics, and especially some battles, did take place, but a large part of those stories belong to mythology. Georges Dumézil, in his 1968 *Mythe et Épopée* pushes aside the possibility and the value of an historic reading of the Mahabharata, stating that “the Kurukshetra battle, the heroes that prepare it and support it find their justification outside of History” (Dumézil, 1968, pp. 241-242).¹ According to him, only Parikṣit is likely to be an historical figure, mainly because other texts refer to his reign, which would mean that only the very end of the epic can be acknowledged as bound to reality. But not reading the epics as the chronicle of actual events does not mean that the texts do not have a historical interest. In the same vein, rewriting an epic nowadays can be of major interest for both the contemporary vision of the historical background of the epic and the hints of more modern concerns that can be enclosed in it. I would like to study the bestseller novel *The Palace of Illusions* by the award-winning novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni following these two directions, and by focusing on the feminine rewriting of the epic. Divakaruni's project is to give Panchaali a say about the events and let the readers see her side of the story. Through a close reading of the text, I will focus on the treatment of femininity in the novel and study what makes it a feminine (if not feminist) version of the epic, and thus a way to rewrite history.

A story narrated in the first person

1. The importance of names

Almost from the start, Panchaali seems to be very attentive to names, and most particularly to her own. She is given many names throughout the novel (not less than seven, including the ones she gives herself). But from the start, she underlines her dislike of the name her father had given her. “I answered to Draupadi for the moment because I had no choice. But in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name” (5).² She clearly prefers to be called Panchaali, a name given to her by the mysterious Vyasa.

You've borne the harshness of the prophecies well, so I'll give you a parting gift—a name. From now on you'll be known as Panchaali, spirit of this land, though in your wanderings you'll leave it far behind. (41)

Psychoanalyst Gérard Pommier has underlined the link between name and paternal filiation: “As soon as the name has been given, it opens on a paternal filiation—even if it was given by the mother” (Pommier, 2013, p. 117).

In the case of Draupadi, it is even more so because she does not have a mother, having been born from the fire of the yajna and she bears her father’s name, which she resents dearly. M. Ojha and L.S. Gorasya see it as the stumbling block of gender reading in the epic. Her “patriarchy affirmed name Draupadi, which means Drupad’s daughter is just the beginning of the gender based limitations imposed on Draupadi in her father’s palace” (Ojha & Gorasya, 2019, 151).

The multiplication of names can thus be read as a difficulty for Draupadi/Panchaali to appropriate her own name and inhabit it. According to Pommier, “there is a characteristic of the name that appears truly only in the transmission of the forename: it is the necessity of its appropriation” (Pommier, 2013, p.125). That’s probably why, during her reverie, Draupadi, who is not yet Panchaali, gives herself others names.

The story inspired me to make up fancy names for myself: Offspring of Vengeance, or the Unexpected One. But Dhai Ma puffed out her cheeks at my tendency to drama, calling me the Girl Who Wasn’t Invited. Who knows, perhaps she was more accurate than I. (1)

It could be noted that being the one “who wasn’t invited” carries a feeling of longing that runs throughout the book: the longing for home. Draupadi, unable to inhabit her own name seems to be unable to find her own place in the world, while, on the contrary, the name Panchaali binds her to a specific place and give her the feeling of belonging that she was missing.

In the same vein, Panchaali seems to be very attentive to the meaning of names, and has a penchant for Homeric epithet. The names that she gets from Krishna, for instance, are endowed specific importance, and insisting on their meaning does not seem to be just an aid for the (unaware) reader because all of them serve to give Panchaali a special place and position:

I had the impression that it was I whom he [Krishna] really came to see. He called me by a special name, the female form of his own: Krishna. It had two meanings: the dark one, or the one whose attraction can’t be resisted. (12)

This special place becomes even more special with time:

Krishna put his arm around my shoulders in that good-natured way he had. “Wouldn’t you, saki?” (That was what he’d taken to calling me of late: saki, dearest companion. I liked the appellation, though sometimes I suspected he used it facetiously). (222)

2. Telling one's Self – A Critical Recalling of What Draupati was.

In the novel, Panchaali is telling her own vision of the events, but she also reviews her feelings, and performs her self-criticism. As the author explains in her foreword: “It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into The Palace of Illusions.” (Divakaruni, 2008, Author's Note, p. XV).

Panchaali appears to be a jealous, and a rather possessive wife. She is jealous of her husbands’ wives and sees their other marriages as a personal defeat. The determination to keep her special place in their life seems to motivate her decisions quite often.

The way she emphasizes the differences shows that it is not a minor issue for her, and betrays a certain weakness, maybe a lack of self-confidence. The fact that Panchaali is jealous not only of her co-wives but also of her husbands themselves, tends to comfort us in our reading.

I was happy and dissatisfied—and jealous of my husbands. In the past, whenever he visited, Krishna had given me his complete attention. Why should things be different now, just because I was a wife? The old restlessness from my girlhood that I'd thought I was done with—if only I could have been a man—rose in me as I watched them clap each other on the back. I pushed it away sternly. Wishful thinking was a folly. For better or worse, I was a woman. I'd have to find a woman's way to force him to notice me. (138-139).

This restlessness is not always linked with jealousy, but it remains omnipresent throughout the novel: Panchaali seems to be completely unable to seize the day, and be happy with her lot in the world. When she finally gets the palace she wanted, she feels “bored” (154) and after Yudhisthir has been consecrated king during the Rajasuya, there is “a feeling of emptiness” (175). As for the wish to be a man, it appears when she compares herself to her brother: “He was too cautious. Sometimes I told him that the gods must have got mixed up when they pushed us out from the fire. He should have been the girl, and I the boy!” (55).

The feminist concerns that lead to the rewriting of the epic also raise the question of motherhood. Is a woman bound to be a mother? And when she becomes one, is it natural to get maternal feelings? The questions are very briefly treated by the text: the rare allusions to her children are eloquent enough. We can notice for instance, that the names of her five sons are not used and the sons themselves stay in the background, which is partly due to their lack of importance in the Mahabharata itself.

Before their tragic death at the end of the war, there are only three mentions of them, their presence being acknowledged by this strange confusion of the five sons as a unique entity, their own mother unable to name them properly (148), and two other occurrences showing the immense distance between the mother and her sons: “I could have stayed with them, I didn't have to go with my husbands to the forest, my boys needed me more,” (197) says Panchaali when she is about to leave for exile, and then in a single paragraph, she explains how they have become strangers: “As for my own children, I found myself awkward and tongue-tied with them [...] But already they were strangers, cool and distant”(207).

We can ask ourselves if this is a way to push aside the social necessity of motherhood, and thus an argument for a feminist reading of the text. But Divakaruni is putting forward Abhimanyu, son of Arjun and Subhadra, and he almost takes the empty space left by the lack of mention of the sons. And does not Panchaali behave like a mother when she arranges his wedding with Uttara (even if it is only with “a dig from [her] elbow in [Arjun's] ribs” (232))? She behaves like a grandmother with Pariksit, Abhimanyu's son, though a strict one. Yudhisthir himself is tempted to soften her stance by comparing her to Kunti (330).

The questions of desire and sexuality are also present, and for the latter the author, along with Panchaali the narrator, plays with the reader's expectations. If a sorceress taught Panchaali the secrets of seduction and how to “arouse [her] own desire” (62), Yudhisthir did not get such an education and

In bed, to my amused surprise, he was shy and easily alarmed. Slowly I realized that he had in his head a compendium of ideas (had Kunti put them there?) about what constituted ladylike sexual behavior, and—this was a longer list—what didn't. I could see that I'd have to dedicate significant energy to reeducating him.

It was going to be a long year. (122).

If we can find a trace of women's empowerment in these lines, it does not seem to have caught much of attention from the author, who, some pages later, passes very quickly on something that could be likened to trivializing domestic violence.

It was Bheem's year to be my spouse, and he was determined to make the most of it. No, not in the obvious bodily way, though he certainly enjoyed sex, the iron-limbed Bheem, and his enthusiasm left ample evidence upon my body. If I pointed out a bruise, he grew shy and penitent. (211)

Sexuality is also present in the poetic metaphor used to specify that Panchaali was having her period when she was lost in the dice game by Yudhisthir. "The petal of this afternoon opened like a red sigh. It was my time of month, which made me lethargic." (188)

This metaphor seems interesting as regards the point of view chosen by the author. The Mahabharata is much more crude in its description of a fact, which, according to the explanation given by Madeleine Biardeau in her comments on the epic, is a factor that aggravated the sin of the Kauravas (Biardeau, 2002, p.379). In her translation of the epic, as in the one by Jean-Michel Péterfalvi (1985), the first mention of Panchaali's period is found in Yudhisthir's words to his wife. Then Panchaali uses it as an argument to avoid going to the sabha, the assembly. The 2006 "told-according-to-the-oral-tradition" version of Serge Demetrian, demonstrates the same reluctance as Divakaruni's version, and very shyly states that "Duhshasana, despite all the rules of Virtue and common sense—as the queen was lightly dressed and sick moreover—dragged Draupadi along to the hall" (Demetrian, 2006, 379).

Why do we find such differences? Madeleine Biardeau's explanation about the rules, habits and customs regarding periods in ancient India shows that the precise nature of Panchaali's condition explains not only why she has her hair loose, but also why it is doubly inappropriate for her to go to the sabha. It should be noted that the subject was not taboo, and the characters did dare to mention the fact in public. With time, we seem to have lost the sense of impurity associated with periods, but doing so, we enclose it within the most private of areas, and hence it stopped being a (casual) subject. Becoming unnecessary in the plot as we lose its meaning with time, it appears only in a very faint way in the modern versions.

Panchaali is moved by revenge, but also by ego which may be even stronger. Throughout the novel, Panchaali's ego is what prevails over all her other decisions. In a way, this ego is also what makes her quite similar to Kunti, as it makes her words performative, prohibiting all backtracking. According to André Comte-Sponville (2001), "the ego is less what I am than what I think I am," the high opinion of Panchaali about what she is, or what she should do and should be, is what leads the most important of her decisions. Not a few times, does she comment on such ideas by pointing at the "vanity" of her thoughts. The two words are linked when she recalls the teaching of the sorceress: "I failed also in this: though I knew all that she taught me was important, in my vanity I only learned the ones that flattered my ego" (62).

We do not know exactly which unflattering things she did not learn and lacked afterwards, except maybe a way to silence her ego and let go more easily. When she seeks revenge, Panchaali reminds the Pandavas of her humiliation and lets them anticipate her retaliation:

Each dawn when I arose, sweaty with restlessness, I pictured our revenge: a fire-strewn battlefield, the air grim with vultures, the mangled bodies of the Kauravas and their allies—the way I would transform history. (But I couldn't bear to imagine Karna's corpse. Instead, I pictured **him kneeling at my feet**, head bent in humiliation. When I tried to decide on a suitable punishment for him, however, my imagination failed me again). (199-200, my emphasis)

Humiliating Karna, or winning over time, seems to flatter Panchaali's ego. But it is also a way to reverse the events of the sabha, as Karna was, at that time, the one expecting Panchaali to kneel at his feet and beg him, which Panchaali did not accept to do.

And so finally, I turned my gaze on Karna. He was my last hope, the only one who had the ability to stop Duryodhan. He looked back at me, his eyes steady. There was a waiting look on his face. **I knew what he wanted: for me to fall on my knees and beg him for mercy.** He would have protected me then. He had the reputation of helping the destitute. **But I wouldn't lower myself to that, not if I died.** (192, emphasis mine)

The refusal to lower herself, even at the cost of her life shows Panchaali's pride and ego, her wish to reverse the situation, even if completely vain, seems to be an attempt at undoing the past in order to wash away the humiliation. Panchaali's ego may be a shield protecting her from the excess of pain. The narrating Panchaali knows what her ego and the attempt to avoid pain have cost her, and the realization of that cost raises doubts and a feeling of responsibility.

The portrait that Panchaali draws of herself is thus not a very kind one. She mentions her flaws and does not try to depict herself in a better light. She knows she is not a perfect wife. Panchaali seems to find reasons for her attitude rather than try to excuse herself for it. If Panchaali is full of regrets about her choices and the things she has not done or dared to say, she stays self-aware till the end, and is concerned about the image that she gives to others: "But what I resented was this: when we fell, our failure would be ascribed not to a physical limitation but a moral one." (345)

A Modern Vision of an Ancient Story: a Feminist Battlefield?

As I have earlier pointed out, Divakaruni's aim, in writing Panchaali's *Mahabharata* is to focus more on women and propose a feminine version of the epic.

But always, listening to the stories of the Mahabharat as a young girl [...] I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of the women. [...] They remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. (Divakaruni, 2008, Author's Note, p. XIV)

The programmatic foreword lets us suppose that the version of the epic proposed by Divakaruni aims to reflect modern social issues apart from depicting an ancient story. If I have been too critical about the treatment of certain aspects of the epic from a feminist perspective, I need to amend this by reminding the readers that Divakaruni herself did not use the word feminist in her foreword, and that if her aim is to give more space to women, she probably did not intend to do militant work.

Is it possible nowadays to focus on a feminine character without raising feminist questions? What vision of womanhood does the text convey? Though some dissonances have been noticed, it should be acknowledged that Divakaruni tries to give the largest picture possible of the questions, starting by contradicting the idea of women-objects that passively suffer and undergo pain:

You're wrong in thinking of woman as an innocent species." She waved her hand again and the map flickered. It seemed to me that I was looking into a hundred homes, humble and kingly both. I heard the voices and thoughts of women, bitter and bickering. [...]

"As you see", the sorceress said, "women contribute to the world's problems in a hundred insidious ways." (66)

Women are thus powerful in their own way, able to change the course of things even if they are not doing it upfront. But the idea of the influence of women during pillow-talk is probably not enough to question the position of women in the society, ancient and modern. It is thus mostly in Panchaali thoughts and questions about the world that we find traces of this modern preoccupation.

In contrast to Georges Dumézil's explanations about the five weddings of Panchaali, Divakaruni seizes the opportunity to use the particularity of her character in order to build a parallel between polygamy and polyandry:

I was surprised at how angry it made me feel—and how helpless. Though Dhai Ma tried to console me by saying that finally I had the freedom men had had for centuries, my situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted or not.

Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women—they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quite wanted. (Had Kunti felt the same way when she was told that the gods would be happy to impregnate her?) (120)

Three ideas could be identified in the above quotation about the place of women in the society: the polyandric situation that Panchaali is about to face is far from the empowerment described by Dhai Ma; on the contrary, it contributes to the idea of a woman-object without choices or power; and finally, the boon that Panchaali is granted is merely made for the satisfaction of her husbands. These ideas shape a society built around men, in which women have to cope with men's desires. Claudine Leblanc notes:

The representation of women in the epic is, without exception, ruled by a powerful stereotype: defined by her passivity in the universe of heroic action, the feminine being seems to exist only to undergo (and suffer). (Leblanc, 2007, 264)

Arti Dhand (2008) goes even further, stating that

Even when one finds apparently newfangled and liberal opinion, [...] it still represents male representations of womanhood and male ideals of femininity. Femal voices, even bold and powerful ones, nevertheless represent male opinion. (Dhand, 2008, 14)

Divakaruni seizes the opportunity given by the rewriting of the chapter XI of the Mahabharata (the Sriparvan or "book of the women") to build a city of women: "It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women." (323)

The power of the women is both political (similar to the power of the king, as the women form their own court) and commercial. It is the power of the third function in Dumézil's repartition of society: the economic power of the merchant.

All this allowed us to set up the destitute in homes of their own and buy merchandise to start businesses for them. In time the women's market became a flourishing center of trade in the city, for the new proprietors took pride in their goods and were canny but fair in their dealings. (324-325)

These initiatives of the women show “the remarkable fortitude of the women who moved on and proved once again their ability to embrace adversity” (Kahtter & Sukul, 2018, p. 291) It not only shows their resilience but also counterbalances the long description of the women killing themselves on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

The widows who lose their husbands on the battlefield perform sati, and immolate themselves en masse on their husbands’ funeral pyre. Though the practice had been widely discussed and commented, it remains quite enigmatic. I have not found any allusion to sati or to jauhar practices in the three translations of the Mahabharata that I used for this work. Divakaruni’s description can relate to both practices, if we understand jauhar more generally as a way of escaping from the enemy. Clarisse Bader minimizes the practice of sati during the ancient times, showing it as a way to escape from the pain of ascetic life that is the lot of widows and stating that they were rare during antiquity (Bader, 1863).. If Divakaruni adds the story of sati/jauhar to the original text, we can ask ourselves why and what it adds to the story. It allows Panchaali to express her pain for the first time, as she comes forward to talk to the women, when Yudhishthir fails to find the words to do that: “I’d started to address the women as a queen might her subjects, but as the words formed in my mouth, I spoke as a mother among mothers, and together we wept.” (314).

For once Panchaali appears among other women, and though she is placed above them on a “makeshift dais” she is in communion with them, sharing their pain and sorrows, mourning her sons and loved ones.

1. Describing the Women’s Condition Now and Then.

What does it mean to be a girl or a woman at the time of the Mahabharata? At first, it seems that the birth of a girl is not welcomed as that of a boy. Radhika Kapur explains that the status of women has declined after the Vedic period (2000 BCE to 1000 BCE),

Gradually, with the course of time, the position of women declined to such an extent that the birth of the girl child within the family was regarded as a misfortune. (Kapur, 2019, p.2)

But dating the Mahabharata is not that easy, Divakaruni places it around 6000

BCE and 5000 BCE when Louis Renou, quoted by Dumézil says that: “All we will dare to say along with Winternitz is that the Mahabharata took its actual form between the 4th century BCE and the 4th century CE” (Dumézil, 1995, pp 34 & 62). Madeleine Biarreau is even more prudent, when she says that it is “not datable, not inscribed on the ground whatever the archaeologist may say, neither the content nor the story takes their value from any reference to reality” (Péterfalvi, 1985, p.13).

Panchaali, though born in a royal family suffers from her father's rejection, as he was not expecting a girl (6). At first, Panchaali is allowed to follow her brother’s tuition, in which she learns “what a boy was supposed to learn” (23), but that worried even her brother (23-24). But this education is specific to Panchaali, and does not say much about what is expected from a girl at that time. Radhika Kapur opens the door to the possibility of an education for women in ancient India, using the example of Maitreyi (Kapur, 2019, p.4), but Clarisse Bader, on the same story explains:

we considered Maitreyi as a rare type. “Case like that of Maitrêyî were exceptions, not the rule,” says Mr. Max Müller. Already the Indians feared to initiate women into their philosophical and religious doctrines. (Bader, 1863, p.19)

The part of her education that is directly related to Panchaali's gender seems to be the less interesting ones: singing, dancing, and playing music, in which Panchaali is not particularly well versed (29). Dhairya Ma adds some behavioral skills to this learning.

We can imagine that these specifically feminine skills were known and learned by all the girls of Panchaali's status at that time. Other hints about the condition of women at the time of the story are dispersed throughout the novel. When Duryodhan invites the Pandavas and Panchaali to his new palace, the later comments: "This was unexpected. Wives did not usually accompany kings on their journeys. Kunti snorted at the impropriety of the idea, but my heart gave a leap." (30) In the same way we get to know that women are usually not allowed in the sabha: "To the hall?" I asked, incredulous. "But women never go there!" (176)

A more problematic example is that of Bhanumati, the wife of Duryodhan. Panchaali comments on her by noticing

She was just a girl and regarded me with such a mix of awe and apprehension that she could hardly speak without stammering. I felt a stab of anger at Duryodhan for having plucked her so soon from her parents. (189)

If this comment raises the question of the practice of child marriage, it also raises the question of the age of the different characters of the epic and of the novel. The Pandavas and the Upapandavas are fighting together during the war, and it is said that the young Panchaali had already heard about the accomplishment of the Pandavas long before her wedding. Assuming that the five brothers are in their full strength at the time of the war and their sons quite young (though Abhimanyu, Arjun's son is already married), Panchaali herself must have been very young at the time of her marriage, perhaps not much older than Bhanumati.

A modern addition to the reflexions on the women's conditions is the description of the events around Panchaali's disrobing. Panchaali in the novel is skeptical regarding the questions of religion and miracle. At the moment of her disrobing, when the epic has recourse to the miraculous elongation of her clothing, the novel proposes a turnaround.

Krishna sat beside me on a cool stone bench. His glance was bright and tender. *No one can shame you*, he said, *if you don't allow it*.
It came to me, in a wash of amazement, that he was right.
Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency.
Was that not miracle enough? (193)

This down to earth version of a miracle can be seen as the reappropriation of her body by Panchaali, at the very same moment when men are trying to change her into an object, she points out their inhumanity and reaffirms her own being and power.

2. *Being Different*

Among those reflections on the position of women both in Ancient India (in the story of the *Mahabharata*) and in the author's vision, appears a rather dissonant note: Panchaali embodied a certain vision of womanhood only by being drastically different from the other women. This appears very early in Panchaali's narration of the story. It is partly linked with her extraordinary birth and the pride she may feel about it, even though Panchaali seems to fully realize the miraculous nature of her birth only when she experiences the rejection and fear of other women, especially her father's wives.

This birth makes the gap between Panchaali and the rest of the women a difference of nature itself. In this sense, she may even appear as a mirror image of her sibling Sikhandi. Sikhandi is said not to be “really a woman anymore” (45) and Panchaali notices it as a matter of fact: “we were the same height, and somehow this consoled me for the loss of the sister he was supposed to be” (46). In a novel that wishes to give a voice to the feminine side of an epic, there seems to be a failure of that very feminine. Womanhood is overtaken by destiny. Both Panchaali and Sikhandi cannot fulfill their destiny by sticking to what is expected from women. Till the end, the path that Panchaali follows is different, it is a path that no women had ever attempted” (343), and if Panchaali is set aside by others, it is because of “people’s wariness of someone who wasn’t born like a normal girl and who, if the prophecy was correct, wouldn’t live a normal woman’s life” (32). As for Sikhandi, he “had to be a man, because only a man can do what [he] must accomplish—kill the greatest warrior of our time” (47).. But like Panchaali, Sikhandi does not into any box, he is saying himself: “When I awoke, I was a man. **And yet not completely so**, for though my form was changed, inside me I remembered how women thought and what they longed for” (46, emphasis mine).

In the same way, when asked by Dhristadyumna about the secrets he has learned by experiencing both side of the spectrum, Sikhandi shades it, by stating that he is neither of the usual binary options: “Sikhandi’s lips twisted in a bitter smile. “Yes, I’ve learned a few things along the way, though now that I’m neither man nor woman they can’t do me any good”” (52).

But stepping out of the usual boundaries and limits of gender does not go without criticisms and quarrels. Panchaali’s father wishes to see his daughter fit into what is expected from a woman and from a princess. That is the reason why he stops allowing her to follow Dhristadyumna’s classes (53), and gives her more suitable companions and tuitions. But despite all his efforts, the differences seem to increase with time: “And I? Each day I thought less and less like the women around me. Each day I moved further from them into a dusky solitude” (26). Panchaali’s descriptions of her companions are full of disdain and contempt which marks the complete opposition that exists between them and the narrator (53).

In a rather naive way, it seems that questions dealing with gender specificities require one to step back and not completely fit in the studied group. Therefore, many remarks emphasize the differences. But on another scale, we can point out the fact that paradoxically, Panchaali is both an epitome of a woman and a wife and a rather “unfeminine” figure, which can prompt us to ask ourselves whether the possibility exists for a woman to have an extraordinary destiny within the boundaries of womanhood shaped by society. The novel certainly underscores the necessity to reshape our system of thoughts regarding gender and their limits.

3. Panchaali’s Questions about Womanhood.

The modern vision of the epic is to be found in the questions on womanhood that Panchaali asks herself or those that are raised by others. The first question is very general and asked by Krishna: “He asked me what I thought of my place in the world as a woman and a princess — and then challenged my rather traditional beliefs” (12).

Simple questions as to what should feminine interests be (53) or the link between strong women and unhappy marriage (76) are asked by Panchaali, who defines herself as a rebel.

The more people dissuaded me, the more determined I became. Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. But what was the alternative? (343-344)

Dhri’s tuitions are also the occasion to think about the place of women in the world.

Dhri's tutor was of the opinion that virtuous women were sent directly into their next birth, where, if they were lucky, they reincarnated as men. But I thought that if lokas existed at all, good women would surely go to one where men were not allowed so that they could be finally free of male demands. However, I prudently kept this theory to myself. (155)

This opinion appears rather strange in a very young and dreamy girl like Panchaali. At that time, she had perhaps not yet been confronted to any "male demands." Or perhaps it is the older Panchaali that takes over and conveys her opinion.

The same Panchaali tries to compare men and women and her description itself shows the evolution of her thoughts.

Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them [the Pandavas] than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. [...] But was a woman's heart any purer, in the end?

That was the final truth I learned. All this time I'd thought myself better than my father, better than all those men who inflicted harm on a thousand innocents in order to punish the one man who had wronged them. I'd thought myself above the cravings that drove him. But I, too, was tainted with them, vengeance encoded into my blood. When the moment came, I couldn't resist it. (195)

The first opposition between Panchaali and the Pandavas goes against Madeleine Biardeau's interpretation of the same event. Commenting on the disrobing of Panchaali, she sees her reaction as a way to play along with Yudhishthir who has sent her a message with instructions. For her, by going to the sabha in her state of impurity, "she stands up, knowing only that by putting herself in the foreground she is playing her husband's game" (Péterfalvi, 1985, p.221). It is thus a play performed by two persons, and if Panchaali behaves in the way that Divakaruni describes, she is not playing alone. And for her, maybe even more than for her husbands, the questions of power and ego are never too far. The idea that men and women are, finally, not that different was set almost since the start, and finds its conclusion when Panchaali asks if the fact that gods do not appear to her is linked with her gender and when, after her fall, she comments on the absence of gender of the human shape that she sees above her: "The air is full of men-but not men exactly, not women, for their bodies are sleek and sexless and glowing" (358).

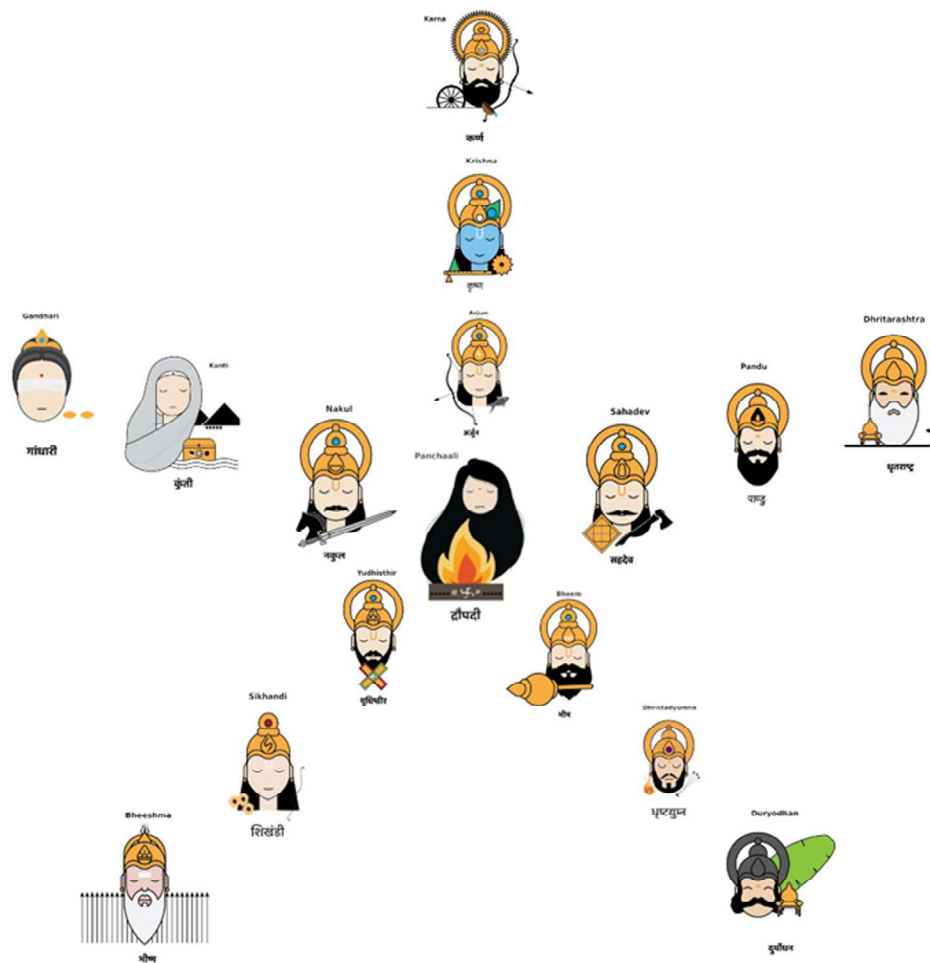
Conclusion

Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions* enables us to think about the dark corners of the epic and put them into perspective with today's interrogations, especially the question of belonging, linked with the questions of name, love and home as longing always seems to be the expression of the need to exist, to be. Placing the story in a more secular surrounding, with a Panchaali full of doubt and questions about religion, reminds us that these questions are far from outdated and the answers not that obvious. But the text proposed by Divakaruni, though very documented, leaves us on our hunger as regards the question of women: can someone as different from her pairs as Panchaali really say something about womanhood? Does she serve the feminist aim of the author? Not fully, it seems. In the same way, the treatment of the epic contradicts many a research on the myth and its relationship with other cultures. With regard to these issues, Divakaruni's rewriting remains just a nice romance novel.

The rewriting of history, that comes with the rewriting of the epic seems to fail in the exactly same places, as Arti Dhand points out, “the novel media are simply new avenues for the manifestation of bhakti, not essentially different from the *rāmīlās* of folklore and the *kathās* and performances of the *Mahābhārata elsewhere*” (Dhand, 2008, p.1). The same seems to be true for the novel.

The Epic's Main Characters

Drawing courtesy of Royal Gulati, edited by A. Basu Roy.



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Endnotes

- ¹ The translation of all the quotations from books and articles written in French are by me.
- ² Hereafter, the page numbers of quotations from the novel will be just indicated within brackets.
- ³ "A woman who has her period is in a state of impurity for three days. She only wears a garment wrapped around the loins to the exclusion of all other garment covering the upper body; she has to have her hair loose and dishevelled instead of being neatly braided into several strands. She must not show herself in public, and nor she does she have access to the purest parts of the house, as the kitchen," remarks Madeleine Biardeau.
- ⁴ The Collins online dictionary estimates the origin of the expression to be around 1935-1940. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/pillow-talk>. The expression seems to be older though, as it appears in novels as early as 1890 and exists in different languages.

Negotiating an Indo-Italian Renaissance: Alternative Histories in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*

Maria-Sabina DRAGA ALEXANDRU

Abstract

In the introduction to Alternative Indias: Writing, Nation and Communalism (2005), Peter Morey and Alex Tickell expand Salman Rushdie's concept of "Indias of the Mind" (Imaginary Homelands, 1992) to argue that India is a complex cultural construct, whose traditions of imagining the world through storytelling have spanned generations, still providing convincing explanatory narratives for events of worldwide consequence. The concept of alternative (or alternate) history has recently gathered ground in popular culture, offering improved versions of history that "correct", with hindsight, wrongs or, simply, rectify incomplete or unconvincing representations of the past. Such an alternative India (with its own alternate histories, developed through a rich tradition of storytelling that continuously revisits the past) is depicted by Rushdie in his 2008 novel The Enchantress of Florence. This paper argues that the novel challenges received interpretations of the Renaissance by proposing an original and (partly) fictitious Indian model instead of the Italian one.

Keywords: Rushdie, alternative history, India, Italy, Renaissance

The rewriting of history from another perspective, focusing on the actors of the respective historical events and not on the political powers of the time, is one of the central missions of postcolonial cultures. It informs not only straightforward historiography, but also, through the commitment to "writing back" to the former centre of colonial empire (famously announced by Salman Rushdie in his 1982 article "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance"), creative fiction. The latter actually has a more important role in that, through its creativity and increasingly fluid formal boundaries, it can reinterpret the past for what it means to us nowadays rather than for its factual accuracy. It may be true that, as Rushdie notices, writers in his position (i.e., Indian writers living abroad) create "fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 10). Yet, in Indian tradition, between those fictions and a more objective understanding of history as the story of a nation there does not seem to be a significant distinction.

Another contemporary Indian novelist who writes in English, Vikram Chandra, insists on this in an interview dedicated to how the virtual reality of computer programming reproduces Indian oral storytelling traditions on a different scale. At the end of his first novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* Chandra openly proclaims that storytelling is life itself and that it makes no difference whether characters die when their stories continue to be alive and grow "like a lotus vine" (Chandra, 1995, p. 617). The author also argues that the difference between story and history (a western import in India, like the novel, both being grafted onto the rich local storytelling practices) is only a matter of perspective:

I wouldn't argue against history at all, I wouldn't deny that sort of temporality, of cause and effect evolution. I guess to me it's related to *darshan* – you know *darshan*, "to view"? It has at least two meanings: one is that of philosophical perspective or way of being, and it can also mean the sight of a god or a guru, who would travel for a long time, and the problem is to get the *darshan* off a certain basis. But I'm using it in the first sense, the idea that any philosophical system presents you with, presumably, an internally coherent way of seeing an aspect of reality which is necessarily incomplete. Whichever angle you stand at will leave out all the other angles. (Draga Alexandru, 2003, p. 19)

Whereas the western understanding of modern history – as, actually, of any narrative – is built around cause and effect evolution, history as seen from India is shown by Chandra to be primarily a matter of perspective, through which the same stories are seen differently depending on the positioning of the observer. This not only blurs any working distinction between history and other narrative genres, equally indebted to the act of storytelling, but also draws attention to the importance of individual interpretation. Histories will be different depending on where and by whom they are told. The millennia-old traditions of Indian storytelling encompass myth-derived stories/histories which follow similar narrative scenarios, myth-derived archetypal stories reperformed at new points in time. In a country of enormous cultural diversity such as India is, stories of various degrees of truthfulness to life coexist and mingle. Peter Morey and Alex Tickell identify an undeniable historical function in the polymorphous, dynamic, ongoing process of Indian storytelling:

Ultimately, one's experience of engaging with the enormous diversity of Indian fictions in English is that some acknowledgement of social and cultural heterogeneity and polyphony is inherent in all such writing – if not consciously, then at least through an inevitable process of historical accretion. Truly, no single narrative is adequate to the task of 'writing India', but all may contribute to the possibility of understanding this variety more fully. (Morey and Tickell, 2005, p. xxxvii)

Such a process of historical accretion imagines history as a storytelling organism that grows from multiple stories, which add up and interact dynamically, from a multitude of perspectives. In this discussion, the exact definition of reality at work (a function of western historical thinking) will make no difference. It is rather the act of owning the stories that surround oneself, told from one's own perspective, that lends all narratives a certain amount of historical authority, as Peter Morey notices, while also bringing together various kinds of "fictions of India": "Having space to narrate means having power" (Morey, 2000 pp. 1-2).

Such alternative historical narratives in contemporary Indian fiction in English arise at a time when the concept of alternative (or alternate) history has once again gathered ground in popular culture. It offers improved versions of history that "correct", with hindsight, wrongs or, simply, incomplete or unconvincing representations of the past. One example of a project of provincializing modern North American history is the Amazon Prime Video series *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-2019), based on Philip K. Dick's 1962 novel and going much further in a dystopian world, parallel to the one we know, following Nazi Germany's and Japan's victory (rather than defeat) in World War II. Dick's warnings, launched in the sixties, as to where the world could have gone had imperialist challenges to democracy succeeded have returned to the limelight, in the wake of recent forms of imperialism and neocolonialism. Indian versions of alternative history are more concerned with re-valuing India's political and cultural role at a time when British colonial rule dictated the ways in which history was written and thus relegated it to a subaltern position. Authors such as Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh or Githa Hariharan have taken issue with this necessary act of rewriting. Salman Rushdie's novels, ever since *Midnight's Children*, are probably all pervaded by this reinterpretative act, which goes even further than doing historical justice to India, into "what might have been" if the full potential of Indian creativity had found a fertile-enough soil to express itself. In a review article in *The Hudson Review* entitled "History and Nightmare", which focuses on several novels, among which *The Enchantress of Florence*, Tom Wilhelmus notices, with reference to Rushdie's novel, that

To awake from the nightmare of history (since none can escape it) is to re-imagine its machinations as possibility and hope. That, at any rate, appears to be the thought that drives Salman Rushdie's new novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*, another miraculous achievement of a supremely gifted storyteller. That *The Enchantress* is a historical novel is attested to by its bibliography of nearly a hundred sources, mostly about Renaissance Florence and the Mughal kingdoms of India, especially the kingdom of Akbar the Great. (Wilhelmus, 2008, p. 585)

To Wilhelmus's "nightmare of history" – which sounds more like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* than Rushdie's adventurous encounter between the two versions of the Renaissance – the solution is, as he maintains, the "possibility and hope" that arise in stories. It is through storytelling that we can forge a friendlier version of history, an endeavour Rushdie seems to have dedicated himself since his first book for children, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and which he has pursued in later novels, especially in the once written since his move to the United States at the end of the nineties. Telling an alternative retelling of history as a grand imaginative story, open to creative reinterpretation, is what the *The Enchantress of Florence* intends to do. This particular case was preceded by three equally imaginative explorations of creative anachronism in novel form, inspired, as it seems, by the writer's move to the new continent: *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), *Fury* (2001) and *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Intervention in the official flow of history through storytelling relativizations is one of Rushdie's specialities. In his previous American novels, he criticises various aspects of American exceptionalism by providing imaginary alternatives, usually inspired by India's resourceful culture, as is the case in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, *Fury* and *Shalimar the Clown*. But in *The Enchantress of Florence* he takes issue with the foundation of western modernity by presenting a version of the Renaissance claimed to be not intrinsically Florentine (hence European), but rather the Mughal Court's invention, or, at least, a negotiation between the two spaces, seen as alter-egos of each other.

The infusion of originality and imagination characterizing Renaissance Italian art and culture in the sixteenth century is attributed to a global (even though to a certain extent secret) export of India's infinite resources of narrative imagination. The centre of this transfer of energies is the partly allegorical figure of the enchantress herself, Qara Köz, also known as Lady Black Eyes, sometimes called Angelica, like the heroine in Matteo Maria Boiardo's Renaissance poem *Orlando innamorato*. Qara Köz is the enchantress in the novels' title, yet by no means is she really the protagonist. She is rather an allegorical representation of a perfection one may associate with the Renaissance search for absolute knowledge and, since she comes from India, she is the main carrier of the novel's message that India is where the spirit of the Renaissance comes from.

In fact, no character in the novel is really a protagonist. There are various episodic characters that take centre stage at times – such as Akbar the Emperor, Mogor dell' Amore or Qara Köz – but none of them is consistently present for any significant length of time. In the spiral sequence of Rushdie's storytelling, as perspectives constantly change, characters are mere illustrators of certain narrative or historical moments, to such an extent that, one may argue, the book situates itself on the border between storytelling and historiography (where characters are not a focus in themselves, but are used for mere exemplification). A lot of space is dedicated to the painting of atmosphere – a feature of realist novel, were it not for the intended exotic and, in places, even fairy tale elements that pervade the text, leading almost always to philosophical musings on the meanings of history:

Not far from the caravanseraï, a tower studded with elephant tusks marked the way to the palace gate. All elephants belonged to the emperor, and by spiking a tower with their teeth he was demonstrating his power. Beware! the tower said. You are entering the realm of the Elephant King, a sovereign so rich in pachyderms that he can waste the gnashers of a thousand of the beasts just to decorate me. In the tower's display of might the traveler recognized the same quality of flamboyance that burned upon his own forehead like a flame, or a mark of the Devil; but the maker of the tower had transformed into strength that quality which, in the traveler, was often seen as a weakness. Is power the only justification for an extrovert personality? the traveler asked himself, and could not answer, but found himself hoping that beauty might be another such excuse, for he was certainly beautiful, and knew that his looks had a power of their own. (Rushdie, 2008, pp. 5-6)

Everything is grand and extraordinary at the Mughal court. The depiction recalls images that seem to come directly from *Arabian Nights*, yet still anchored in verifiable historical reality. Indeed, *The Enchantress of Florence* combines storytelling with historiography and novelistic narrative, in a hybrid text whose reality of an extreme visual richness. The display of wealth the traveller encounters at the imperial court is quickly identified as a sign of great political power. This element of cause-effect commitment pertaining to western historiography is counterbalanced by the abundance of storytelling detail, in which the narrator takes undisguised pleasure. Apart from this, there is no one central plot, but several, focusing around a multitude of characters that, in turn, take the role of protagonist for a while, then shift positions with other characters that come to the limelight. Some of them are famous and powerful, like the Mughal emperor Akbar who addresses everybody around by using the imperial “we”, yet is powerless and humble before his imaginary lover Jodha, his feminine alter-ego before whom he is a mere “I”. Others are imaginary characters built, in the good tradition of historiographic metafiction, using features of real historical characters that Rushdie reshuffles for the benefit of his own adventurous fictional plot. The most important of them are the three Florentine friends, Niccolò il Machia, Ago Vespucci and Nino Argalia. As their names suggest, they combine fictional character features with creative anachronistic references to easily recognizable historical characters. They travel the world, crossing paths with locals in European and Asian settings and creating opportunities for a vast range of cultural comparisons across long distances.

In a book that includes an analysis of *Shalimar the Clown* as representative of Rushdie’s version of the invasion of alternative history elements into the configurations of the contemporary global world, Christoph Senft describes this phenomenon using the term “transmodern historiography”. The term expresses a literary gesture of eluding the western limitations and conditionings of modernity by imagining alternative modernities that rely on literature as a medium to manifest themselves: “The central argument is that literature can, and should, be regarded as transmodern historiography that allows us to represent the past in ways that counteract and enrich global and hegemonic discourses and give a voice to local and suppressed expressions of modernity” (Senft 2016: 4). Rushdie has always interfered in the received interpretations of history (as the *Satanic Verses* scandal shows), but has also constantly blamed extreme ideological or religious positions for their reductive intolerance. Many of his novels – such as *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and, more recently, *Shalimar the Clown* – stand as proof of this. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Bombay, which Rushdie praised as a centre of multiculturalism avant-la-lettre as early as his 1981 novel *Midnight’s Children*, is the centre of a plea for the creative resources of impurity and, implicitly, against the current ubiquitousness of a certain kind of imperialist American model that Rushdie resents. It is an even more radical act of “provincialising history” (Senft, 2016, p.19) that Rushdie stages in *The Enchantress of Florence*, which presents us with a complex instance of cultural negotiation, of exchange of characters and ideas between India and Italy, represented by Akbar’s Mughal court at Sikri and Lorenzo de’ Medici’s Florence. The novel ultimately proposes an alternative Renaissance, in whose definition the balance leans more towards Indian, rather than European, roots. This bold claim is thoroughly supported by the fluid narrative which wavers in between the two spaces, mixing the characters attached to them and recasting the world of great cultural exchange, world travel and discovery that the Renaissance was in a fictitious way that, however, is unfailingly faithful to its spirit.

Certain features of the Renaissance are shared by the two cultural spaces, across significant geographical distances. One of them is Renaissance humanism, which takes various shapes, yet maintains the admiration for the centrality of man as a creature of perfection in the universe. We recognize text-book definitions of the Renaissance cityscape in Rushdie’s Florence, marked by recognizable monuments such as the campanile of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Piazza San Marco, the Medici gardens and the Palazzo Medici (Rushdie, 2008, p. 138) and inhabited by debauched characters who live their lives as art. As for the Indian version, cruel as Akbar may be when he kills the Rana of Cooch Naheen (a cruelty that, actually, was worldspread at the time), his imaginary relationship with Jodha is – while it lasts – the epitome of such perfection. Jodha is the projection of Akbar’s desires, but also of the abstract Renaissance ideal of human perfection, so perfect that one would find it hard to believe that she exists (and therefore Rushdie builds her as altogether imaginary).

No real woman was ever like that, so perfectly attentive, so undemanding, so endlessly available. She was an impossibility, a fantasy of perfection. They feared her, knowing that, being impossible, she was irresistible, and that was why the king loved her best. They hated her for her theft of their histories. If they could have murdered her they would have done so, but until the emperor tired of her, or died himself, she was immortal. The idea of the emperor's death was not beyond contemplation, but so far the queens were not contemplating it. So far they bore their grievances in silence. "The emperor is mad," they grumbled inwardly, but sensibly forbore to utter the words. And when he was galloping around killing people they left the imaginary consort to her own devices. They never spoke her name. Jodha, Jodhabai. The words never crossed their lips. She wandered the palace quarter alone. She was a lonely shadow glimpsed through latticed stone screens. She was a cloth blown by the breeze. At night she stood under the little cupola on the top story of the Panch Mahal and scanned the horizon for the return of the king who made her real. The king, who was coming home from the wars. (Rushdie, 2008, pp. 24-25)

Jodha's dependence on Akbar's presence confirms her imaginary status. Precisely because of that, it may strike one as surprising that it is also Jodha who makes Akbar feel the most vulnerable. It is only with her that he refers to himself as "I" and not the "we" of supreme authority, which shows that, despite his omnipotent position, Akbar wonders (in pure humanist manner) about the frailty of his own humanity and the vanity of all earthly authority. Interestingly, Qara Kōz – the centre of this novel's fictional world – dethrones even Jodha at a later point in the narrative. Whereas Jodha has been tailored by Akbar to be his perfect match (yet it is only to him that she is perfect, unreal as she is), Qara Kōz's absolute perfection does not depend on perspective. The Indian princess whose powers of seduction have been validated by her life in Florence – and, indeed, by her Florentine self, immortalized artistically as Angelica la Fiorentina – is not just an idea, but the embodied principle of the Renaissance, a celebration of the beauty of human flesh as celebrated in Renaissance paintings, of life and art intertwined. Rushdie takes advantage of the very spirit of the Renaissance to expand the creative power of one human mind (Akbar's) beyond all limits. Rather than denying greatness, though, such limits confirm it: it is not in his next-to-divine power, but in his human frailty (as manifested in his emotional vulnerability in relation to the two women) that Akbar's greatness actually resides.

The Enchantress of Florence is a book with a bibliography (a rather unusual feature for a novel), of which an impressive number of titles are on the aesthetic and societal characteristics of the Italian Renaissance. The bibliography, meant to assist the author in recreating the Renaissance atmosphere, includes Baldesar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, a text-book of good manners at the European courts of the time, of which the Mughal court does not seem unaware at all, as does it not seem innocent of the European cruelties of the time. There also appear historical treatises and biographies of important characters of the time. Rushdie's interest in the Renaissance, in fact, has gone very much in depth throughout his career, as shown by his use of Shakespearean intertexts that Geetha Ganapathy-Doré analyzes her in her article "Shakespeare in Rushdie/ Shakespearean Rushdie" (*Atlantis* 31, 2, December 2009, 9-22). While noticing that the 2003 production of *Midnight's Children* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, with an all-Asian cast, may have been a surprise to many, Ganapathy-Doré highlights the impressive weight of Shakespearean quotations in Rushdie's work and thus signals the absolute legitimacy of such a canonical confirmation. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Shakespearean traces are present through the complex part of the foreigner (or traveller) as fool, who, as we know, is, in the bard's plays, the only one who can tell the truth even to the King's face without being punished:

It is to be noted that the protagonist of his latest novels (2005, 2008) are clowns: Shalimar and Mogor Dell'Amore. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie deliberately cultivates the confusion between the foreigner and the fool (Rushdie 2008: 6).

Finally, the fool wearing a coat of coloured leather lozenges will turn out to be a bastard child of an improbable encounter between Renaissance Italy and Moghul India, thus prefiguring the mixed heritage of colonial encounter which the author himself partakes of. Using the fool's point of view enables Rushdie to debunk the imperial grandstand view, whether it is articulated by the West or by Islam. (Ganapathy-Doré, 2009, p.16)

The presence of traces of Shakespeare, who, in a Euro-Indian dialogue, will sum up the spirit of the Renaissance better than anyone else, is of significance in a novel that repositions India (which at the time was beginning to gradually enter the scenario of colonialism, through the increasing authority of the East India Company) not only outside any kind of colonial plot, but as a top negotiator on the stage of world culture at this time of great flourishing. Mogor dell'Amore, the mysterious foreigner-fool of many names, is the only one (apart from the imaginary Jodha) who can contradict even Akbar the Great. Even though he takes risks that are sometimes rather costly to him, he craftily manages to stay unharmed by Akbar's omnipotent authority and engages in complicated philosophical debates with the emperor around matters of culture and religion circulating at the time. His praise of "the great polytheist pantheons because the stories are better, more numerous, more dramatic, more humorous, more marvellous" (Rushdie, 2008, p. 140), an unlikely preference for a European, confirms Rushdie's choice of an understanding of history as the best collection of stories ever told and, definitely, as one more good story. As for Rushdie's fictional version of Akbar the Great, his falling in love with Qara Kōz, the hybrid Indo-Italian embodiment of beauty, and his friendship with Mogor dell'Amore are correlatives of his adherence to Renaissance principles:

Qara Kōz was a woman such as he had never met, a woman who had forged her own life, beyond convention, by the force of her will alone, a woman like a king. This was a new dream for him, an undreamed vision of what a woman might be. It alarmed him, aroused him, intoxicated him, possessed him. Yes, Qara Kōz was extraordinary; and so, the emperor believed, was Vespucci, or Mogor dell'Amore. The emperor had tested him and found great merit there. He was not an enemy. He was a favorite. He deserved to be praised, not blamed. (Rushdie, 2008, p. 163)

In his relationships with Qara Kōz and Mogor dell'Amore, Akbar behaves not like the omnipotent emperor that he is, but like any Renaissance prince seeking elevated company. His conversations with Mogor dell'Amore seem exercises of educated debate inspired by Castiglione's *Courtier*, whereas Qara Kōz (also referred to as Angelica) answers the character requirements of a Dantean Beatrice or a Petrarchean Laura. But so do these two characters, built following the model of the European Renaissance courtier and lady (even though the lady is the quintessence of the two geographical spaces) respond to the cultural challenges of the Mughal court and are – in good Renaissance fashion – prepared to take in the cultural challenges of another space.

But there is one more subject that populated the mental landscape of the time and that is the discovery of America, alluded to early in the novel by the historical hints of the name of another character, Ago Vespucci. I argued somewhere else that *The Enchantress of Florence* engages with a concept of America as an invention of the European mind and a crowning of Renaissance humanist thought. It would be relevant to the discussion here to insist on the fact that America as imagined in the novel, while it represents a culmination of European dreams of a better world (and thus a correction to all sorts of ills of Europe, such as the rigid class structure, the social immobility and the general shortage of space), also proposes a different understanding of time as a variation to European linearity. The new continent's lack of awareness of temporal progress and thus of history as evolution amounts to a total absence of time and a different conceptualization of space than the traditional European ones:

Across the Ocean Sea in *Mundus Novus* the laws of space and time did not apply. (...) The locals, those few who mastered European languages, confirmed that theirs was a world without change, a place of stasis, *outside time*, they said, and that was the way they preferred it to be. It was possible, and there were philosophers who argued the point vociferously, that time had been brought to *Mundus Novus* by the European voyagers and settlers, along with various diseases. This was why it didn't work properly. It had not yet adapted to the new situation. "In time", people in *Mundus Novus* said, "there will be time". (Rushdie, 2008, p. 328)

The kind of temporality brought over by the European conquerors is featured not as a gain, but as a lack. Instead, the understanding of the world of the indigenous population as change-free, as situated outside time, believes in a cyclical conceptualization of time that brings us full circle to Akbar's Mughal court. Linear time as a force of destruction rather than progress in a sense responds to the scientific enquiries of the Renaissance, but also proposes a non-European temporality or, rather, atemporality, more focused outside the palpable world than on it. Hence, space is also reconceptualized as a place of stasis, outside time and thus with access to a supernatural order of things which Europe had lost and was trying to regain through its territorial conquests. America is, therefore, another space for an alternative history to develop, but this time it is not retrospective and corrective, like the Indo-Italian Renaissance imagined by Rushdie through the cultural negotiations between Sikri and Florence, but prospective, future-oriented: a potential history of what is yet to happen, which, actually, many narrative threads that are left open in the novel point to. In the world of Rushdie's alternative Renaissance, made of the fabric of storytelling, America is an extension of this dream, a kind of fairy tale other world which, at the very beginning of its own modern history, can actually provide a space for the projects and dreams of the time to be brought to life, in a different perspective.

The *Enchantress of Florence* tells the story of an encounter between two parallel worlds, whose imaginary contact enriches the cultural meanings of the great celebration of human excellence that the Renaissance was. Rushdie's version of alternative history takes the Renaissance project – whose main aim was to give full reins to the infinite creative capacities of the human mind – further, by connecting it to non-European spaces that are usually discussed in an entirely different light. This is one version of Rushdie's ubiquitous criticism of the limitations of history and the abuses of political powers which, by virtue of the boundless imagination set free in the process of storytelling, makes use of creative anachronism to build stories more credible than verifiable truth. Humanist ideas are explored in the novel in a comparative transnational light *avant la lettre*, which builds bridges across cultures and corrects, in hindsight, the reductive effects of colonial hierarchies.

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Endnotes

For a more in-depth discussion of America as an invention of the European mind see Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru, "Cartographies of Indian Modernity in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *The Enchantress of Florence*". *ODISEI (II): O cartografie identitară. Studii de caz (ODISEI (II): An Identity Cartography. Case Studies)*, eds. Mihaela Irimia and Dragoș Ivana, University of Bucharest Press, 2009, 392-403

Rewriting the Political, Social and Cultural History of India, England and America by Rewriting the History of the Novel in Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte*

Geetha GANAPATHY-DORE

Abstract

While at Elon, Rushdie plunged into futuristic science fiction to find an escape route from bullying by classmates in his boarding school. Later, he studied history in Cambridge. After trying to write the postcolonial history of India and Pakistan, and contemporary America at different and crucial moments, in his latest novel Quichotte, Rushdie attempts to take on Cervantes, the very pioneer of the genre of the novel in whose lineage the migrant author wants to be placed by the reader. Situated in post-2001 America with trips to England, the narrative unfolds in an era where "anything can happen," an augmented version of Orwellian reversals. This fictional canvas allows Rushdie to rewrite the history of India, the UK and more significantly, Trump's America, while a glorified nationalist narrative of history is being officially spun in these countries. Indian and American histories are intertwined through the Indo-American diaspora to give the reader a global perspective. The author identifies his ageing self with the dwindling planet and reinvents the fictional pair of Quichotte and Sancho and their quest for love as a potent remedy to the inexorable end of History. My paper attempts to decipher Rushdie's novel with the help of Milan Kundera's theoretical work on the art of the novel and argues that fiction becomes the language in which truth could be told, when lies masquerade as truth.

Keywords: Rushdie, History, rewriting, 21st century novel, nationalism, truth

What is history? As a general rule, we take history to mean a factual record and dispassionate account of the past. But, history is said to be "written by the victors and framed according to the prejudices and bias existing on their side" (Vest, 1891). In that sense, any history is always already rewritten. That is perhaps one of the reasons why T.S. Eliot (1934, p.51) expressed his distrust of history in "Gerontion":

*History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.*

It was the philosopher Hegel who argued for history with a capital H. History, i.e., the history of humanity. According to him, is a progressive process that helps humanity achieve absolute freedom and during which the "spirit discovers itself and its own concept." (Hegel, 1857, p. 62). His disciple Karl Marx held that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx, 1848). The conservative American scholar Francis Fukuyama (1992) went to the extent of postulating the end of History when the Communist Soviet Empire fell and liberal democracy became the predominant model of government in many parts of the world. Milan Kundera, who hails from the former Eastern bloc country of Czechoslovakia, qualifies History as "the suprahuman force of an omnipotent society" (Kundera, 1986, p. 23). When we speak about History with a capital H, we take for granted that there exists a grand narrative of human experience and that by studying the past, we can discern the future orientations of this ongoing narrative. Historians were tempted to rewrite history when new evidence emerged or new facts uncovered, and the need was felt for a new perspective to be outlined (Salmon, 1912). However, after the Second World War, revisionist rewritings of the Holocaust that denied the atrocious crimes of Hitler, shocked humanity. For postcolonial writers, colonial history had rather been "a nightmare from which they were trying to awake" (Joyce, 2008, p.32).

Postcolonial scholars contested what they perceived to be a Eurocentric master narrative that went in the name of universal history by proposing plural and alternative histories such as subaltern studies, feminist histories, and Dalit reclamations to cite just the Indian example. Rewriting History was thus seen as a way to right the wrongs done in the past (Rajan, 2000).

Postcolonial novelists were drawn into the politics of rewriting History while performing the act of decentring the canon. In 1983, after his literary career had been launched, Rushdie met a Cambridge literature don who pointed out to him that as a Commonwealth Writer he occupied “a position on the periphery.” Rushdie afterwards published an essay affirming that “Commonwealth literature does not exist” given the diversity of contexts that inspired writers coming from the various corners of the Commonwealth (Rushdie, 1992, p.61). Even after winning the Booker of Bookers and being knighted, Rushdie is not viewed as a canonical writer. When he realizes that “he would never be canonical,” (Rushdie, 2019, p.215) it is easy for a writer to play with history, corrupt it with myth, epic and legend, colour it with memory, alter it with story and warp its frontiers in such a way as to make it a mirror of literature. The writer's licence gives Rushdie the liberty to make light of his own knighthood, impersonate himself in the role of Don Quixote and turn the genre of chivalric romance on its head. In Rushdie's view, Cervantes's hero, “the marginal man, the man laughably out of touch and doggedly out of step and also unarguably out of mind,” (281), a predecessor of the modern day immigrant writer, is truly an embodiment of humanity. To rewrite *Don Quixote* is, therefore, to rewrite History.

The Novel as an anti-dote to the End of History

This article takes up for scrutiny Rushdie's fourteenth and latest novel, *Quichotte*, which was short listed for the Booker Prize in 2019. It first discusses the reasons for Rushdie's attempt to take on Cervantes, the very pioneer of the genre of the novel in whose lineage the migrant author wants to be placed by the reader (Rushdie, 1992, p. 21). It then reviews the many strategies adopted by Rushdie to rewrite the canonical Don Quixote, i.e., hybridization of the European quest narrative by Farid-ud-Din Attar's mystic quest narrative, Herman Melville's whale hunt and the American road novel; recourse to Nabokovian parallel universes in which the Quichotte-Sancho-Human Trampoline trio is mirrored in the Brother-Sister-Son trio; Marcel Du Champ-inspired surrealistic scenes; a generational clash thanks to a Pinocchio-like character who challenges the author who has fathered him; the device of a speaking cricket that combines the magic of Alladin's genie with the cuteness of a Pixar animated figure, and Andersen's fairytale-like escape into a transhistoric ever after. Finally, the article tries to argue that this fictional canvas allows Rushdie to rewrite the political, social and cultural history of contemporary India, England and more significantly, Trump's America from a transplanted person's point of view. Diagnosing the younger generation's lack of memory as the root cause of their loss of sense of history, Rushdie revives the memories of a multicultural Bombay before it became Mumbai, interprets Brexit as a sign of nostalgia for an imperial past and writes all the truth about the erasure of Native American history, slavery, racism, the Muslim ban, gun violence, the opioid crisis and the obsession with the media and new frontiers in America, while a glorified and patriotic narrative of American history is being officially spun. Indian and American histories are intertwined through the Indo-American diaspora to give the reader a global perspective. “L'univers, c'est moi” feels the omniscient author (357). Indeed he identifies his ageing self with the dwindling planet and reinvents the fictional pair of Quichotte and Sancho to propose the quest for love as an anti-dote to the inexorable end of History.

The one common characteristic that Rushdie's Quichotte has with reference to his fictional double is that he is tall and skinny. His total disconnection from worldly reality, obsession with love and use of ornate language are other common features. Rushdie's Sancho too gets beaten up like his predecessor. The horse Rocinante has been replaced by a grey metal Chevy Cruise. But for the rest, Rushdie's “updating of Don Quixote for the digital age” (Winterson, 2019) is one among the multiple versions of *Don Quixote*.

Rushdie has thrown in references to Jules Massenet's 1910 opera *Don Quichotte* and Akira Kurosawa's 1980 film *Kagemusha* (Shadow Warrior) to indicate that these are his novel's intertexts. The Dulcinea of Massenet was a more sophisticated character compared to the original and was modeled on Lucy Arbell, the young singer with whom the sixty-seven year old composer was in love. As the older Rushdie fell in love with and married the much younger Indo-American actress and television host Padma Lakshmi, he was inspired by Massenet in retelling the quest for his lady love. Kagemusha is one of the names of the secret agent Lance Makioka in Rushdie's novel who comes to warn the writer about his son's activism as a member of a group called Legion. The Brother/writer's son signs his name as Quix 97 and wears a mask from the Broadway 2002 revival of the musical, *Man of La Mancha* (221). The canonical text thus becomes a hypotext that lies buried beneath the layers of multicultural rewritings in both classical and popular registers.

While he was a student at Eton, Rushdie plunged into futuristic science fiction to find an escape route from bullying classmates in his boarding school. Later, he took up history in Cambridge. Though he turned to science fiction in his initial attempt at novel writing (Rushdie, 1975), Rushdie shot into fame after fictionalizing the history of postcolonial India in *Midnight's Children* (1981), which was followed by a political satire of the history of postcolonial Pakistan, *Shame* (1983). Apart from these works of historiographic metafiction, Rushdie rewrote the history of modern Indian art in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). The postcolonial predicament of being "handcuffed to history," (Rushdie, 1982, p. 9) and the acceleration of time in the modern world and the meaning of History have been at the very heart of his writing and craft. Tales from *The Arabian Nights*, which played a formative role in the shaping of his imagination during his childhood in Bombay, are basically about how human life is a race against death and how time must be used for survival through creativity. The fatwa pronounced against Rushdie pronounced by Ayatollah Khomeini in February 1989, after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in which Rushdie tried to engage with the early history of Islam, only intensified his awareness of the preciousness of life and the necessity to contend with time. Two Years, *Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* (which is another way of saying 1001 nights), Rushdie's novel published in 2015 and narrated by a voice from a future millennium, pictures strange jinn princesses from the imaginary world of Peristan. It is clear that Rushdie associates America with the future and India with the irretrievable landscape of his lost childhood. As for *The Golden House*, Rushdie's rather unconvincing effort to compete with Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, published in 2017, it chronicles Trump's America where "Suddenly lying was funny, and hatred was funny, and bigotry was funny" (Garner, 2017). *Quichotte* comes as a more forceful sequel to it.

In an interview accorded to *The Hindu*, Rushdie notes that "the great tradition of the realist novel is based on an agreement between the writer and the reader about the nature of the world. When *reality* becomes contested, the foundation of the realist novel is eroded" (Lunn, 2019). Hence the need to humorously stage the renegotiation of this pact between the author and the reader in the form of a conversation between a father and his son. *Quichotte* is a satire of the 21st century man whose brain is addled by binge watching television. He is the very epitome of modern mobility: "He no longer had a fixed abode. The road was his home, the car his living room" (9). Rushdie uses the technique of *mise en abyme*, a sleight of hand used by Cervantes himself, who introduced a metanarrative dimension to his novel by presenting his own story as the translation of an Arabic manuscript by Cid[c] Hemet[c] Benengeli, Melville who had introduced *Moby Dick* as "the draught of a draught," (Melville, 1851, p. 159) and Nabokov whose Sebastian Knight writes his autobiography as his brother's life story.

The author disguises the Ismail/Quichotte quest as the plot of another novel written by Sam DuChamp, a low brow spy fiction writer. His name is mispronounced as Sam the Sham (25), making him a fake, a pale imitation of the conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp. Later in the novel his son is shown to claim his father's legacy by taking on Marcel Duchamp's and Picabia's names as his pseudonyms which are indeed attempted rewritings of his identity (Ganapathy-Doré, 2013). "Everyone is someone else now" remarks a disenchanted Quichotte (25). In his 2020 America interview with François Busnel (Rushdie, 2020, p. 25), Rushdie has identified change of identity as

one of the big themes of American literature, especially literature from New York. It is at the heart of what one calls “the Great American Novel”. But I have the feeling that even if the subject fascinates me, I am not capable of writing the great American novel of identity.

Rushdie does not leave any space for the informed critic to explicate his text. He himself hands out the key to the reader about what he set out to do by rewriting *Don Quixote*:

Cervantes had gone to war with the junk culture of his own age. He [the writer] said that he was trying also to write about the impossible, obsessional love, father-son relationships, sibling quarrels, and yes unforgivable things; about Indian immigrants, racism toward them, crooks among them; about cyber-spies, science fiction, the intertwining of fictional and “real” realities, the death of the author, the end of the world. He told her he wanted to incorporate elements of the parodic, and of satire and pastiche. (289)

The blue fairy in the Sancho subplot lays bare the relationship between individuals and history:

All of us are in two stories at the same time... Life and Times. There is our own personal story, and the bigger story of what is happening around us. When both are in trouble simultaneously, when the crisis inside you intersects with the crisis outside you, things get a little crazy. (351)

The end of his marriage with Padma Laskhmi and the pursuit of his career as a writer in a world that was falling apart were the two problems that beset Rushdie. *Quichotte* is not a historical novel, but a novel about the history of the novel which is called upon to come to terms with the twists and turns of contemporary history. “If the work of every novelist contains an implicit vision of the history of the novel, an idea of what the novel is,” as Milan Kundera has sustained (Kundera, 1986, p. 9), Rushdie's novel is more than a metanarrative, a metanarratological *récit*. Quichotte embodies authorhood and Sancho, characterhood. Fiction happens when characters rebel against the control of the author and break into freedom and live a life of their own. In *Quichotte*, Sancho, the character gets frustrated because he does not have access to the certain parts of the omniscient author's mind (130). Brother, the writer who narrates the tale of Quichotte, suggests that his story was a “metamorphosed version of his own” (22). He goes on to suggest further that the tale in its capacity as the individual life history of Quichotte was “more authentic” (ibid.) than as the narrator's fiction about his family. To make matters worse, the narrator confesses that his yarn is unreliable because “Brother on somedays had difficulty remembering which history was his own and which Quichotte's” (216). At another point in the novel, the character teaches the author about the nature of true love (356). This parody of the critical concepts of narratology shows that Rushdie's rewriting of Cervantes is not without forethought. As Milan Kundera has earlier pointed out, *Don Quixote* imparts to the reader “the wisdom of uncertainty.” (Kundera, 1986, p. 21) Rushdie had earlier drawn our attention to the postmodernist predicament of tentativeness by stating that “Meaning is a shaky edifice” (Rushdie, 1992, p. 12). The same idea that was also the subject of another Rushdie novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is repeated in *Quichotte*: “we all live on shaky ground” (332). The novelistic genre allows for the incorporation of heterogeneous time thanks to flash-backs and fast-forwarding flights of fancy. However, the rather anachronistic recasting of Pinocchio as Sancho and the Arabian Nights genie as the speaking insect Grillo parlante, which can magically produce bank notes, ID and credit cards to help the imaginary young boy come of age in the consumer paradise of America destabilizes the reader's world of literary references.

The Quixotic note on pronunciation, a frame text, that tells the reader about the various ways in which the name of Quichotte is pronounced (in French, German and Spanish), and the “key shot” in the crosscultural cinema to come, immediately plunge us into the typically Rushdian universe of interlingual pun and transnational space.

Situated in post-2001 America, the narrative unfolds in an age where “Anything-Can-Happen,” an augmented version of Orwellian reversals. One understands why Rushdie renames his own novel in his novel *Reverse Rendition* (227) in a playful manner. Since the days of Columbus, America has been a shadow of India. These days India has become an echo of America not only because of the comings and goings of the diaspora but also because of the nationalist ideas of the heads of these countries that resonate across space. Muslims from some countries are thus put on “the no-entry list” in America (126) and Muslims suspected of eating beef-meat are lynched by cow-vigilantes in India (54).

From time immemorial, philosophers have tried to understand the temporal dimension of the universe. From H.G. Wells to Arthur C. Clarke, time travels have remained a literary fantasy. Nevertheless, Rushdie seems to have read extensively about Einstein's general theory of relativity which does not exclude the possibility of time travel, even though it is difficult to put it into practice. The quantum paradox of Erwin Schrödinger is mentioned in the novel (270) by an Indian character called Evel Cent, a prophet of the future (loosely modelled after Elon Musk. The name itself is a deformation of the Hindi name Awwal Sant, meaning first saint). Evel Cent first pretends that his dog named Schrödinger travelled through interdimensional space and came back alive and unchanged (271) before admitting that it was a lie later on (385). He has pursued Kennedy's dream of New Frontiers and conceived a postreality continuum. His Neighbour Earth Exchange Technology would whisk human beings away from the end of the world to a home in a parallel and alternative universe (204). What Rushdie tries to distillate is not only the passage of personal time (symbolized in the novel by Quichotte's heart condition which serves as a contraption to drive the plot) as in Proust's memories, but also time as a physical phenomenon. Rushdie's metaphor for time is “fabric” (169) in which a hole could be burned into. A traumatic “Interior Event” (10 & 273), i.e., a stroke, provokes gashes in the writer's memory. Similarly, Salma R., an American TV host of Indian origin with whom he has fallen desperately in love, has recourse to OxyCotin because it is a “time-release drug” (112). Later she undergoes electro convulsive therapy to preserve her from her dark moods bordering on folly and does not remember certain names and incidents. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice who falls into the hole of the white rabbit to wake up in Wonderland, it is possible for human beings to dive into the black hole of oblivion to emerge in another place and another time, i.e., in another reality. Another instance where the notion of time gets disoriented is when there is a “location dislocation” (137). Sancho goes to sleep in the Drury inn in Amarillo and wakes up in Double Tree by Hilton in Tulsa and thinks he is in New York. The question of time, therefore, is inevitably connected to the question of different forms of reality in Rushdie. Fiction allows the reader to imaginatively experience time travel and perceive multiple realities (naturally real, magically real, surreal, hyperreal). In the novel, high definition reality as represented in the TV sometimes prevails over reality as lived by the characters. Salma's sense of time as a television host is absolute. Even the clocks bend to please her so that her staff could get their work done on time. Indeed the Author/Quichotte subscribes to the Hindu notion of *maya* (reality as illusion), considers reality as “a trick of the light” (96) and aims to look beyond the surface for other dimensions of meaning.

What gives Quichotte the key to decipher reality is the poetic metaphors of Farid-ud-Din Attar in his *Conference of Birds*. The several metaphorical valleys (search, love, knowledge, unity, contentment, wonderment and poverty/absolute nothingness) referred to in his quest narrative are deliberately transposed in Rushdie's self-referential and postmodern text which plays with the traditional elements of the quest narrative (a hero, a villain who challenges him, a friend who helps the hero, a call that stirs the hero into action, the journey, the arrival and challenges, the final ordeal and the achievement of the goal) and the American novel, especially American Road novel. The real name of the character called Quichotte is Ismail. This first name is an echo of Ishmael, the lead character in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. While his Ismail's double, Quichotte, is besotted by Salma R. like Melville's Ahab, who is obsessed with the whale, Ismail is able to maintain a critical distance like Ishmael and be aware “obsession destroys the obsessed” (129). As regards the American road novel which is part and parcel of the American literary tradition in search of discovery and self-discovery through adventure, it is also a quest narrative like the picaresque novel. But most often, the outcome is one of disappointment.

Initially, what Rushdie intended was to redo Alexis de Tocqueville's journey in reverse, i.e., from New York to the West. With his son Milan, he wanted to take the mythical Route 66 which was one of his fantasies. But, having been invited to contribute a comparative literature essay on Cervantes and Shakespeare who both died in 1616, he decided to write instead an imaginary version of Quixote's journey (Rushdie, 2020, p. 27). Rushdie's narrative ends with a sense of disillusionment about the art of the novel. "One-had no story anymore. Character, narrative, history were all dead" (236). The clue to the intimation that the universe is disintegrating is the uncertain present which functions as a sure sign of the unpredictable dystopia to come. The chronology of this period is counted in terms of Before Google and After Google (258). Democratic regimes have been replaced by the mob rule and the kangaroo court of social media.

Reverse Rendition of the New World's History

Rushdie starts with a rather recent wave of migration to America. The history of Indo-American diaspora narrated by Quichotte's double the writer Brother is quite linear and didactic. He reviews (26-27) the condition of the Indian diaspora from the Migration Act of 1790, which allowed only free white persons to become American citizens, to the suspicious atmosphere of post September 11, 2001 attacks through the Immigration Act of 1917 which excluded the Hindoos, the landmark Supreme Court case *United States v Bhagat Singh Thind* 1923 in which the court ruled out the possibility of Americans assimilating with Indians, the 1946 Luce Celler Act which permitted hundred Indians per year to come to the US, and the Immigration Act 1965 which opened the doors more fully to Indians. The only gap in Rushdie's account of the Indo-American history is the reference to the Indians expelled by Idi Amin from Uganda who came to the US and thrived thanks to the motel business (Tukel, 2007). Contrary to African Americans, Indian immigrants were spared of racial abuse until 1987 when the Dotbustergang attacked Indian families in Jersey City.

The historical recalling of these facts prepares the ground for the racist attack that Ismail Smile alias Quichotte the hero and his imaginary son Sancho suffer at Lake Capote and the maneuver of intimidation in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when Quichotte drives from Atlanta to New York in search of the love of Salma R. with whom he shares a common point: both of them had spent their childhood in Bombay. Indeed the father and the son witness the shooting of two Indians by an Islamophobic American in Kansas. This true incident which occurred in 2017 is so deftly interwoven into the fabric of the narrative that the borderline between fact and fiction is blurred. Sancho himself gets beaten up by three racists in New York because he sees them wearing "collars with the broken leashes," which are visual metaphors for their animal-like anger and unfettered hatred. Rushdie is at his best when depicting immigrant bashing, whether literal or phantasmagorical, in America. He feels that as an American citizen, he is entitled to write the novel of the New York immigrant (Rushdie, 2020, p.26). Just as he wrote back to the British Empire, he writes back against violence towards immigrants by conjuring up a scene in which the Brother's son executes a karate gesture and turns the gunman in Kansas into a victim begging for his life (364). Only the novelistic genre offers the potential for this "reverse rendition" in an alternate reality.

Rushdie handles the historically older abominations of slavery and racism against African Americans in an oblique manner. Though he never ever mentions the name of Donald Trump, he mentions Obama (375) and Oprah (47) by name. The dependent father son relationship between Quichotte and Sancho modelled on the master servant relationship in *Don Quixote* certainly brings to mind the bond of slavery: "I was imported. I got put on a ship and sailed away and crossed the mighty ocean into Charleston Bay." (93). The enduring legacy of slavery in the form of racism in its contemporary manifestation is witnessed through the testimonies of African Americans who come to talk in the "While Black" segment of Salma's Show (11). Salma performs the role of Lady Liberty, who implements the humanitarian vision expressed in Emma Lazarus's sonnet.

Rushdie recalls in his *America interview* that Auguste Bartholdi's statue of liberty was intended to enlighten thought before it became a symbol of the welcoming of migrants (Rushdie, 2020, p.31).

The name Sancho is not only that of Don Quixote's sidekick but also that of Ignatius Sancho, “the extraordinary negro” (234). Thanks to the name of a Jamaican restaurant in London named after him, the writer is able to unpack the history of slavery in the British Empire. Born on a slaveship in 1729, Sancho was a runaway slave who was freed in England. He did work for English aristocrats but not as an accompanying servant for an adventurous knight but as “composer, playwright, polemicist, prolific writer of essay-letters to the newspapers, author of *Theory of Music*, greengrocer, the first person of African origin to vote in a British election.” (Ibid.). Rushdie puts him on par with Ottobah Cugoana, the first black man to dictate his account to his white friends and publish an autobiographical narrative called *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* in 1787 and Olaudah Equiano, the first black writer (from Biafra) of an autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself*, which was published in 1789. Like them, Ignatius Sancho was a chronicler of slavery and campaigned against it. Thomas Gainsborough painted his portrait and he was admired by Laurence Sterne who wrote letters to him. This passage in the novel says as much about the dignity of freed slaves and their talents as about the liberal minds of English artists and intellectuals who were open-minded and did not manifest racist prejudice in those times. The revival of the memories of anti-slavery movement restores faith in humanity and raises hopes about overcoming racism and bringing about change. The passing mention of Mandela's name (375) also has the same effect.

Similarly, the claims to the history of the American nation of the Native Indian minority are established by recourse to etymology. Etymology of place names helps *Quichotte* re-establish the connection between history and geography. He connects the linguistic parochialism of some racist Americans who want everyone to speak only English with the act of possession. The names of Spanish saints on the West Coast and old English place names on the East Coast have “buried the past beneath them” (153). Native Indian words have lost their power. Sometimes, the meaning remains as in Chicago, the onion field and Mississippi, the Great River but nobody remembers the original meaning. Indeed the fictive town of Beautiful depicted in the novel is the translation of a Native American word: Olathe, the real name of the town where the Kansas shooting occurred (Lunn, 2019). It is Rushdie's way of reviving Native American history.

The most striking stories of contemporary American history have been rewritten as surrealistic episodes by Salman Rushdie: trumpism as a masquerade of mastodons that afflict (183-191) the imaginary town of Berenger and the opioid scandal as an immoral commercial scheme invented by Dr. R. K. Smile, the cousin of Ismail Smile. A Trump like character is featured in a TV series called *Five Eyes* in which Salma plays the CIA Chief. The imaginary TV president “was obsessed by cable news, pandered to a whole supremacist base, and [...] played golf” (46). Later the readers are witnesses to a hallucinatory scene: well meaning American citizens becoming mastodons over night and going on a rampage against migrants. *Quichotte* refers to them as m. americanum, a monstrous creature belonging to pre-history, in other words, a descendant of the physically sturdy early WASP settlers, who do not want to recognize the transformation of America as a country of immigrants. They are patriots and white supremacists who have been emboldened by Trump and turned hostile and aggressive towards immigrants. But not all of them are four legged monsters. Some stand erect and try to discuss with ordinary human beings. What distinguishes the mastodons is their enormous size and the sound and fury that they vent. The green suit they wear recalls the suit that Sylvester Stallone wore in the movie *Rocky*. This is Rushdie's satirical way of translating Trump's “Make America great again” discourse and the uninhibited right wing populism that is gaining ground in America. However, *Quichotte* and Sancho see this episode as a passing scene in the larger spectacle of history. The reversibility or irreversibility of this aberrational metamorphosis of American identity, which the Romanian immigrant motel owner Ionesco calls “mastodontis” is what is at stake. The intertextual reference to and the transposition of Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* (1974) is obvious in this episode, Berenger being the one uncapitulating human being in this absurd play which tells the tale of mass conversion to totalitarianism.

The Indian American physician Dr. R.K. Smile, a relative of Ismail Smile or Smile Smile, has patented In Smile™ a sublingual opioid (fentanyl which is ten times more powerful than morphine) and is shamelessly marketing it by

manipulating other doctors who defraud Medicare by prescribing this dangerous drug to celebrities who do not need painkillers for any terminal disease but for quelling their personal and existential angst. In order to convince doctors, the company uses pretty women. R.K. Smile's wife, named "Happy" to match her husband's name, is involved in charitable activities and convinces art galleries to accept donations from her husband as a means to enhance his reputation. She cites the example of OxyContin family. Readers familiar with the scandal of OxyContin and the Purdue Pharma founded by the Sackler family can easily discern the fact behind the fiction as the allusion to patronage of art gives the clue to real history. Using real names would have exposed Rushdie to libel suits. By fictionally metamorphosing the Jewish American entrepreneur into Indian one of uncertain ancestry helps him portray the immigrant as a trickster who tests the host society. Historically, the American dream is to pursue happiness. If Smile is the first degree of happiness, the ultimate degree would be ecstasy. Materialistically oriented Americans seem to be resorting to uninhibited sex and illegal and life-threatening drugs to feel the thrill and fill the spiritual void (49). In so doing, they have compromised the dream of democracy which has become an illiberal one.

The irony is that Dr. R.K. Smile tells the truth of his method to people as if it were a lie told in jest. This episode helps Rushdie tackle the role of falsehoods in the Trump era and the need to fact-check those claims by members of the press or the justice department who have reliable knowledge. Quichotte dubs it "errorism" (327) which is as bad as terrorism. Alongside these front page stories, the narrator recounts the marginal story of the hospice children whom Salma R. makes visible by filming it just as she films racial prejudice in the Republican majority states.

Rushdie's rewriting of history by relativizing the univocal truth of official history with alternative stories should not be confused with the post-truth and fake news of the Trump era. Former president Barack Obama designated it by another name:

What we've seen is what some people call truth decay, something that's been accelerated by outgoing President Trump, the sense that not only do we not have to tell the truth, but the truth doesn't even matter (Obama, 2020).

The Cambridge Dictionary defines post-truth as "relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts." Rushdie's novel depicts media fuelled situations of post-truth for the reader unfamiliar with such a process to know what it is. It does mention fake names of secret agents. While fake news pollutes the real by brainwashing the viewers, the writer believes that imaginative fiction has "the power to enter and transform and even improve the real world" (32). When lies masquerade as truth, fiction becomes the language in which truth could be told. In his America Interview (Rushdie, 2020, p. 40), Rushdie explains this in simple but unforgettable terms:

The purpose of a lie is to obscure the truth; the purpose of fiction is to reveal the truth. This is the big difference between art and lie. It does not matter whether the novel is a fairy story or science fiction, whether it is related to magic realism or surrealism: the goal of literature is the unveiling of truth. The goal of falsehood is untruth.

Farewell to the Old World – End of Empire, Brexit and Bombay

The unexpected turn that history has taken in England is evoked by a family story in chapters four, fifteen and seventeen. The Writer/Brother's Sister elopes to England as the wife of an older painter because her parents refuse to invest in her education abroad. Her awareness of gender discrimination leads her to becoming a human rights lawyer. She helps many an immigrant and especially immigrant woman to find their way in England. However, when she defends residents against a noisy West London Jamaican restaurant, she loses the capital of sympathy she had

accumulated over the years and is accused of racism. She, on her own, withdraws her candidacy for membership in the House of Lords as a life peeress and a prospective position as Lord Speaker. The Conservatives initially back her because she is a meritorious person and members of the Labour party support her because she represents a double minority – ethnic and gender. But unfortunately there is no depth in their conviction. The pragmatic and commonsensical English people have fallen prey to skepticism and fight over whether affirmative action is merely positive discrimination (62). If the anecdote of the missed opportunity helps the writer picture the legislative branch, he is able to touch upon the sense of tolerance and fairness in the judiciary through the character of the cross dressing English judge who marries Sister, despite the fact that she is a divorced Muslim woman whose body has been mutilated by breast cancer. In chapter 7, Rushdie alludes to Brexit, again without naming it, as “a wild nostalgic decision,” (53) which “broke the country in half” (54). Rushdie briefly evokes the malaise of the Windrush generation and compares Brexit to the religious divide that plagues the subcontinent and the racial divide that splinters the US. London's clubby atmosphere has been replaced by the empty apartments of rich Chinese, Russian and Arab investors. The writer's sister speaks Queen's English and wears floral patterned dresses like the queen (294). The staging of her death by cancer and the simultaneous suicide of her decent husband is an allegory of the decline of old English culture. Like in the US, the xenophobic discourse of white populism, England-for-the English, is on the rise. Britain has become a “fractured, second-class nation” (278) like its former colonies. The chess move (Kasparov, 2008) communicated to Brother by his niece, which sets in motion “The Grand (family) Reconciliation” (34) drama, is a subtle allusion to Satyajit Ray's movie *Chantranj ke Kilari*. But this time, the British do not take over and change the rules of the game. The game ends in a tragedy at both the family and national levels. Rushdie's treatment of the Brexit issue tries thus to strike a balance between constructivist and game theories of international relations (Oliver, 2019). He situates Brexit in a larger theory of world disintegration rather than the much debated hypothesis of European disintegration.

The Bohemian Bombay painted by Rushdie is largely a memorial one. The three major lines that could be discerned are the reworked history of Bollywood legends such as Raj Kapoor, Nargis and Vijayanti Mala, including the playback singers Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle, the history of modern Indian painters Husain, Raza, Gaitonde and Khanna and the hidden and unsavoury aspects of Indian patriarchy. Along with real painters, Rushdie's artist character from *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Aurora Zagoiby, who reminds us of Amrita Sher Ghil, is mentioned blurring the borders between reality and fiction. Indeed Amrita Sher Ghil's “Village Scene” of seated women reappears in an altered form: “four women with shorn hair wearing white saris, sitting in a room with an ornately patterned rug” (251) in the Human Trampoline's house as a commissioned piece, making the imaginary world seep into the real one. The writer's Sister as well as Salma recount a tale of sexual abuse, by the father in the former case and the grandfather in the latter. Another legacy of the family that crosses borders is genetics. Salma, R inherits her grandmother's and her mother's mental illness. This is one of the reasons why she has recourse to the fatal drug that nearly kills her. The only legacy that the Ulysses-like-author hands down to his Telemachus of a son is the colourful street language of Bambaiyya (152). When the son hurls the words he has learnt from his father like weapons at the perpetrators of the racist aggression in New York (210), the reader realizes that it is the immigrants' mother tongue that frightens the natives.

Conclusion

In this multistranded narrative, the history of colour symbolism that *Quichotte* expounds to his son Sancho in a professoral tone at Billy Diner, after telling him that they should skirt the red Republican states and drive through a Democratic blue state to avoid hostile encounters, is almost poetic and falsely naïve:

In Europe, the colours of political affiliation are reversed, so blue is the colour of conservatism, reactionaries and capitalists, while red stand for communism, socialism, democratic socialism, and social democracy.

I ask myself sometimes: what is the colour of love? It's hard to find one that isn't used up already. Saffron is the colour of Hindu nationalism, green the color of Islam, except for two places where they prefer red, and black is the preferred color of Islamic fanatics. Pink is associated with women's protests and the whole rainbow is the sign of gay pride. White, I don't think of as a color, except in the racial context. So maybe brown. Brown, like us. That must be the color of love. (142)

This passage sums up the History of humanity by translating it into the chromatic register as if it were a haze of colour powders thrown during a Holi festival. The writer turns painter to plead for hybridity and tolerance. Unfortunately this "carnival of relativity" (Kundera, 1993, 39) is interrupted in the novel by gun-totting Americans.

There is a striking image in the novel about a history essay that the writer composes in Eton. One of his vengeful classmates tears it into pieces. Another writes "Wogs go home" on his door. Rushdie catches hold of the culprit and beats him up. This is one act of uncontrollable violence he remembers. Tearing the essay into pieces at least symbolically destroys the history that was narrated therein. How to destroy a troubled history? Quichotte, the unwilling accomplice in Dr. Smile's stratagems, points a gun at his beloved, not to kill her but save her from drug dependence and forces her to consent to travel to Evel Cent's portal to Next, the other Earth, wanting to put an end to their terrestrial history. The novel ends with a freeze frame: Salma R. and Quichotte standing on the threshold of a gate, a Rushdian remake of "the instant made eternity" in Browning's "Last Ride Together". Their transhistoric life after death, if there was one, is a story that cannot be logically told. The naming of the portal as "Mayflower" stamps it as a typical American Dream, a repetition of History. Luckily the author is not dead, but only asleep and sees his microscopic characters steal their way into his office. The realistic novel is no more. Real history as fake novel is the new normal.

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Endnotes

¹Hereafter all the quotations from this novel will be indicated by just its page number within brackets.

²The protagonist is a migrant and travelling salesman.

³Rushdie married Padma Lakshmi in 2004. The couple divorced in 2007.

⁴In *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie describes how he was asked to choose aliases by the British secret service in order to protect him.

⁵The translation of all the quotations from this interview published in French is mine.

⁶Rushdie had proposed alternative titles to Shakespeare's plays. See Carol Blue's "The Folger Perambulation" in the *New Yorker Magazine* dated May 6, 1996.

⁷Salma R. could be a fictional guise for Padma Rushdie or Salman Rushdie himself embodied in a female identity.

⁸On 22nd February 2017, in a Kansas bar, Adam Purinton, a 51-year-old US Navy veteran, shot two Indian engineers aged 32, Srinivas Kuchibhotla and Alok Madasani, taking them to be "two middle Eastern men." The former died and the later survived. Purinton also wounded another American, Ian Grillot, 24, who tried to intervene. This hate crime was said to have been prompted by President Trump's Muslim Ban and his anti-immigrant rhetoric, which he denied.

⁹A word play on "driving while intoxicated" used by African Americans to refer to racial profiling by the police.

¹⁰Indeed the Sackler Center for Arts Education at the Guggenheim Museum, the Sackler Institute for Comparative Genomics at the American Museum of Natural History, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution, the Sackler Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art still give the Sackler family an honourable position while the Louvre Museum has removed the name from its Wing of Oriental Antiquities.

Channel 4's *Indian Summers*: A Period Drama with an Agenda

Lydie LE MOINE

Abstract

Channel 4's website describes the TV series Indian Summers as an "epic drama set in the 1930s as India dreams of independence but the British cling to power" presenting its potential audience with the antagonistic views of a personified India – as unreal as a poetic construct – who "dreams" while real people – the British – desperately yet concretely make their unwanted presence felt. Marketing has it right: the series is targeting post-modern audiences with supposedly anti-colonial views but also an irredeemable tendency to associate India with the elusive exotic unknown. Yet Paul Rutman, its creator, meant the series to be a thought-provoking and eye-opening production about colonialism and Britishness. In this paper, I would like to show how Raj nostalgia and postcolonial criticism may coexist and interact in Indian Summers and explore the extent of this apparently intractable contradiction.

Keywords: colonialism, Britishness, Raj nostalgia, *Indian Summers*, Rutman

A British period drama set in colonial India may raise ambivalent expectations in Western audiences: exotic representations of imagined places mixed with postcolonial consciousness leading to the question whether one can indulge in the possibly guilty pleasure of watching colonization romanticized by so-called Raj nostalgia now that colonization is under the fire of criticism. In the last five years, several British productions set in or alluding to colonial India were released and brought back memories of the Raj: films – *Victoria & Abdul* (Stephen Frears, 2017) and *Viceroy's House* (Gurinder Chadha, 2017) – and TV series – *Indian Summers* (Paul Rutman, 2015) and *Beecham House* (Gurinder Chadha, 2019), the latter being set in 1795 and targeting the East India Company does not exactly falls into the scope of Raj fiction, but presents a plot revolving around a British hero saving an Indian aristocratic family from its enemies. The value of these works in terms of historical accuracy and artistic quality varies; what do not change are the accusations of imperialist nostalgia they are said to express, according to press reviewers.

Channel 4 released the TV series *Indian Summers* in 2015, describing it on its website as "an epic drama set in the 1930s as India dreams of independence but the British cling to power." India "dreams" and the British "rule": the choice of words appeals to commentary as it opposes India as a personified poetic construct lost in elusiveness to a defined group of real people who actually do something. Is *Indian Summers* another instalment of what Salman Rushdie called "Raj revival" productions in his essay "Outside the Whale?" (Rushdie, 1992, p. 90) The answer is not a straightforward one as the series provides elements for a nuanced approach of a contentious topic: the Raj in Western fiction, particularly on screen.

In this paper, I contend that there is more to the debate than opposing two clear-cut antagonistic views of the past – imperialist vs. anti-imperialist – because the notion of Raj nostalgia is itself an ambiguous one when considered in the light of research on the cultural value of nostalgia and on the issue of postcolonial commodification. This ambiguity is reflected in *Indian Summers* in a way that makes the show a paradoxical production, both staging and challenging Raj nostalgia, depending on which narrative and film-making choices are made.

TV series have their own specificities and requirements regarding aesthetics, format, narrative, and storytelling. Some pose as mirrors of society, expected to hold together several purposes: cultural, historical, and cinematic, but what they all have in common is to be entertaining products with a commercial purpose.

Indian Summers was meant to last five seasons, each retracing the history of five decisive summers in the administration of India until India's independence. The creator of the series, Paul Rutman, wanted *Indian Summers* to be a thought-provoking and eye-opening production about colonialism. In an interview published on Channel 4 about his project, he explained what he had in mind:

It strikes me as interesting that so many younger people have no notion what the Empire was... We've done a very good job of sweeping the entire Empire experience under the carpet. I think for my grandparents' generation, for many people, it was a huge part of their lives, for thousands of people, it was an extraordinary informative experience that touched them and changed them and changed the sense of how they felt about themselves and how they felt about their country.

Telling the lives of people then to make other people think now seemed a project worth the investment. The medium chosen was apt to reach a large audience and the topic had proven popular among audiences, if we bear in mind the success of what could be deemed *Indian Summers*' precursor, the 1984 ITV adaptation of Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* novels: *The Jewel in the Crown*. Yet, *Indian Summers* was cancelled because of the low audience ratings of the second season. That the fate of a series should depend on audience ratings and the money that goes with it regardless of its artistic or ideological value makes for an interestingly ambiguous feature, to be added to the ambiguity related to the notion of Raj nostalgia.

The didactic and critical purpose that led Rutman to creating *Indian Summers* provides the audience with a wide array of characters and situations intended to present a reliable overview of the community gathered in Shimla, the summer capital of the Raj, where the Viceroy and his administration relocated each year to escape the excessive heat in Delhi. Choosing Shimla and not Delhi to depict the life of the British ruling community was no innocent choice. Life at the hill stations reflected the distance kept by the colonizers from the country they were administering. Dane Kennedy describes any hill station as:

A unique urban entity, a seasonal site for the recreational activities of a highly transitory expatriate population, whose memories of a distant homeland it lovingly evoked. Hence the replication of particular features of the natural and social environment of Britain was central to the hill's station's distinctive identity. As one geographer has put it, hill stations "offered isolated, exclusive milieus where sojourners could feel at home." (Kennedy, 1996, p. 3)

Even the romantic storylines have socio-political undertones. They support the creator's overt intention of debunking the myth of a class of ruling "gentlemen", hence the very straightforward depiction of the British characters' private lives. After all, what contemporary audiences may ignore was well known at that time. Dane Kennedy, while toning down the impressions left by Kipling's *Plain Tales of the Hills*, acknowledges that:

Evidence does suggest that the conduct of Europeans changed when they got to the hills. Scrutiny was directed toward sexual scandal in the hill stations at least in part because it was the most dramatic indicator of the transforming power of these places. Up among the clouds, it seemed permissible to behave in ways that went beyond the limits of propriety elsewhere. (Kennedy, 1996, p.128)

He explains this unbridled behaviour as "a relief from the constraints that were elsewhere imposed on [them]" (Kennedy, 1996, p.129): having to set an example and preserve prestige in the plains, they let off steam once in their hill retreats where they were cut from the native population.

Focusing on the British microcosm in Shimla provides matter for romance and political intrigues. The series sheds light on the scheming and not so glorious behaviour of the British in the political and private spheres as well as on the relationships between the different communities. This double focus provides the viewer with the glamour of high society – *Indian Summers* has been called the *Downton Abbey* of British India – and the didactic and critical approach intended by the creator. Even though dealing primarily with the British elite, the series stages a very diverse array of British, Indian, Anglo-Indian and even American characters.

Since the series aims at depicting more day-to-day life than epic moments of the Raj, it revolves around the fates of two families – the Whelans and the Dalals – on a political background. Ralph Whelan, private secretary to the Viceroy, and his sister Alice were born in India, belonging to a family that “has been there since the Mughals” (S1 E1). The Whelans are shown more at home in India than in Britain and represent the now historical group of people from British descent born in India called then “Anglo-Indian”. Both are or were involved in a relationship with a native; Ralph had a son with a peasant girl he abandoned for the sake of his career and Alice's relationship with Aafrin Dalal is a key line of the narrative.

The other main characters are the Dalals, a Parsi family. The Parsis are certainly not the community anyone would think of as representative of the Indian population, particularly when it comes to a Western audience who may not be familiar with the history of a community that never was very numerous in India and is still not: the 2011 India Census Data estimates the number of Indian Parsis at 57,264. In an interview with Dipesh Banerjee for *The Indian Express*, Paul Rutman explains why he chose to make a Parsi family central to his plot:

I was interested in writing about Parsis, because in some ways this community found itself caught between the British and other parts of Indian society. Like the British, the Parsis are a sort of endangered community, fighting for its survival. The mood of elegy, of decline, infects the Dalals, as much as it does the British figures in the story. (Banerjee, 2015)

The choice is in keeping with the idea that drives the series: the interaction between power and identity and how it shapes characters and society. The whole Dalal family is made as to reflect characteristics usually attached to the Parsi community and what was at work in the Indian society of the time: tradition vs modernity in the private sphere, status quo or fight for independence in the political sphere. The father is an educated and quite liberal Anglophile, he fought for the British during WWI and is dubious of the nationalist process to which their eldest daughter Sooni adheres wholeheartedly as a Gandhi follower while her brother Aafrin, who belongs to the ICS, evolves from being subservient to the British to collaborating with a revolutionary. The mother sticks to the Parsi tradition and disowns Sooni for marrying a Muslim but turns a blind eye when it comes to Aafrin's adulterous relationship with Alice Whelan.

The other characters are divided into groups representative of the Shimla microcosm: the British as the centre of attention, Indian nationalists, Indian civil servants, Princes, and a category I call the outsiders because each of them, for different reasons, does not belong to any other group, and their fates illustrate the rule that in imperial Britain racial and social boundaries are not to be crossed. Those outsiders are Ian McLeod, Ramu Sood and Leena Prasad. As a Scot, Ian McLeod is looked down upon by the members of the British community, all English. He is finally rejected when he accepts to work for Ramu Sood on the tea plantation previously owned by his uncle and whose ownership passed in Sood's hands as a result of the uncle's bankruptcy. McLeod is evicted from the Club and Sood made the scapegoat in a murder case related to Whelan's shady past. Both have to pay the price of not respecting the codes of imperial society: Sood with his life and McLeod with social rejection that he finally prefers to integration into a group he has come to despise, which earns him acceptance from the Indian population. Leena Prasad is a Eurasian aide at the orphanage for mixed-race children. She represents the “half-castes” who were rejected by both Indian and British communities.

Their mixed origins were proof that boundaries had been crossed, which was unacceptable in colonial society where social status was racialized.

Recreating colonial Shimla presents a multiple-layered interest: it has the cinematic attractiveness of a spectacular landscape, mixing the exotic of the tea plantations and the familiar of very English-looking cottages and gardens on an pre-Himalayan background; it also brings in the political and social values of places like the Royal Shimla Club and the Mall, where no Indians are allowed, or the bazaar, where few Europeans are seen. Above all, Shimla being the summer residence of the Viceroy, it provides the audience with the spectacle of British colonial government at its highest level. In this regard, audiences with no specific knowledge of British governance in India may certainly have learnt about people and facts unknown to them yet decisive in the process that led to Indian independence.

Indian Summers focuses the political narrative of the first season on the aftermath of the 1931 Round Table and the issue of representation in the Provincial Assemblies that resulted in the Communal Award made by Ramsay McDonald on 16 August 1932 extending separate electorate already existing for Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans to the Depressed Classes – the Untouchables – and Gandhi's subsequent opposition to the measure. The second season follows up with the chronicle of the tentative devolution of power to Indians, staging the debates about the 1935 Government of India Act and showing the British manoeuvring to gain support from the princely States against Congress and exploiting the tensions between Hindus and Muslims.

The first season stages colonial violence at domestic level, in Shimla: denial of justice to native people, police interrupting a Congress member's speech, beating the crowd, and arresting people at random (S1 E3). The political opposition is shown as occasional demonstrators in the streets or negotiators at higher levels, and little is done to suggest the tension that reigned in other parts of India, highlighting the aloofness of the hill station community, protected and estranged from reality. The second season shows violence reaching higher levels and pervading everyday life: nationalist struggle has become more aggressive – attacks on the Viceroy and on the Viceregal Lodge (S2 E1 & 6) – and is shown brutally repressed by the British who also strongly react against communal unrest as in the scenes of the Karachi riots in March 1935 (S2 E4 & 6).

As a result of its intended didactic and mind-opening purpose, *Indian Summers* stages how the British progressively handling delegation of power to Congress was a mix of Machiavellian manoeuvres and heavy-handed error and trial lacking perspective, suggesting their neglect of Indian socio-cultural realities. The ideological standpoint is critical of British imperialism yet in a light that shows it as a complex issue revealing the incoherence and short-sightedness of the British – tensions in Westminster about India, between Westminster and Delhi, scheming and blundering exploitation of Indian divisions – and the vexing attitudes of the Indian nationalists, divided over conflicting expectations and mutual mistrust. *Indian Summers* may be said to lack the edge that makes a gripping political series because it focuses more on romance than on sharp criticism alone. However, it equally targets the official univocal narratives of both the British imperialists and Indian nationalists, revealing cracks in the façades and providing an unfinished and perfectible televisual version of Tirthankar Roy's statement in *How British Rule Changed India's Economy: The Paradox of the Raj*: “the legacy of colonialism is a paradox and [...] any story that tells us that it did more harm than good or the other way round is one-sided” (Roy, 2019, p.4). What the series is good at is precisely highlighting paradoxes in three domains. The first set of paradoxes exposes the underlying motives and the faults of British policy, the second reveals the disruption colonial order introduced in Indian society and the third revolves around the status of Indian revolutionary violence.

Whether dealing with the negotiations about the Provincial Assemblies in 1932 or the Government of India Act of 1935 the British are shown entrapped in the seemingly unforeseen consequences of a policy supposed to grant more and more autonomy while at the same time devised to ultimately bind Indian governmental bodies to British authority.

The project behind the Government of India Act of 1935 ended in stalemate since neither Congress nor the Princes decisively adhered to it. In addition, although voted by a Conservative government, it had raised much opposition in Parliament. Through the mishaps of the Communal Award and the Government of India Act, the British are shown enmeshed in the paradox of being in power while at the same time somehow symbolically disempowered by their own incompetence and the resistance of their adversaries. The paradox is illustrated by Lord Willingdon's remark, made in private: "We took a dreadful hiding on this India Bill" (S2E9), later counterbalanced by the official speech of the new Viceroy's advisor to the Indian civil servants:

There's work to be done, a raft of bold reforms thanks to our government's India Bill, elections to come, hand in hand with India towards the ultimate goal of self-government. Though not before she's ready and then I feel, well, we all do, that there's every reason to be optimistic. (S2 E10)

Aafrin Dalal replies with a speech alluding to actual statements made by nationalist leaders about the Act; Nehru calling it "a machine with strong brakes but no engine," Jinnah characterising it as "thoroughly rotten, fundamentally bad and totally unacceptable," and Gandhi, "a Constitution which nobody likes" (Sen, 2006, p.198):

I've met your type before, I've heard your speeches...ah, your speech, since it's always the same. And I have to say; I do not share your optimism because the truth is... the truth is... nobody here wants your rotten Bill, Sir. We don't want it and we don't trust it. It is a machine composed entirely of brakes, and though all sides, even the native Princes, are agreed that they hate this Bill, sir, the truth is all it will do, sir, all it will ever do is drive us deeper apart, Hindu against Muslim, until every city, every field is sewn with bombs and knives and only the word of Gandhi stands between us and you, Sir. Not rulers but policemen since that is all you are, keeping the peace with your lathis raised until the whistle is blown and you run your last damn furlong into the sea. (S2 E10)

The "divide and rule" motto usually invoked as the tool for maintaining the cohesion of Empire is repeatedly referred to. "Let's see if we can't break things up a bit," says the Viceroy (S1 E4) as Whelan suggests making use of the antagonism between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issue of the Provincial Assemblies. It is also openly quoted in a conversation between Whelan and a representative of the Untouchables, Dr Kamble, inspired by the real Bapu Chandrasen Kamble politically active after Independence and not in 1932, being born in 1919. The dialogue shows that the Indians have no illusion about the unreliability and instability of British support:

Whelan: Look... We want to help but Congress are spoiling for a fight over these elections. You hold your ground, insist on your right to the quota and we will stand with you. What do you say?

Kamble: This isn't more 'divide and rule'? Drive the Indians apart, so much the better for the British?

Whelan: Not this time. (S1 E5)

Whelan's last sentence sounds like a hint at a sort of political cat-and-mouse game between the British and the nationalists, revealing the psychological violence of colonial order and its political power plays. Physical violence is shown in the series and it is intertwined with the second set of paradoxes I have previously mentioned: those that reveal how colonial order affects relations between Indians. Not only is division fuelled and exploited in the debates about self-government, but it also runs deeper, pitting Indians against each other not only on caste, religion or ethnicity ground but on compliance to British rule as the dividing line. Showing Indians beating other Indians who demonstrate against colonial rule is particularly revealing of the deep level of violence imposed on the colonized people.

The troops firing at unarmed protesters in Karachi (S2 E4 and E6) were exonerated because, as reported in the *Sidney Morning Herald*, their “discipline and steadiness” had avoided “a situation of grave danger,” which explains why the Governor of Bombay and the Viceroy thought “no useful purpose would be served by conducting a public inquiry as demanded by the legislature and the Nationalist press, as it would tend further to embitter Hindu-Moslem feelings.” (11 April 1935). Forty-seven people were killed and 134 injured in Karachi, yet the dramatic images of the riot – close-ups on reluctant and uneasy faces of the soldiers about to fire and ground-angle shots of bodies lying in pools of blood – are no less shocking than the scenes showing Indian police beating Indian protesters in the bazaar (S1 E1), Indian guards at the gate of the Royal Shimla Club standing next to a sign that reads “No dogs or Indians”, or Ramu Sood approaching Ian McLeod at the Mall to talk about his uncle's debts and being told to leave by Sergeant Singh, because “Indians may not use the Mall before sundown” (S1 E3).

These scenes illustrate the cultural disruption colonialism entails: when the colonized fights the colonized on account of compliance to colonial rule, the model of oppressive centre versus oppressed margin, seen metaphorically more than geographically, does not hold as such and must re-evaluated. The power relation and its impact on identity seems to be limited to a fixed binary system that Sara Suleri challenges in *The Rhetoric of English India* so as to make sense of an Anglo-Indian context that is too ambivalent to fit what she calls “the rhetoric of binarism”:

Colonial facts [...] lack a recognizable cultural plot; they frequently fail to cohere around the master-myth that proclaims static line of demarcation between imperial power and disempowered culture, between colonizer and colonized. Instead, they move with a ghostly mobility to suggest how highly unsettling an economy of complicity and guilt is in operation between each actor on the colonial stage. (Suleri, 1992, p. 3)

The notion of centre is no longer associated only with the alien oppressive power as the fault line also affects Indian society, creating other centres of reference leading to what Sara Suleri calls “cultural unrecognizability”:

The story of colonial encounter is in itself a radically decentering narrative that is impelled to realign with violence any static binarism between colonizer and colonized. It calls to be read as an enactment of a cultural unrecognizability as to what constitutes the marginal or the central. (Suleri, 1992, p.2)

Her statement highlights the fact that colonial power relations are more complex than they look and that the referential dichotomy between centre and periphery is not sufficient to make sense of the shifting criteria that structure colonial society. Such “cultural unrecognizability” refers to a multiplicity of embedded processes of othering that finally make cultural identification hard to delineate.

The embedded processes that make the notion of “other” multifaceted is frequently staged in the series. One of several examples is provided in a scene showing how Indian members of the ICS behave to meet the social standards attached to their status which introduce them further in the organization of British colonial society but sever them from their own. In the third episode of the first season, Aafrin has to take horse-riding lessons because he has been promoted as personal secretary to Whelan. The successive frames show an evolution and reshuffling of hierarchies among the group. We first see Aafrin alone, struggling on his horse, then the frame widens and focuses on his Indian colleagues who sneer at his difficulties, implying that Aafrin does not belong to their group yet. The next frame shows that Whelan has joined them and their attitude changes as a new hierarchy has been introduced. The scene ends with a frame isolating Aafrin and Whelan, with Ralph inviting him to take drinks the same night, thus replacing the initial hierarchy of belonging and domination by a new one.

This precise scene is an example of how othering affects any power relation and is not limited to colonized-colonizer interaction. It mostly stresses how colonial rule estranges colonized people from their own, a message that is made even more striking as it is set between a scene showing Indian police beating Indian protesters at a nationalist meeting and another one with Leena Prasad and Alice Whelan talking about the books used at the mission to school the Eurasian orphans. The scene's first shot is a close-up on the cover of *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Alice is shown surprised at seeing such a book on the shelf and also at Leena's blunt answer explaining they are Mr Raworth's, the missionary in charge with the school, suggesting she does not have any say on the matter. Alice then apologetically explains she "only wondered if they might not enjoy something closer to home, with landscape that's more familiar to them, the *Mahabharata*, perhaps or *Tipu Sultan*?" Leena's gaze and silence at Alice's suggestions makes them sound inappropriate, not that she disapproves of them, but they do not correspond to what a British school of the time would teach Indian or Eurasian children. The values, characters and teachings of the *Mahabharata* are foreign to Edwardian systems of reference and the allusion to Tipu Sultan is quite surprising. He fought the British in three of the four Anglo-Mysore wars between 1780 and 1799, and as such was praised by the nationalists as a figure of resistance, but the English made him the typical Oriental cruel and lustful despot through chronicles – William Kirkpatrick, *Select Letters of Tippoo Sultan to Various Public Functionaries* (1811) – and popular novels – *The Surgeon's Daughter*, Walter Scott (1827), Tipoo Sultaun, Philip Meadows Taylor (1840) and *The Tiger of Mysore*, George Alfred Henty (1895). In less than three minutes of the episode, the audience watches communal, social and cultural disruption staged, highlighting how imperial ideology makes Indians "others" to their own culture by imposing new legal and socio-cultural codes that disparage or rule out the pre-existing ones.

There is a third paradox that presides over the discourse of power in the series: the way politically motivated violence against the British is evoked. The paradox here lies in the fact that in a narrative largely critical of British rule in India, violent revolutionary actions are condemned. The second season introduces a Bengali character, Naresh Banerjee, sketched as a demented fanatic embodying the nationalist fighters who advocated the use of any kind of violence to force the British out of India. He is what is called a *bhadralok dacoit*, which in Bengali means "gentlemanly criminal", a category of revolutionaries that came from the educated and high-caste class in Bengal and whose emergence, role and legacy Durba Ghosh analyses in *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919-1947*, calling them "revolutionary terrorists", an expression she says fits both Indian and British perspectives of the time, despite recent controversies around the term "terrorists" (2017, p. 2).

Ghosh explains her research project emerged from wondering why famous Bengali Nationalists like Surya Sen, Kalpana Dutta or Pritilata Waddadar who took part in the Chittagong Armoury raids mentioned in the series (S1 E10) did not receive the same treatment as the more universally known figures of Gandhi, Jinnah or Nehru: "Why did nationalist and English-language stories [as opposed to Bengali-language ones] feel compelled to play down the violent activities of these radical and militant groups?" (2017, p. x). I think *Indian Summers* reflects such a "downplaying" narrative in the way it represents Banerjee and how it refers to the Chittagong attacks: not as a plan to significantly disrupt colonial administration – the 18 April 1930 raids – but as an isolate action against the Pahartali European Club because of its sign "No Indians or dogs allowed" whereas the attack on 24 September 1932 being firstly led in retaliation against the repression of the 1930 raids.

Ghosh also underlines and explains a fact that may look paradoxical: as constitutional reforms were somehow gathering momentum, revolutionary unrest was growing, generating more repressive legislation:

The colonial government rationalized the enactment of repressive legislation as a protection to the project of constitutional reform, which was intended to recruit Indians, but only those with moderate politics, into supporting the British government of India. (Ghosh, 2017, p.3)

This paradox somehow accounts for the higher tension that differentiates the series' first season from the second where violence pervades both the private lives of the different characters and the narratives of political struggle. Yet, where Ghosh aims to "take political violence seriously as a part of the Indian struggle for independence" (2017, p. xi), *Indian Summers* fails to fully engage on such an issue, avoiding to push the logics of the paradoxes of power and violence to its limits and to let the audience decide, for Banerjee's character with his mystique of violence and psychopathic behaviour is impossible to relate to. The series misses a thought-provoking point to explore: as Ghosh writes, "one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist." (2017, p. xi)

Tirthankar Roy's statement about appraising the paradoxical impact and legacy of colonialism is only satisfactory if one tries to explore it and dissect precise situations, which the series does not really do to the core. Moreover, the way it focuses on Indian divisions could lead cynical advocates of imperial rule to justify what Sunil Khilnani denounces in *The Idea of India* as "an historicist nostalgia – a sense that without the carapace of imperial authority, things fall apart." (Khilnani, 2017, p.1) Doing so leads the series to missing the point Khilnani makes when claiming that "one of the remarkable facts about the nationalist movement that brought India to independence was its capacity to entertain diverse, often contending visions of India" (Ibid, pp. 5-6). It heavily stresses the paternalistic and divisive policy of the British but does not particularly extol the Princes nor the nationalists who are presented in an ambiguously simplistic light: a bloc more or less loosely unified behind Gandhi, prone to easily get divided and as such not politically mature or reliable despite fighting for an unquestionably legitimate cause. An explanation to this unsatisfactory outlook could be that what the series targets is more the attitude and actions of the British: it has to find a balance between showing how the British saw their nationalist opponents – as depicted above – and inducing how damaging such so-called superiority was. The only standpoint that is openly rejected is the revolutionary one. One can only make conjectures about this aspect of the series: is it because mentioning revolutionaries in a sympathetic light would disrupt a certain vision of peace-loving India only relying on Gandhian virtues or would it simply be seen as too anti-British, or both?

This unresolved alternative leads to address the issue of representation of India and the special idealized relationship between Britain and its "Jewel in the Crown" during the colonial period. The relationship was so special that the British even coined a term to refer to colonial India: the Raj. The word, meaning sovereignty, rule or kingdom, was borrowed from Hindustani. Its second meaning came in use after the official transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown on 28 June 1858 in the wake of the 1857 Indian Rebellion. The word would now refer to India as ruled by the British. The mere fact of borrowing a word from the culture of the colonized to refer to colonization suggests both fascination and denial from the British; fascination for a rich culture and denial of the violence imposed by the domination of an alien power, a sort of colonialist acculturation, which sounds paradoxical. The word raj came to acquire a capital letter, as the new "country" it had become but it also developed a meaning that not only covered the political and economic exploitation of India under colonial rule but also its evolution into a cultural and aesthetic construct seen through British lenses. A metonymic shift occurred: from the name given to British domination to colonial India as both a set of exotic scenes, peoples and customs and the cradle of a new category of British people who came to call themselves "Anglo-Indians", as the Whelans do in the series. Its coinage suggests a relationship so specific that it affected their identity.

Indian independence did not erase the place India held in the cultural unconscious of many in the United Kingdom as shown by the amount of works of Anglo-Indian fiction in literature and in cinema after 1947. Nostalgia for India in post-colonial Britain has proven to be a constant source of aesthetic creativity: dramas set in colonial or contemporary India never fail to meet with success – to various extents – when they are released, as if they struck a sensitive chord in British audiences. *Indian Summers*, for all its critical approach of the Raj, is no exception, yet I would contend that it uses Raj nostalgia more than it advocates it.

Defining Raj nostalgia implies mentioning images, tropes and types referring to a certain idea of India that transcends time and space and bears witness of conservative colonialist undertones. There are elephants and tiger hunts, Maharajahs and Bengal Lancers, princesses in zenanas and devoted missionaries, epic battles and exotic customs, cruel or appealing, intense experiences for the senses, squalid bazaars and sumptuous durbars. It does not matter whether the scene is set in Kerala or Rajasthan, in the 19th century or in the 1930s because what matters in Raj nostalgia is not the people, history and geography of India but a made-up image of India as a backcloth for the British imperial epic, Shamsul Islam calls it “the imperial gospel” quoting Lord Curzon:

“Remember that the Almighty has placed your hands on the greatest of His plough [...] to feel that somewhere among these millions you have left a little justice or happiness or prosperity [...] a dawn of intellectual enlightenment, or a stirring of duty, where it did not before exist – that is enough, that is the Englishman's justification in India.” (Islam, 1979, p.3)

In this regard, Raj nostalgia derives from an imperial mystique intertwined with the process of national identity building: the Empire became a defining element of British self-perception, yet the imperial enterprise being endowed with a mythical dimension, its connection to temporality was both concrete and elusive. In other words, Raj nostalgia is correlative to the imperial enterprise as myth, which makes its connection to temporality complex as it transcends it, like myths transcend time. In *Le Roman anglo-indien de Kipling à Paul Scott*, Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas traces Raj nostalgia back to times when India was still under British rule. She contends that nostalgia for a mythical, a-historical past is part of the traditional colonial discourse perpetuated in fiction whose role is to create and secure a false legacy (Baneth-Nouailhetas, 1999, p.237).

This type of conservative imperialist Raj nostalgia is not really what *Indian Summers* relies on. What the series exemplifies is the ambivalence of representing colonial India for British directors and audiences: holding together modern history and myth, that is to say, presenting the audience with a postcolonial point of view and a vision of India as glamorous and exotic. Making a lush representation of the past compatible with a critical depiction of colonialism for commercial reasons has turned Raj nostalgia into an asset with market value. Then how hold together two features made antagonistic by an equation that endows – probably unconsciously and certainly a bit simplistically – anti-imperialism with positive values and market law with negative ones? Can one be critical of anything while at the same time hoping to make profit? In “Notes on the Postcolonial” (1992), Ella Shohat suggested to elaborate on the distinction between ‘postcolonialism’ and ‘postcoloniality’. In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Graham Huggan takes up the challenge and explores the tension between two conflicting yet intertwined systems of reference that share a common ground: dealing with the impact of colonization on cultures, now and then. Huggan's analysis contends that handling the conflict between postcolonialism and postcoloniality is not to pit them against one another but to acknowledge that:

Postcolonialism is *bound up* with postcoloniality – that in the overwhelmingly commercial context of late twentieth-century culture, postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products. (Huggan, 2003, p.6)

One could even say that the two systems feed on one another: the most quoted examples to illustrate this matter of fact is the status of writers like Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy, both vocal critics of colonialism yet highly profitable assets in the global market of postcolonial literature from which they benefit, a status analyzed, among other writers, by Saadia Toor (2000), Huggan (2003), or Sandra Ponzanesi (2014).

Perceptions change, allowing new social representations and interactions to be established on the basis of the new cultural and semiotic value ascribed to the object consumed.

Huggan suggests a way of dealing with the exotic “from within” that may be relevant to analyse nostalgia and its commodification (Huggan, 2006, p.33). He calls this approach “strategic exoticism”, based on Gayatri Spivak’s argument in *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues that*:

It is a question of developing vigilance for systemic appropriations of the social capacity to produce a *differential* that is one basis of exchange into the networks of cultural [...] identity. (Spivak, 1990, p. 228)

This vigilance supposes an imbalance in the way of considering the object of research born out of the necessity to “inhabit it, indeed invest it, to criticize it” (Spivak, 1990, p. 228). Strategic exoticism in its ambivalent nature can still be called upon as a way to expose and subvert the codes of commodification it lives by, in a kind of creative – and possibly auto-destructive – reflexive irony that leaves the consumer-viewer free to devise their own interpretation.

Indian Summers as an example of “critical exoticism” may not be the sharpest, but I would say it does better on that count than other British screen productions. It plays with the aesthetic codes of Anglo-Indian fiction, maintaining a balance between indulgence and irony, exotic chic and myth debunking. Its opening credits illustrate “exotic chic” to a fault: complete with painted elephants in pageants, sepia-tinted pictures showing British at parties and Indians as servants or demonstrators, with splashes of colours reminding of Holi and ending with a close-up on a dark hand holding a white one, promise of an inter-communal romance to spice up political issues. What looks like commercial cliché could also be read as critically intended, particularly when one discovers that the romance will involve a middle-class Indian civil servant and the sister of the Viceroy’s private secretary, transgressing the ultimate sexual taboo of colonial society. A white woman could never be attracted to a native: that would have implied dismissing the superiority of the white male over the native one. Even in the credits, the critical stance “from within” can be traced.

Yet another scene – among many others – provides an example of debunking of the traditional Anglo-Indian hypotext on Raj nostalgia as rooted in imperial mystique in a conversation between Ian McLeod and Sooni Dalal:

Sooni: What is so special about you people that you have two countries to go between? And then at school, we were told it was something called “British values” that set you apart. And how were we taught this? With the help of your great Rudyard Kipling, born in Bombay like me!

Ian: Oh, aye? We had him foisted on us too.

Sooni: I know, thundering in my head thanks to Sister Christine and her horsewhip! “If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken...” And then?

Ian: Aye aye [...] “twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools...”

Sooni: “And watch the things you gave your life to, broken and stoop...”

Ian: “And build them up with worn-out tools.”

Sooni: Imperialist claptrap! (S1. E8)

This scene is inserted between two others set at the tribunal where Ramu Sood is going to be sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit despite McLeod's testimony that proved him innocent. The Anglo-Indian hypotext of overt reference to Kipling – the poem *If* – and covert reference to *A Passage to India* – Dr Aziz's trial – is put in perspective and even challenged by editing, which creates narrative irony towards so-called British moral superiority – denied by the death sentence of an innocent man – and by Sooni's words, which target and deflate the Anglo-Indians' haughty aloofness: “*your great Rudyard Kipling, born in Bombay, just like me!*” Acting, framing, editing and TV storytelling provide a varied range of possibilities that allow challenging the traditional Anglo-Indian narrative in form as well as in content. During the whole scene, Sooni, standing, is shot from below, in moderate low-angle shot whereas Ian, sitting, is shot from above, in moderate high-angle shot; even the postures are telling. The dialogue between McLeod and Sooni can be read as a way to deride Raj nostalgia and Kipling's legacy twice: through what is said and what is shown.

These examples illustrate some of the ways *Indian Summers* uses and relates to Raj nostalgia as a commodity: at times partly adhering to it when it is more about landscapes and imagery– the opening credits – or distancing from it when ideology is at stake – the scene between Ian and Sooni. One could say that Paul Rutman's agenda is mostly met: *Indian Summers* cannot be said a new re-enactment of neo-imperialist Raj nostalgia nor its staging of the British rulers inaccurate or complacent. The series is quite critical whether dealing with political, socio-cultural or personal situations and the characters are, to different extents, complex if not ambiguous. Rutman's representation of India may be too prone to aestheticism and romance may be too heavy-handed but he does not make the Raj an appealing period and provides an antidote for univocal nostalgic representations. His vision is one of diversity, ambiguity and complexity that may not be sharp enough but that certainly deflates the myth of imperial grandeur still lingering in some contemporary British minds.

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Rewriting the Space Race in Cinematic Text : A Comparison of *Mission Mangal* and *Hidden Figures*

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Abstract

The conquest of space has been the object of numerous films with special effects. This paper compares and contrasts two recent films (Hidden Figures, 2016 and Mission Mangal, 2019) on the space race. It proposes a critical reading of these two attempts to rewrite history on cinema – one, a film on the 2014 Mars mission by India and the other, about the little known, yet significant, contributions of Black women mathematicians to the early American space programme. Decades apart in historical context, both films highlight how women of color, were included in space research. But both films also draw on the trope of male protagonists doing the right thing for excluded subjects. History is rewritten with the impulsion to include all, but the act of rewriting hurls the voices of those included and instead, foregrounds the act of inclusion.

Keywords: film, space research, women scientists, history

Introduction

Films are a prime medium for the collective retelling of national and more so, nationalist history. Throughout contemporary history, films have also been used by governments to muster nationalist pride before, during and after wars. Key historical turning points, such as the Partition in India and the Civil War in the United States, have been told and retold on celluloid, like a collective nationalist mythology, adapted to the ebbs and flows of the national conscience (Ahmed, 1992; Burgoyne, 1997). Rewriting history can also be a project that attempts to salvage lost voices, those of women, minorities and the historically marginalized. Even at this moment in time, history is being written. Over the last year, the pandemic has upended lives and economies on a global scale. It is already being noted that, in these critical times, it is mostly men (more than seventy percent) and not women, who are publishing both medical and academic research (Hunt, 2020). In any nation, the power and privilege to examine, analyze and then write about historical turning points has always, and still is, reserved for the socially and politically dominant groups. This makes any retrospective project to retell the histories of marginalized peoples all the more vital for sincere historiography.

In this paper, we compare and contrast two contemporary films, set on the nationalist and predominantly masculine turf of space research. *Mission Mangal* (Sharma, Bhatia, Naidu, Ahwaz & Aurora, 2019) was a Hollywood film about the successful 2014 Mars Orbiter Mission, also known as *Mongolian*, by the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). *Hidden Figures* (Mali, Williams, Gigliotti, Chernin & Topping, 2016) was a Hollywood film that sought to highlight the contributions of Black women mathematicians to the American space programme at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) centre, located in West Virginia. The films combined both aspects of the retelling of history - the statist nationalist narrative and the salvaging of marginalized voices. *Mission Mangal* (MM hereon) was a quasi-state-sponsored vehicle to document and proclaim the entry of India into an exclusive club of nations in space research.

The film also attempts to highlight the contributions of Indian women scientists to the Mars mission. *Hidden Figures* (IIF hereon) is, first and foremost, a documentation of Black women's little known contributions to American exceptionalism in space research. It also toes the line of nationalist pride to further validate this historically unrecognized work.

For our analysis, we draw on a range of theoretical perspectives including feminist theory, particularly Black feminist work on race, gender and their intersections, work about women in science, especially in space research, and film theory. Rather than a pure critique of historiography, we draw attention to the cinematic text and its inclusion of historically unavailable representations, namely of Indian and Black women scientists. As diasporic Indian women and brown immigrants, we acknowledge our privilege of location outside India (in relation to MM), and as brown 'model minority' immigrants (in relation to HF). For the most part, we have attempted to draw theoretical work written from the standpoint of the marginalized voices that are represented in the films. Below, we first briefly explore women's historical presence in the field of outer space research, then give a synopsis of the films, followed by an analysis of the broad themes in both films related to rewriting history.

Women in Space

In *Space Oddities*, Marie Lathers (2010) traced how the liberal feminist goal to rewrite women into space history, led to programmes such as NASA's Herstory Project. The project aims to reclaim women's contributions to space research through a process of retrospective documentation. In a similar exploration of the highly masculine professional field of space research, Pesterfield (2016) concurred that the work of liberal feminists towards political reform, ensured a degree of inclusion for women in space programmes. However, argued Pesterfield, through an ecofeminist lens, it was clear that innate dualisms (such as Reason/Nature attributed to Men/Women) continued to relegate women to limited roles in space research, not just in the United States, but also in the space programmes of its competitor, Russia. To document this inequality, Lathers suggested recording the decades-old struggles, resistances and tweaking of gender definitions with regard to women in space research. To tell Her-story then is to reckon with this troubled history.

It is, therefore, a weighted endeavour to use film as a medium to retell these troubled histories. Historical films are said to be a motley genre of films which "engage with history or which in some way construct a relationship to the past" (Stubbs, 2013, p. 19). Their modes of engagement with the past could be purely textual (primarily through prologues and epilogues), or extra-textual (through film marketing activities or the general 'buzz' generated by a film, the conversations that surround it). Stubbs suggested that the claim of a historical film to veracity and authenticity should be examined, not in and of itself, but for the wider interest in this genre at any given time. Similarly, in an analysis of historical Hollywood films, Burgoyne (1997) concurred that films should not be held up to the standards of other scholastic work in terms of historical factual fidelity. Instead, what is of concern in a cinematic rewriting of history, is the challenge posed by the film to collective social memory, the affective purchase of the narrative that the film offers, over all other forms of the nation as imagined community. Along these broad lines of thinking on the history of women in space research and the nature of cinematic historiography, we propose to examine how two films on women in space may evoke larger social conversations about inequality. First, we outline a synopsis of the two films. Then, we trace the broad narrative themes in the films, when they are seen as case studies of history rewritten to reflect the social context of a historical moment, but also speaking to the context of production.

Synopsis

Hidden Figures

Produced by Fox2000 Pictures, directed by Theodore Melfi and released in 2016 (during the second term of U.S. President Barack Obama), *Hidden Figures* was based on an eponymous book by Margot Lee Shetterly.

Shetterly drew from the lives of three Black women scientists at NASA and from her childhood spent in proximity to the NASA research centre at Langley, Virginia. The title reflects the intersectional condition (Crenshaw, 1989) of the main characters, marginalised as women in the male-dominated NASA, and as women of color, in its white workforce. On a backdrop of the racial segregation of the 1950s, the film focuses from the outset on the space race, as the U.S. competes with Russia to send a manned mission to space. As the opening credits roll, the three Black women mathematicians and protagonists are escorted by a white male police officer to NASA (“because we need to get there before the Sputniks”). These three Black women scientists, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson, were part of a hidden workforce of so-called ‘human computers’, who did complex calculations for crucial aspects of the space missions, even as mainframe computers waited to be installed, programmed and operated at NASA. HF tackles the social and political issues that surround the rise of three Black women in tasks considered of lower order, relative to the all-white and all-male engineer or manager positions. With sharp mathematical and thinking skills, the women are better at their work than many of their colleagues. Yet, they face everyday microaggressions and open discrimination at work. The film chronicles how these Black women scientists overcame racist and sexist perceptions to make lasting contributions to the American space programme. It also offers glimpses of their personal struggles as mothers and partners, while they strive to excel at a competitive and high-stakes workplace.

Mission Mangal

Directed by Jagan Shakti, the title of *Mission Mangal* plays on the evident intertextuality with the Hollywood film series *Mission: Impossible*, with ‘mangal’ signifying the planet Mars in Hindi and also ‘well-being’ in many Indian languages. Set between 2010 and 2014, the film traces the trajectory of an ‘impossible’ (as echoed throughout the film) space mission. The Mars Orbiter Mission was created soon after the failure of a previous Indian satellite launch. The film traces the trajectory of the fulfillment of the Mars mission in September 2014 (the same year that Prime Minister Narendra Modi first came to power). The unmanned mission to Mars was meant to secure the nation’s position in the global space race. “*Desh ka bhala hoga*” or “it will bode well for the country” is a constant refrain in the film to reference the ongoing space race with China. But the Mars Mission was also meant to redeem India’s position on the world stage, as not simply an emerging economy, but a serious and self-reliant competitor in space. So the film frequently references the honour of former, pioneering ISRO scientists, who had championed domestic technology for space research.

In the template of a commercial Bollywood film about the underdog, MM depicts how a ragtag team of scientists overcame a limited budget and constraining work conditions to successfully launch the mission, fueled largely by a spirit of nationalism. The mission team has four women scientists, two male scientists and a project lead, the male protagonist. One of the women scientists is Muslim, while the rest of the team are shown to be Hindu. In standard Bollywood format, song and dance sequences mingle with a serious narrative. For instance, one scene depicts the scientists rolling up their sleeves, tucking their saris and holding up paint brushes to spruce up the hangar-like space allocated to the Mars Department. Thus, a seemingly underperforming team rises to the occasion and puts in sixteen-hour work days, in order to fulfill a nation’s dream. In the process, each team member is called to be a better scientist, a better partner and a better mother. The last scene is that of a victory song and march by the team after the successful launch. In epilogue, we have a clip from one of the speeches by the Indian Prime Minister referencing the Mars mission and congratulating the team. Released on the 2019 anniversary of Indian independence (August 15), *Mission Mangal* was a resounding commercial success.

Given their storylines, both films could be considered biopics, a “profoundly hybrid genre” (Moine, 2011, p. 25), like the historical genre. They fit into the contemporary turn in filmmaking for carefully reconstituting the past (p. 26). Like most biopics, both carry an inspirational dimension, calling their audiences to identify with the characters and their life experiences. They are based on the lives of people whose work and achievements are seen as significant for the nation.

. Anchored in fiction, biopics rework history by adapting some elements of the ‘real’ lives that they depict. Thus, while both films used fictional elements, their epilogues included photographs of the scientists on these missions.

As popular films, they resonated widely and were high-grossing commercial successes. We acknowledge the significance of what these films have done, that is, make available popular representations of women scientists, including three Black women scientists and a Muslim woman scientist. Therefore, while we undertake a detailed critique of the films below, we also presume that popular audiences, especially Indian women and Black women audiences, engage in a “negotiated reception” (Bobo, 1995, p. 5) of patriarchal subtexts in films. With this savvy audience as a guide, we detail some of the subtexts that emerge in the two films, using the narrative themes of *jugaad*, strong Black women, motherhood, gendered attire and intersectionality on film.

***Jugaad* and Endurance**

Bollywood has traditionally churned out jingoistic patriotism at every turn in Indian history, with films about the Partition, the Sino-Indian war or other moments of national reckoning. But around the turn of the century, the vast media machinery in the country increasingly glorified a distant, pure Hindu past and called for a collective folding inwards of the Indian psyche, while simultaneously reaping the economic benefits of liberalization (Bhatia, 2002). The bourgeois Indian was at the helm of this neo-nationalist turn in contemporary Indian history. MM is a product of the meeting of collective Indian middle-class ambition with the neo-nationalist aspiration for membership in a club of global space leaders.

A recurring theme in MM is the idea of *jugaad*, which roughly translates from Hindi to ‘shrewd improvisation using limited resources’. *Jugaad* is a term used to credit the ‘make do’ skills that are a daily necessity for many Indians. MM introduces the Mars mission as a large scale project of *jugaad* in outer space. A fledgling national space programme overcomes a resource and budgetary crunch to launch a world class mission to Mars. Key to this idea of *jugaad* is the adage of ‘making the impossible possible’, repeated at every critical part of the plot. This adaptive ingenuity amid a constraint of resources also fits into the national ‘Make in India’ project, launched after the election of Prime Minister Modi (Sen, 2020). The ‘poor’ (developing India, as seen through Western eyes, and its scientists) become the vanguards of innovation and entrepreneurship.

However, this innovation comes with little assessment of risk or the sustainability of this *jugaad* (Samamtha & Gundi, 2018). Each of the scientists in MM is asked repeatedly by team leaders to ‘think out of the box’ and adapt the material and their engineering skills to the budget, overlooking the actual requirements for designing a spacecraft. The male protagonist and team lead repeatedly storms into top-level meetings to remind the spectators and the officials of this nationalist ‘can-do’ motto, though it means using untested technology or sidelining protocol. It is noteworthy that the lead actor in MM, Akshay Kumar, was previously typecast in macho action-hero roles in the 1990’s. But, more recently, the actor has undergone a makeover (Samamtha & Gundi, 2018). This image makeover includes supporting social causes and aligning with a new entrepreneurial India. As the project lead, Kumar is figuratively and actually always leading this team of mostly women scientists in this nationalist *jugaad*. Thus, the drive towards nationalist self-reliance becomes indivisible from an overbearing patriarchal mode that always accords women their position, only this time through grand gestures of making way for them in the public sphere.

Furthermore, in order to depict the national quest to indigenize space research, MM turns ‘home science’, shown as a mostly feminine domain in the film, into fodder for the neo-nationalist project. The innovation for the launch, the *jugaad*, first happens in the intimacy of home. But these homegrown ideas are rarely owned or explicated by the women scientists in the film. For instance, it is Tara Shinde, the project director, who first has a Eureka moment about the fuel-saving mechanism for the mission. Based on a simple cooking technique for the Indian fried bread ‘puri’, Tara suggests cutting off ignition to continue propulsion until the energy is used up.

This way, the spacecraft could cross the Van Allen belt and reach its Mars orbit on limited fuel. However, it is the male project lead that assumes the role of interpreter for these ideas. He invariably and confidently communicates them to the leadership of the space programme.

After the initial excitement of finding the orbiting mechanism, the team of scientists themselves become the project, whereby the *jugaad* becomes one of using underperforming though talented scientists to fulfill the potential of the nation. Again, in allegiance to the 'Make in India' campaign, the film goes on to show how these talented Indian scientists faced all odds yet continued unruffled. By the end of the film, the previous mission failure is a distant memory, redeeming faith in the nationalist *jugaad*. In the process, the film also explicitly compares the sacrifice of personal lives by the scientists to that of soldiers in the army.

In moderation, *jugaad* can be empowering to those who are forced to survive with limited resources. But it can also be misapplied to glorify the lack that necessitates forced innovation (Samantha & Gundi, 2018). A faithful representation of *jugaad* calls for a balancing act, a heightened sensibility, particularly on film. MM fails to strike this balance, as it focuses on a nationalist *jugaad* that uses the ideas of women scientists as fodder, but gives them only marginal ownership in the process. Instead, it chose to highlight a 'make do' attitude helmed mostly by the male protagonist.

Like *jugaad*, women and minorities have traditionally drawn on their strength to endure within an oppressive system. However, in HF, the focus on the endurance of those bearing the brunt of a racist and sexist system, inadvertently makes them into involuntary martyrs. Lola Young (1996) articulated the problematic oppositional representation of Black women characters in 'white-authored' films. Drawing on Fanon (1986) and West (1992), Young argued that Black women's roles in cinema were often a projection, stemming from the denial of white privilege, a form of Othering that could take a positive or negative cinematic form. While positive media representations, such as the depiction of Black women scientists (or of women scientists in India), are important, there is a danger of projection and stereotyping in the medium of film. One such gendered stereotype is the role of the Strong Black Woman, a gender role created within an oppressive racial system, and subsequently internalized and perpetuated through generations (Collins, 2004; Wyatt, 2008). This historical role vaunts the strength of Black women to endure hardships, in contrast to the dominant idea of women as weak and vulnerable in radicalized patriarchy. This gendered and radicalized role enables a whole oppressive system to fall into place, predicated on the strength of Black women to endure (Wyatt, 2008).

The three Black women scientists in HF are epitomes of the Strong Black Woman role. They experience extreme hardships at work and less so, at home, and still 'keep it all together'. In other words, they endure. Katherine toils hard as a single mom and faces every slight at work with stoicism. Dorothy grits her teeth at being overlooked at work, despite her experience. Mary endures taunts about her absence from home, while stretching herself to find work that matches her intelligence. As Strong Black Women, they rarely let their guard down except in each other's company. The bathroom scene with Katherine is one of the few in the film that reveals a degree of vulnerability that belies this myth of superhuman strength. Katherine has to use the segregated bathroom in a different building and as a result, has to run back and forth during the short break. During one such break, she is running back to her desk in the rain, only to be reprimanded by the project lead, who is unaware of her predicament. Setting aside the armour of the Strong Black Woman (Wyatt, 2008), Katherine takes back her power in a monologue that gets the attention of all in the office and ends with her declaring that, despite her struggles, she could barely afford a pearl necklace. She leaves for the day at the end of the scene. Her speech lays claim to her vulnerability, her material needs and her womanhood all at once. Yet, this cinematic moment, which could have been completely hers, is not left untouched. The project lead then proceeds to play out the 'white saviour role' – in privileged indignation, he takes a crowbar to the segregated sign outside the bathroom in the building. This scene is all the more meaningful as it was written especially for the film version of the story (Willis, 2017).

Motherhood and Science

Rigid gender roles also permeate the depiction of motherhood in both films. Women scientists are awkwardly poised in their maternal roles, struggling with an internalized science vs. motherhood conflict to become ‘true’ scientists. One of the women on the Mars team, Tara Shinde, is depicted as a *grihalakshmi* or feminine-force-behind-the-home. Still, she is repeatedly shown pondering and conflicted over her physical absence at home as a working mother. In one scene, Tara figuratively becomes a mom at work, asking the team to reflect on their childhood dreams and birthday wishes, in order to summon their inner scientist. Besides this somewhat contrived scene, there is little acknowledgement in the film of the benefits of the overlap of the scientist with the maternal role.

Where it is depicted in MM, the materiality of the maternal experience is highly mediated through technology. One of the women scientists on the team, Varsha Gowda, is under significant social and familial pressure to become a mother. Fertility technology comes to her rescue and leads to a precarious pregnancy. The fertility clinic appears pristine with soft-hued shots and affable doctors. Little is said about the class-based privilege to afford this treatment in India, where low-income families take loans to go through several such cycles of treatment with no success. In a film that vaunts the idea of thrift or ‘doing more with less’, the expenses of these fertility treatments seem normalized. Moreover, when Varsha hesitates to continue working through her difficult pregnancy, the male team lead asks if she wants to be “just a mom” or “a MOM mom” (referring to the acronym for the Mars Orbiter Mission). The tightrope that is modern motherhood and the complex weighing of options by this woman scientist, are all dismissed with a platitude from the all-knowing male protagonist. Unsurprisingly, fatherhood and male scientists are never privy to similar conflicts. In fact, none of the scientists’ roles as fathers are examined at all.

While HF is less contrite in its depictions of women scientists as mothers, it underscores as well the incompatibility of the two roles. Mary Jackson’s husband asks her to check her ambition for further studies and better work prospects because he thinks that she had little time as such for her children. However, he relents later, when he sees Mary working hard to achieve her dreams. He presents her with a mechanical pencil for her studies. Similarly, Katherine Johnson’s three daughters, whose grandmother is their primary caregiver, are also shown to be pining for more time with Katherine. Few scenes acknowledge the compatibility of the women’s scientist selves with their motherhood. One such scene shows Dorothy Vaughan reading out loud to her children from a software training book. Dorothy had to learn the new software in order to stay updated for the arrival of computers at work. She uses a lilting, storybook voice and tone to read the book out loud to her son. It is not difficult to imagine other such instances, where being a mother and a scientist were compatible and mutually nourishing roles for the women. It is telling that both films depict too few of these moments.

Suits, Skirts, Saris

Historically, Indian women scientists had to tread the tightrope of gender, caste and other conformism in their social relationships, which included a strict code in attire, so that they could transgress gender norms at work (Sur, 2001). To study these unwritten norms for women scientists in India, Abha Sur (2001) chronicled the lives of women scientists in the laboratory of Nobel laureate, C. V. Raman. Buoyed by pre-independence nationalism and aided by class and caste privilege, these women received a modern education, unlike the vast majority of Indian women. The pursuit of science also aligned with an ascetic way of life in India, and made it safe for women to devote their lives to science, much like their male counterparts. Still, Sur argues that, traditionally, Indian women scientists were rarely recognized individually for their scientific work. The women scientists in MM are similarly shown to be conforming to traditional gender norms and roles in their personal lives. The reel time dedicated to examining the personal lives of these women is extensive, unlike the vague sketches of the personal lives of the male scientists. This extensive documentation does not, however, highlight any transgressions in domestic gender roles. On the contrary, we have a picture of women stretching themselves to fit into restrictive, socially-assigned roles for Indian women.

Their attire is a telling sign of these inflexible norms. They can be seen in limited western and some modern Indian work-wear throughout the film. Yet, for launch day and the climactic scene, all the women scientists are shown in the conventional and festive Indian attire of saris and flowers. Men on the team do not wear similarly traditional Indian attire for the scene. In fact, performing tradition through attire is highly gendered in modern India, whereby men are held to less restrictive standards of traditional wear than women.

Indeed, the women scientists on the actual Mars mission in India were first internationally recognized through a widely-circulated photo of launch day, as a group of traditionally-dressed Indian women in mission control (Biswas, 2014). For the Black women scientists in HF, attire is similarly socially signifying. It becomes a means to perform a 'politics of respectability' (Higginbotham, 1994; Diaz, 2016). Historically, this politics involved Black women and men adopting a range of bourgeois values in morality, work ethic and personal appearance, in order to achieve racial uplift and validation (Diaz, 2016). Both working-class and middle-class Black people subscribed to this politics. To reflect this ethos, the costumes of the Black women scientists in HF seem more planned and formal than the staid, uniform-like suits of the white male scientists, or even the attire of white women secretaries. In one of the few scenes where Katherine asserts herself directly as a scientist, she comments about this limited significance of attire. At the church picnic, where she first met her future fiancé, the colonel Jim Johnson, he expresses surprise that NASA had hired women. In reply, Katherine asserts: "It's not because we wear skirts, it's because we wear glasses". She thus draws attention to their intelligence as women scientists, rather than any social or gendered signifiers such as clothing. One other scene underscores this social relevance of attire for the Black women scientists. After the successful launch, Katherine is presented with a pearl necklace by one of the secretaries. She is informed that it was a gift from the project lead's wife. Previously, Katherine had publicly voiced at work how she could not afford a pearl necklace, despite her hard work and struggles. Given the historical context of the film, and the 'politics of respectability' described previously, the pearl necklace from the white project lead's wife, was such a gendered signifier of respectability.

Intersectionality on the Silver Screen

From the perspective of Black women spectators of Hollywood films, bell hooks (2003) argued that representation of Black women ranges from pure objectification for the white male gaze to tokenism to the relatively few, self-aware and un-accommodating Black women subjects. After hooks (2000; 2009), any representation of Black women would be amiss if it did not consider their intersectionality. Located at the intersection of racism and sexism, they face systems of oppression that overlap each other, be it outside or in their homes (Crenshaw, 1989). While HF addresses these oppressive systems separately, at work or at home, there are few instances where being Black and being a woman are addressed together. One exception would be the scene discussed previously related to Katherine having to use the bathroom located in the other building, and then having to explain her long absence from her desk. Else, the film mostly sways from one to the other (race or gender), and fails to capture the complex intersectional struggles of Black women. Thus, for instance, when stopped by the white policeman on their way to Langley, the scene that ensues highlights the racial tensions underlying this encounter. At other times, and in other scenes, a constant gendered objectification is at play for the three Black women scientists.

Akin to the real machines that replaced them eventually, the three women mathematicians were simply called 'the computers' and had to use a separate office than the main team. It is only when Dorothy Vaughan mastered new software code that she and the other 'computers' (all Black women mathematicians) were accorded better status, joining the rest of the workforce in the main building. Again, gendered objectification is evident when the astronaut, who relies on Katherine's calculations, validates her work by saying, "I like her numbers." As mothers too, the personal struggles of these women scientists appear untainted by racial tensions, and in some scenes, almost idyllic. The film rarely ventures to depict how the difficulties of Black working mothers are amplified by race.

Likewise, MM does not depict the intersectional identity and experiences of the Muslim woman scientist, Neha Siddiqui. As a divorced Muslim woman, few scenes capture the overlapping structures of oppression that Neha must negotiate to make her place in the dominant Hindu patriarchal tableau of contemporary India. One instance of her intersectional identity is depicted when a single shot shows her being denied a rental as a divorcee. Else, Neha simply blends in with the rest of the team, as if her realities were quite comparable to theirs. Moreover, the arc of this character mimics the 2019 repeal of the triple talaq bill (Chowdhury, 2019), when she is given refuge by the older Hindu male scientist on the team. Like religion, caste intersections are also ignored in, what could be seen as, the privilege of the film makers to overlook the caste-based discrimination still present in modern India.

Conclusion

The two films analyzed here, albeit from different contexts, depict historical events and tend to reconstruct truth in an acceptable shade. As products of commercial cinema, they narrate a story with all the elements of a commercial plot. As biopics, they contextualize events, use objects, artifacts and attire. In the category of films about the conquest of space, they break new ground, showing the work of women scientists behind national space research programmes. Both films are also 'feel-good' films that generally elude spectators' malaise. This paper sought to examine the price of this palatable truth in these two attempts to rewrite history on film.

The rarefied air of outer space research, fiction and films traditionally restricted women's place to forms of domesticity – the astronaut's wife or the secretary or the communication specialist (Lathers 2012). Both films set out to challenge this tradition. But the nationalism of the Mars mission or the liberal egalitarianism that sought to include the history of Black women in the space programme, both drew extensively on the masculine capital of their privileged male protagonists. In this paper, we read between the lines of cinematic inclusivity in rewriting history. We found that the nationalist jugaad of MM portrayed the resourceful minds of women scientists, but failed to give them full ownership for their ideas. HF, meanwhile, painted a picture of strong Black women as scientists. However, in the process, their true vulnerability was subsumed by the same patina of endurance. Both films portrayed scientists as mothers, but chose to highlight the two roles as incompatible. Gender norms and roles were also rarely transgressed, as was most evident from the adherence to a gendered code in attire. Lastly, intersectional experiences were glossed over, in favor of a compartmental approach to systems of oppression, be it race, gender or religion.

The rewriting of history is bound to include some uncomfortable truths. In this process, who speaks whose truth matters. Thus, while the personal is political in women's struggle against oppression, it is not the same as simply opening up women's private lives to a public gaze. The personal becomes political when the divide between public and private, as drawn out by patriarchy, is questioned (hooks & McKinnon, 1996). In MM, the blurring of the public and private results in a Pygmalion effect, where women scientists, each inept in their own way (as a mother, or unable to learn driving, or lacking in *desh-bhakti* or nationalist spirit, among a litany of other lacks), are all coached into scientific greatness by the lead male scientist. The latter's life and thinking remain opaque and unexplored to the end. HF similarly renders opaque the private lives of the male scientists. They might as well have been automatons in white shirts, appearing and disappearing every day at the office.

Space research and outer space missions are emotionally-charged work, involving both deep imagination and the proximity of bodies, be it the bodies of researchers packed into mission control rooms, or those of the astronauts, who stretch the limits of the human body. Ignoring the affect and the material does disservice to the field and to the spirit of outer space exploration. Both films also characterize and celebrate these space missions as 'doing the impossible'. The word is repeated by the scientists, especially when considering road blocks in their work. But space research, in its essence, calls for a depth of imagination. In both films, this work of imagining pales in comparison to the adrenaline rush of achieving the impossible, where space itself is positioned as the unknown, waiting to be pierced by the male gaze and male explorer.

. In other words, it is not the collaborative spirit of space research that animates the stories here, but the competitive spirit of knowing more and more before rival nations. However, space exploration has also been a collaborative effort (like, for instance, with the Artemis Accords), where knowledge transfer and sharing between nations cannot be ignored, like it was in the two films discussed here.

To rewrite history in a socially just manner, it must be done inside out and not outside in: from inside the most marginalized groups, by the most marginalized actors, as also from inside each participant in this re-writing, after a process of decolonization of the mind, an inside out deconstruction of racist, casteist and sexist oppressive systems. So it is not merely enough to represent marginalized historical groups, but it is important to pay attention to how this is done in practice. Who were the editors, scriptwriters, music producers on these films? How are they a product of the oppressive history being rewritten? These are some meticulous lines of interrogation that could give the right direction to the rewriting of history on film as a weaving together of our common shared stories.

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