

New Asian American Writers and News from UK, Italy and Asia: Literature and the Visual Arts



Selected Essays

Vol. II

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Introduction

The following essays have been selected either from different sessions of our “Asia and the West” annual meeting (which has become a true reference point for scholars interested in cross-cultural encounters), or from different Conferences from those of Volume I. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Lina Unali, who edited the first volume of this e-book, for introducing me to Asian American and Asian British literature, and for allowing me to collaborate in her nationally and internationally praised research over the years.

In her contribution, Daniela Zizzari explores the contents of Thomas Harriot’s *Report*, aiming at encouraging the migration of the British to Virginia while, shifting perspective and undermining what is commonly meant by “East” and “West”, Elèna Mortara focuses on the analysis of a poem by Walt Whitman, entitled “Facing West from California’s Shores”. Heather Gardner delves into the ideas of “travelling”, “migrating” and “transnationalism” and Serena Fusco, analyzes the literary production of Liu Sola, a diasporic Chinese writer, artist, singer and composer. Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard focuses, instead, on an Indian writer, Toru Dutt, whom she describes as “syncretic”, due to the presence of Indian, French, and English elements (including the use of different languages) in her literary production.

Issues of identity are the subject of Aiping Zhang’s, Elisa Bracalente’s and Riccardo Rosati’s papers. The first explores the idea of “Chineseness” and “acculturation” in *Sour Sweet*, a novel by Chinese British Timothy Mo; Elisa Bracalente investigates the questioned “aboriginality” of Australian writer Mudrooroo, while Riccardo Rosati deals with the loss of Japanese identity in contemporary Japanese novelists.

From modern fiction to ancient literary texts: Chiara Palumbo focuses on the first English translations of the Chinese masterpiece entitled *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Sarah Landreth, instead, analyzes Schreiner’s female Alladdeen as a prototype of a new Victorian woman.

Two essays deal with the connection between visual arts and literature: Alessandra Contenti’s (which explores the idea of an “Indian Garden” in both British and Indian texts written in English), and Elisabetta Marino’s, which outlines a brief history of British Bangladeshi literature besides making reference to its visual representations (namely book covers and posters).

The last two contributions are a personal recollection by Isabella Vat, reporting on her travel to Pushkar as a vitalizing experience, and an interview on telecommunications in Asia by Lina Unali to Alessandro Unali, a Vodafone electronics engineer.

Elisabetta Marino



“Peace Gardens” (Sheffield): the fountain. Photo by Elisabetta Marino

Promoting Migration: Thomas Harriot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia**

Daniela Zizzari, University of Rome Tor Vergata

In the year of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, 1588, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, by Sir Thomas Harriot was printed in London. The author was a mathematician and astronomer, held in very high esteem by his contemporaries. As for many intellectuals who had no aristocratic ascendancy we know very little of Harriot's family. He studied at Oxford, where he became friends with Richard Hackluyt and Thomas Allen and in 1580, after his graduation, went to London.

In 1583 he entered Sir Walter Raleigh's service and his knowledge of mathematical and astronomical sciences proved essential for the tutoring of all the seamen who participated in the expeditions to the New World organized by Raleigh.

We cannot be certain whether Harriot was among Raleigh's men who made an expedition to Roanoke Island in 1584, off the coast of North Carolina, but he certainly sailed to Virginia in 1585 where Raleigh intended to found a permanent English colony. Severe storms and hardships forced Raleigh's men to return to England, and as a witness of what he had experienced there, Harriot published his *Briefe and True Report*. We shall see how true and reliable it is. After Elizabeth's death Raleigh's fortune plunged: he was suspected of conspiracy against James I and imprisoned in the Tower. Harriot's fortune declined too and when in 1618 Raleigh was sentenced to death, he witnessed the public execution. By that time Harriot was suffering from cancer of the nose, most likely induced by his heavy use of tobacco, which eventually led to his death in 1621.

Allegations of atheism against Raleigh and the men of his circle were spread widely during his life. It is worth remembering that the young playwright Christopher Marlowe, Kit, as he was referred to by his contemporaries, was a member of that group, the so-called "School of Night", according to an allusion made by Shakespeare in *Love's Labour Lost* (IV.iii.255). Apparently it was Marlowe who spoke rather freely of Harriot's atheism if we want to believe to the official deposition given by Richard Baines, soon after Marlowe's violent death in 1593: "Marlowe affirmeth that Moises was but a jugglar & that one Hariot, being Sir Walter Raleigh's man, can do more than he (...) That all they that love not Tobacco and Boyes were fooles" and other blasphemies.

We have no consistent evidence of Raleigh's, Harriot's, Marlowe's and all the other members of the "School of Night"'s atheism, yet Harriot's detached and scientific approach to the natural world was seen with great suspicion by ecclesiastical and secular authorities. In the Elizabethan age the profession of atheism was a capital offence, a challenge to the duty of obedience and a menace against the order of society given by God.

But, in order to read Harriot's report as an encouragement to migrate to the New World, we have to reconsider a few but fundamental issues of that age.

The first was undoubtedly a political one: the necessity of founding permanent

English colonies in America in order to oppose the Spanish monopoly already established there, from which the Catholic arch enemy derived relevant economic profits used to finance wars against Protestant nations.

As I have pointed out before, the first quarto edition of Harriot's *Report* was printed in the momentous year of the war against Spain, 1588. The second and most relevant issue was the economic one: the population rise of the 16th century and 17th century and the subsequent inflation and abnormal price rise which disrupted the economy and forced a mass migration from the country to the cities, London in particular.

A well documented study on this problem gives us the following data on the rapid increase of the population in England in the sixteenth century¹:

1541	2.774.000
1561	2.985.000
1586	3.806.000
1591	3.899.000

At the same time the purchasing power of agricultural labourers and buiding craftsmen was dramatically lowered, according to these estimates².

If we assume that in 1499 it equalled 100, the figures from mid-century on are:

1540-49	71
1560-59	66
1580-89	57

The obvious and most evident consequences produced by these two factors were on the one hand the fear of riots and the disruption of social order and on the other the belief that England could not provide any more the essential products to her people. A colony settlement could be seen as a way of easing the pressure represented by an increasing number of people who lived near starvation level. Every bad harvest was followed by the bursting out of food riots which threatened the social order and the private property³. The opening lines of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* deal precisely with this problem:

First Cit. We are accounted poor Citizens, the patricians good.
What authority surfeits on would relieve us. If they would yield
us but the superfluity, while it were wholesome, we might guess
they relieved us humanely; but they think we are too dear: the
leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory
to particularise their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them.
Let us revenge this with our pikes, ere we become rakes: for the
gods know I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge⁴.

Therefore the colonial enterprise held out to England the hope to improve the economy, to solve the problem of over-population, to contrast the Spanish settlements and to reduce imports, especially grain, smoked fish and tobacco.

Raleigh had been given a patent by Elizabeth: "To our trusty and welbeloved servaunte Walter Raleigh Esquier and to his heryes and assignes for ever liberty and license from tyme to tyme and at all tymes for ever hereafter to discover

search fynde out and viewe such remote heathen and barbarous landes contries and territories not actually possessed of any Christian prynce and inhabited by Christian people”⁵. In brief: “Serve God and Grow rich”, although it must be admitted that the English settlers were less brutal than the Spanish in converting the indigenous populations.

Harriot had to comply with Raleigh’s request to encourage investors, tradesmen and simple emigrants in the Virginia enterprise all the more so since diaries and reports of men who had taken part in the previous expeditions to Virginia, although not meant for publication, focused on the hardship, the violence of the inhabitants and the disillusion of their expectations.

Consequently, what we read in Harriot’s report, written with a scientific and apparently unbiased method, did not correspond to the truth.

In the address to his “investors, well wishers and friends of the settling and planting of Virginia”, considering how “slanderous and shameful (reports) have done much harm to many people who might otherwise have favoured and invested in the project” Harriot explains his purpose “(...) to give a brief explanation of the opinions of these men, (...) and pass to a description of the marketable commodities of the country, which are the subjects of this discussion” (*Report*, 3).

He then explains how he will divide his treatise into three separate parts so that it may easily be read and understood. In the first he will “enumerate commodities already found there, or which could be raised there to serve the ordinary needs of you who will be planters and inhabitants of that country”.

Actually what he does is to stress the surplus of these commodities, that could be exported to England, with great benefit of the country and great economic disadvantage to its enemies.

In the second part he will list all the goods that grow naturally there for food and sustenance of life but that cannot be exported and finally in the last part he will also give a brief description of the nature and manners of its inhabitants.

From Harriot’s description of plants, edible vegetables, herbs, fish, game, beasts, wood, minerals, pearls the land of Virginia looks like *the promised land*: “The planted ground, compared with an English acre of forty rods in length and four in breadth, yealds at least two hundred London bushels of corn, beans, and peas in addition to the crop of *macocqtver*, *melden*⁶, and sunflowers. In England we think it a large crop if an acre gives forty bushels of wheat” (9).

Plenty without any effort: “(...) we found that one man may prepare and cultivate as much ground (...) with less than twenty-four hours’ labor as will supply him food in abundance for a year”.

It is interesting to note how Harriot made a phonetic transcription of the words used by the natives, but his original manuscript with a glossary has not yet been found.

Harriot’s strategy is very keen: he describes every single item and occurrence with a detached and scientific method, thus making his readers believe that everything he states is the plain truth.

The section of the report that interests us the most is no doubt the last one, concerning the nature and manners of the people.

Harriot was very worried about the rumours that circulated on the violence of the inhabitants so that at the very beginning of this section he reassured his readers that the natives were not to be feared. From his point of view, of an alleged atheism, we get a very peculiar description of their religion. "They believe in many gods, of different kind and degrees (...) Their chief god has existed from all eternity. (...) He created the world, then he made the sun, the moon and the stars (...) the waters of the world were made first (...) The natives believe also in the immortality of the soul, that after this life is either carried to heaven, where the gods live, or else to a great pit or hole. In heaven it enjoys perpetual bliss and happiness, but in the pit (...) it burns continually". The description of this religion, very similar to Christianity, would certainly make the specific religious charges given to Raleigh's patent to propagate the Gospels, an easy achievement.

But, further on in this section, Harriot, I think, reveals his profound disbelief in religion. It is when he refers stories told to him by the natives "about two persons who had lately died and revived again". One was "a wicked man who died and was buried. The day after the burial the natives saw that the earth of his grave had began to move, and took him up again. The man made a declaration, saying that his soul had been about to enter into *Popogusso* when one of the gods had saved him and given him leave to return to earth to teach his friends what they should do to avoid that terrible place of torment". The other story is analogous and tells all the pleasures of heaven. Harriot comments dryly: "whether or not the *Weroans*⁷ and priests use subtle devices with the common people, the belief in heaven and the fiery pit makes the simple folk give strict obedience to their governors and behave with great care, so that they may avoid torment after death and enjoy bliss".

A most interesting part of the *Report*, used by Stephen Greenblatt as a title of his seminal study on Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion" (1985) is where Harriot describes the devastating effects that their presence had on the natives' health. Wherever they had passed "people began to die very fast. In some towns twenty people died, in some forty, in some sixty, and in one sixscore; this was a large portion of the inhabitants. And the strange thing is that this occurred only in towns where we had been and where they had done some mischief against us, and it happened always after we had left (...) After this disease had struck in four or five places, some of our native friends (...) were persuaded that it was we who brought it about, helped by our God. They thought that through Him we were able to slay anyone at any place and without the use of weapons".

The lack of antibodies for those that were common diseases in Europe, along with the undisputable technical and cultural superiority displayed by the English, made the natives believe that the newcomers were not men but gods.

No wonder that they would shortly submit.

Harriot explains further: "and as their medicine could not cure the strange disease, they tried to excuse their ignorance by shamefully encouraging the simple people to believe that the death was caused by invisible bullets. To prove it they sucked strings of blood out of the sick bodies and said that these were the strings to which the bullets were attached".

Harriot cannot find an explanation for these deaths and admits that they were

interpreted by other natives who did not believe in the invisible bullets, “as the work of God for our sakes, and we ourselves had reason to agree with them, no matter what other causes there might be” yet he decided not to speculate on these other causes in the *Report*.

Having spent a year in Virginia, living among the natives, observing their manners and trying to find answers to their behaviour, Harriot the scientist and the keen anthropologist, came to see them as friends, from whom nothing could be feared and their land not as an inhospitable country but as an English province.

Raleigh’s Virginia became a permanent British Colony in 1607. It is worth remembering that the Pilgrim Fathers left England with the intent of sailing to Virginia, to give rise to a new, Protestant civilization, as Harriot had encouraged his fellow countrymen to do in his report, but storms and hardships forced them to land near Cape Cod, where they settled down in 1620. In conclusion, Harriot’s intent of promoting migration towards the land of Virginia proved to be successful.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2004: “This Earth of Migrations, Immigrations, Emigrations Produces Languages, Literary Texts and Works of Art”.

¹ E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871*, 1981, p. 528.

² J. Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV, 1550-1640*, Cambridge, 1967, p. 865.

³ Cf. A. Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions*, 1985.

⁴ I.i.15-26.

⁵ D.B. Quinn, “Thomas Harriot and the New World” in *Thomas Harriot: Renaissance Scientist*, ed. by J. Shirley, 1974.

⁶ Previously described as pumpkin and mountain spinach.

⁷ The chiefs.

Walt Whitman and Human Migrations: Facing West from California's Shores*

Elèna Mortara, University of Rome Tor Vergata

One feels happy when one can share with other people the joy of the reading of a text. A poem selected from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* will allow us to enjoy this experience of mental pleasure and intellectual exploration. The poem by Whitman, first published in 1860 and given its final shape in 1867, is "Facing West from California's Shores", whose close reading will help us rethink our geography and ideas in terms of the East and West relationship, while tackling the issue of the frontier in American life and the deep relevance of migrations in its history.

"Facing West from California's Shores"¹ is a short poem of eleven lines, belonging to that "string" or "Cluster of Poems"² that were first published under the collective French title of "Enfans d'Adam" in the third edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1860). In the following 1867 edition, the imperfectly spelled French title of this group of poems was changed to its corresponding English "Children of Adam", its final name. This part of *Leaves of Grass*, "Children of Adam", was to take an important position in the general structure of Whitman's lifelong collection, being set, in its final 1891-92 "death-bed edition" (Whitman's only last authorized text), immediately after the long sequence of poems that can be considered as introductory: the short "Epigraph", the series of "Inscriptions" and the two long seminal poems "Starting from Paumanok" and "Song of Myself", having the "myself", or its origin in individual life, as a subject³. As a matter of fact, "Children of Adam" is, apart from the "Inscriptions", the first group of poems in the volume with a collective name. This collective quality is an important aspect, in this initial phase of Whitman's poetic architecture. It suits the intentions expressed by the poet in a note⁴, where he describes this cluster as having "Adam, as a central figure and type"; Adam, the biblical first man, being, in fact, the explicit subject of both the first and last poem of the section⁵. This universal, archetypal context, concerning man and his origins, defines an atmosphere, which is quite appropriate to the poem we are now going to read and should be kept in mind in our analysis. All of Whitman's poems, in fact, can and indeed must, given the bulk of *Leaves of Grass*, be appreciated each individually, like separate "leaves" of the collective "grass" evoked in the title. Yet their understanding increases if they are set in their poetic structural context and read in dynamic relation to the portion or spot of bookish "greenery" to which they belong, and within the structure of the whole volume, which was to grow in the course of the years as a living organism of words.

It was in the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass* that "Facing West from California's Shores", like the surrounding cluster of poems "Children of Adam", was given its final form and present title. It is important to stress the historical and cultural context in which the poem was born. The year 1860, when the poem was first written, was only a decade away from the end of the war with Mexico, which officially transferred sovereignty over California to the U.S.; California, this vast geographical area, had been joined to the United States as its 31st state only in 1851 (Melville's *Moby-Dick* came out in the same year). Whitman, the singer of

American space and its infinite possibilities, was inspired by these events. The original 1860 title of the poem was “Hindustan, from the Western Sea”, a more matter-of-fact, yet partially mythical title, explicit in mentioning a specific Oriental land, archetypical Hindustan, the land of the Hindus, to be seen from the Western waters of unmentioned America. The final title opens up a wider and more mysterious view toward a Western horizon and explicitly introduces the American viewpoint of California. In the early 1860s, the California Gold Rush had already brought thousands of gold-seekers to that side of the continent. The American Frontier had reached its Western border. And now by looking across the ocean from California’s shores, by facing further West from the Western physical border of America, what was there that one could see? It was, with a necessary reversal of mental categories, the East.

“Facing West from California’s Shores” is a poem, born within this historical context, which even today not only helps us, but even obliges us to reassess our geography, to shake off our usual categories of thinking. We usually associate the West with America and its European origins and the East with Asia. But if our point of view starts from California’s shores, then “Facing West” means facing what we traditionally call “the East”. This American reaching of the East from the West is the new, mysterious reality inspiring the poem, its first source of poetic meditation. It is the vertiginous feeling of having come full circle, or *almost* full circle in the exploration of the globe that the poem communicates. In a closer reading of the text we shall now see the variety of questions that go with that feeling, the new conception of man emerging from the possible new encounter of West and East, and the central role played by the theme of human migrations in this poetic meditation.

Facing West from California's Shores

Facing West from California's shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity,
The land of migrations, look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled;
For, starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmere,
From Asia, from the north, from the God, the sage, and the
Hero,
From the south, from the flowery peninsulas and the spice islands,
Long having wander'd since, round the earth having wander'd,
Now I face home again, very pleas'd and joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)

As is common in Whitman (particularly in his shorter pieces), the first line of the poem is the same as the poem's title. So the poem begins with a participial phrase, "Facing West from California's shores", which sets the scene and the situation. From a stylistic point of view, we are immediately confronted with what the critic Ezra Greenspan has called Whitman's "lifelong attachment to the grammatical form of the present participle", a practice which contributes to his

“long-flowing poetic syntax”, and which is so frequent in his writing⁶, both at the beginning of his poems or within them, as to constitute “an essential part” of his free-verse poetics⁷. The series of participles plunge the reader into a situation told while it is taking place, in its dynamic development, while the subject “I” appears only in the third line. The semantic content of the first line immediately suggests, with the verb *facing*, an idea of partial movement (not of the body but of the eye), and all the geographic signals that follow show a dynamic, visual and mental tension towards a somewhere else from where one is, a spiritual turning towards. And this notion is then reinforced and further clarified by the second verse, again a self-describing line with two participles, a self-portrait in a typical Whitmanesque style, where any possibility of fixity is abolished, both in form and in the semantic meaning of the words: “Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound”. The endless mobility of the mind, “inquiring, tireless, and seeking”, is fittingly expressed in one of Whitman’s favorite verb forms, a perfect linguistic tool for speaking of life as a continuous process of development.

Philological criticism, with its attention to the history of a text, helps us with an important piece of information. The first two lines we have just read, with their series of participles setting the scene and expressing what we have called the endless mobility of the mind, were only introduced in 1867. The poem originally started, in its 1860 first edition, with the subject “I” and the whole present third line, where the poet introduces himself in this way:

I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity,
the land of migrations, look afar
(l. 3)

The first part of the line makes one hear the voice of the bardic “I” describing himself as a contradictory figure, “a child, very old” at the same time. Of course, one is reminded of the English Romantic poet William Blake, who began his two early collections about Innocence and Experience with two introductory poems, both called “Introduction”, showing the poet in his two opposing aspects: on the one hand, as an innocent, child-inspired piper-poet, singing “songs of happy cheer” (l. 10), in “Introduction” to *Songs of Innocence*, and, on the other hand, as a man of infinite experience encompassing the limits of time, who “present, Past, & Future sees” (l. 2), in “Introduction” to *Songs of Experience*⁸. This was the poet, from the perspective of “the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”, that Blake had meant to “shew”⁹ in his combined collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). The American Romantic poet Whitman, writing more than sixty years later, encloses the two contradictory images within himself. This is not surprising for, as we know from other poems as well, Whitman not only accepts his contradictions, but is even proud of them, as if they manifested his comprehension of reality in its complexity and his ability to hold a vision of totality. In this poem, the contradictory idea of being both very young and very old is essential, in the description not only of the artist, but of man, the American man as a new Adam. One can start to understand that when reading further in the same line.

The words immediately following in the long, important third line of the poem refer to the setting of the scene: “over waves” is justified by the geographic situation described, of being along California’s shores in one’s imagination. Yet

the waves are also the metaphorical carriers of this looking afar, a means of transport for the eye and the mind. Thus they are associated also with a reflection on the figure of the poet, as one who lets himself be carried “over waves” by the rhythm of the ocean, which is Whitman’s rhythm, life’s rhythm for him, as a matter of fact. All of Whitman’s poetry is defined by the poet as “ocean’s poem”, as we can read in the third of his “Inscriptions”, “In Cabin’d Ships at Sea” (ll. 8-16)¹⁰:

Here are our thoughts, voyagers’ thoughts,
Here not the land, firm land, alone appears, (...)
(...) we feel the undulating deck beneath our feet,
We feel the long pulsation, ebb and flow of endless motion,
The tones of unseen mystery, the vague and vast suggestions of the briny world,
the liquid-flowing syllables,
The perfume, the faint creaking of the cordage, the melancholy rhythm,
The boundless vista and the horizon far and dim are all here,
And this is ocean’s poem.

It is particularly the borderline situation, between land and sea, along the seashore, that in one of his fragments Whitman describes as formative of his soul and most inspiring¹¹. And it is this condition, this “dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid”, that we find in “Facing West from California’s Shores”.

Carried by these waves, along the borderline of land and ocean, we have now come to a point in the poem that is most interesting, particularly in a discussion about human migrations. The direction to which the I is looking is, indeed, “towards the house of maternity, the land of migrations” (l. 3). Here the geographic context colors itself with mythical and archetypal implications, already suggested by the name of the whole section, “Children of Adam”. What Whitman tells us is not a story of specific immigrations and emigrations, human motions created by temporary necessities. What he sings is the basic ur-story of the whole of mankind, the tension towards *elsewhere* that has compelled human beings to move always further West from their mythical land of origins. At the same time what is sung is the need for getting in touch again with one’s starting point, in order, paradoxically, to proceed in life. And this starting point is common to all humanity.

Thanks to the spherical shape of the earth, the eye can look towards its source not by turning backwards, but by looking onwards. This is one of the paradoxes of human life implied in the poem, side by side with the other contradictory elements coexisting, both in the self, fresh as a child and experienced as an old man, and in his visionary goal, the “house of maternity” afar, which is also “the land of migrations”: a double definition that expresses the double forces at work. Going back, by going onwards, towards the source is also a going back to one’s departure from it. Here we have the story of mankind’s past, beginning from the East, moving westward and eventually coming back, or rather imagining the possibility of coming back, full circle to the East from which it started: an East now turned into the West. It is a round journey, corresponding to the deeply engraved Romantic love for geometric circular figures¹².

According to the Aryan theories that were increasing in popularity at the time, humanity’s journey had begun in the Orient. In the vision which the poem gives

voice to, the circular journey had started in two areas: in the North of Indian Asia, “from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmere” (l. 5), here described as a world of religious wisdom and heroism, and in “the south, the flowery peninsulas and the spice islands” (l. 7), referring, either to Sri Lanka (former Ceylon), South of India, or to Indonesia and Malaysia. After wandering round the earth (“Long having wander’d since, round the earth having wander’d”, l. 8), the migrant poet feels happily close to the geographical, historical and archetypical, origins of the world. The coming “home again” (l. 9) would mean, like in all mythical comings back, being enriched from the circular journey. One recognizes in the protagonist of this experience the new Adam figure described, in one of Whitman’s notes, as a “fully complete, well-developed man”, in contrast to “the youthful type-hero of novels and love poems”¹³. The modern Adam is a mature Adam, like the one, refreshed with sleep in the morning, of the following poem, “As Adam Early in the Morning”, which concludes the “Children of Adam” section of *Leaves of Grass*. He is very similar to the “advancing man” described by Emerson in “Circles”, an essay that can be read as an ideological prelude to this poem and to much of Whitman’s writing (“The new position of the advancing man has all the powers of the old, yet has them all new. It carries in its bosom all the energies of the past, yet is itself an exhalation of the morning”)¹⁴. The modern American Adam/Ulysses, however, has not reached humanity’s cradle, his Ithaca, yet, the mythical *nostos* is not yet fully achieved, it is only at hand as a possibility open to the future. A “world afar”, “off the shore of my Western sea”, “the circle almost circled”, all these phrases from the poem show that the circle has not been completed yet.

Even at what would seem to be the further limit of the American movable frontier, even here Whitman’s poetry is still a “Song of the Open Road”. The “fluidity of American life” is not blocked by the reaching of the Western frontier along the Pacific Ocean, as it will be later theorized by historian Frederick J. Turner in his famous essay of 1893 on the meaning of the frontier in American history¹⁵. The frontier is still open, the tension towards elsewhere is still there, by looking out of one’s national limits and setting oneself within a larger universal context of human efforts and meanings. Whitman’s bard still wants to look beyond. He may know all about the past and the present, but he doesn’t know what the future will be (as declared by Emerson, “In nature every moment is new; (...) the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition”)¹⁶. He can recount the whole story of mankind from its Eastern mythical origins to its Western migration and development, and can celebrate the present possible reunion of the West with its original Eastern sources (which have meanwhile become the West by looking afar from California’s shores). Yet this mythical migration and almost circular achievement has been reached only to realize that one is still on the way.

The last joyful statement of the modern Adam/Ulysses who has reached California’s shores and is in search of home further West, “Now I face home again, very pleased and joyous,” (l. 9) already announces, in the choice of the verb, that the voyage is not over. It is, however, particularly the loose language structure of the whole sentence which indicates, with a tiny linguistic sign, the incompleteness of the journey. The statement in the poem about facing home again, in fact, is surprisingly not concluded by a period, but by a comma: a very unusual punctuation mark, considering that it marks the end of the sentence! The

frontier beyond American Western shores is open. The last words of the poem, after the comma, are two questions exposed as in a whisper to oneself, within two parentheses (it is a common technique by Whitman, to use parentheses to emphasize central points, by separating them from the flowing rest). These basic questions are:

(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)

(ll. 10-11)

It is with these theatrical asides, with these unanswered questions to oneself and to the reader¹⁷, that the poem concludes. The spiritual migration of the forever young/old Adam must continue, though the sense of achievement is not without doubts. The new man is at the brink of new discoveries concerning humanity, while having within himself all the past history of mankind, as the “long ago” implies (“America does not repel the past”, these are the opening words of the Preface in *Leaves of Grass 1855*)¹⁸. The search must still go on¹⁹. The essential questions that made you start moving are still there, new questions keep coming. “Myself moving forward then and now and forever”, this is one of the poet’s self-descriptions in “Song of Myself” (section 32, l. 696). In Whitman’s dynamic vision, *migrating* is the essence of life: migrating, that is to say, “moving forward”, in search of the forever “yet unfound” mystery, and incessantly learning on the way.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2004: "This Earth of Migrations, Immigrations, Emigrations Produces Languages, Literary Texts and Works of Art".

² W. Whitman, "Facing West from California's Shores" in the "Children of Adam" section of *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by S. Bradley and H. W. Blodgett, Norton, New York-London, 1973, pp. 110-111. This edition of *Leaves of Grass* will be further referred to as: Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Norton.

² These are Whitman's own definitions, from two of his notes concerning this group of poems. The notes were published posthumously in his *Notes and Fragments*, ed. by R.M. Bucke, 1899 (republished in *Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. by R.M. Bucke and others, vol. IX, 1902). The definitions in these notes, expressing Whitman's intentions, are: "A string of poems (short, etc.)" (169, No. 63), and "Theory of a Cluster of Poems" (124, No. 142). Quoted in Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Norton, p. 90, note "Adam".

³ "Starting from Paumanok" was first published as an introductory poem of the 1860 edition, while "Song of Myself" was the first, longest and most important poem of the first edition.

⁴ W. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, ed. by R.M. Bucke, p. 124, No. 142. See my endnote 2.

⁵ The first poem in the section is "To the Garden the World", the last one is "As Adam Early in the Morning".

⁶ I shall quote just three examples of self-descriptions in the participle, from poems in *Leaves of Grass* written by Whitman in different periods. A chronologically early case is in "The Sleepers", (1855), ll. 1-5: "I wander all night in my vision,/ stepping (...) noiselessly stepping and stopping,/ Bending (...)/ Wandering (...) Pausing, gazing, bending, and stopping". For a text of the same years as the poem we are analyzing, the 1860s, see the self-portrait in form of a spider in "A Noiseless Patient Spider" (1868, 1881), where we can observe, with the poetic I narrator, the spider's endless process of taking out its filaments from itself, "tirelessly speeding them" (l. 5) and the poet "Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking (...)/ somewhere" (ll. 8-10). Finally, for a text of the 1870s one can see "Passage to India" (1874, 1881), which joyfully begins with a series of "Singing": "Singing my days,/ Singing the great achievements of the present,/ Singing the strong light works of engineers,/ Our modern wonders" (ll. 1-3).

⁷ Ezra Greenspan, "Some Remarks on the Poetics of 'Participle-Loving Whitman'", *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. by E. Greenspan, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 92, 95.

⁸ "Hear the voice of the Bard! Who present, Past, & Future sees/ Whose ears have heard/ The Holy Word,/ That walk'd among the ancient trees", ll. 1-5 (first lines of Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience*).

⁹ Cf. subtitle of W. Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794): "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul".

¹⁰ W. Whitman, "In Cabin'd Ships at Sea" (*Leaves of Grass*, Norton, 2). The passage, describing his own book, is put in italics by the poet. "In Cabin'd Ships at Sea" was first published in 1871, as the third of the "Inscriptions", and was

never revised.

¹¹ “Even as a boy, I had the fancy, the wish, to write a piece, perhaps a poem, about the seashore – that suggesting, dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid (...)// There is a dream, a picture, that for years at intervals (...) has come noiselessly before me, and I really believe, fiction as it is, has entered largely into my practical life – certainly into my writings, and shaped and colored them. It is nothing more or less than a stretch of interminable white-brown sand, hard and smooth and broad, with the ocean perpetually, grandly, rolling in upon it, with slow-measured sweep, with rustle and hiss and foam, and many a thump as of low brass drums. This scene, this picture, I say, has risen before me at times for years”. These moving words are from W. Whitman, “Sea-shore Fancies” in *Prose Works 1892*, ed. by Floyd Stovall (New York University Press, New York, 1963-64), vol. I, *Specimen Days* (1963), pp. 138-139. In Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Norton, pp. 766-767. The following quotation is from this text.

¹² See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles”, in his *Essays: First Series* (1841): “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world” (*The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed., with a Biographical Introduction, by Brooks Atkinson, The Modern Library, New York, 1940, p. 279). For a deep analysis of the role of geometric figures in German culture, cf. Michele Cometa, “La passione della duplicità. Geometrie della Goethezeit” in *Simmetria e Antisimmetria. Due spinte in conflitto nella cultura dei paesi di lingua tedesca*, ed. by Luciano Zagari, Edizioni ETS, Pisa, 2001, pp. 53-91.

¹³ W. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, ed. by R.M. Bucke, 1899, p. 124, No. 142 (in Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Norton, 90). This note, where the poet describes his Adam figure as being a “fully complete, well-developed man, eld, bearded, swart, fiery, – as a more than rival of the youthful type-hero of novels and love poems”, polemically sets up one type of hero against another: experience vs ignorance.

¹⁴ Ralph W. Emerson, “Circles”, *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Atkinson, p. 239.

¹⁵ Frederick Turner, “The Meaning of the Frontier in American History”, *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, 1893; rep. in F.J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1953. The sentence about “fluidity” is from the second paragraph of this essay.

¹⁶ R.W. Emerson, “Circles”, *The Complete Essays*, ed. by Atkinson, p. 239.

¹⁷ What is this something one is looking for, while wandering across the globe? This remains unexpressed, a mystery for the reader as well. We are confronted with what Umberto Eco has called “opera aperta”, an open-ended work.

¹⁸ W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Norton, p. 711 (in the only Italian bilingual edition of this text: W. Whitman, *Foglie d'erba 1855*, ed. by Mario Corona, Marsilio, Venice, 1996, 66). For a similar concept in Emerson, see above and note 14.

¹⁹ Also Emerson writes, in “Circles”, about “this incessant movement and progression which all things partake”, yet he immediately adds that this movement and progression “could never become sensible to us but by contrast to some principle of fixture or stability of the soul” (“Circles”, *The Complete Essays*, ed. by Atkinson, 238).

Travelling, Exploring, Migrating in Relation to Alterity*

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Travelling, exploring and migrating all involve movement, displacement and encounters with different people and cultures. On the one hand the traveller, the explorer and the migrant share the experience of leaving behind the familiar world and of defining themselves by comparing identities. On the other, they are different in the type of relationship they tend to establish with alterity. This relationship obviously depends on the myriad particular motivations, emotions and reactions which move the individual, but also on the features which differentiate these three distinct modes for changing locality.

In travelling there is a point of departure, a point of arrival, and the security of an itinerary. A return is also expected. Exploring requires a greater flexibility, as the route is made in progress; the destination and the return are also subject to changes in the itinerary. In migrancy the point of arrival is even more uncertain and homecoming often impossible. The traveller and the explorer can learn the language and the history of the host country, if they wish, but they are not asked to dwell on them as the migrant is. The loss of the primary home, the mutability of the itinerary, the uncertainty of return and the need to break cultural barriers challenge therefore the identity of the migrant in a way the common traveller rarely experiences. Furthermore, if our knowledge and capacity for understanding are determined by the language we use, not only the perception but also the concept of Self may be affected by the new language the immigrant needs to learn.

The early explorers projected their images of the world on the new-found lands, a tendency which was put systematically into practice by the British colonizers in the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus many different possessions were made homogeneous to the colonizers' mother country and turned into parallel English societies. In plotting and mapping the new lands, whether in America or in Australia, explorers and colonizers also symbolically reproduced their mother country, of which they repeated the toponymy. As Elleke Boehmer observed in *Migrant Metaphors*¹, from this practice of homogenizing the unknown to the known, the colonizers developed the strategy of projecting any kind of discomfort they experienced onto the natives. The images of threat in the colonialists' texts, and the European representations of the colonized people as unruly and malign are the result of this process of othering. When Robinson Crusoe names his man Friday and teaches him his language, he makes of him a speaking mute as in Coetzee's *Foe*. Under these masks alterity remains undescribable. To some extent also the contemporary tourist, who takes his world with him wherever he goes, acts accordingly.

In postcolonial times the massive migratory movements of people from Africa and Asia to Europe and America disrupted the distinction and the distance between the centre and the periphery of the world, bringing the marginalized people into the heart of the ruling powers. Paradoxically there are now more chances of encountering alterity at home than abroad. Moreover, travelling and exploring have lost the individual character they had in the past. In times when not much is left to discover on this planet, explorers are going into the space or on particular expeditions requiring huge financial resources and sophisticated technological

knowledge. Meanwhile travelling has produced the collective phenomenon we call tourism. A broad section of the population of industrialized countries engage in tourist practices and many professional activities have been developed to cope with the mass character of tourism. Despite the changes, both the traditional traveller and the contemporary tourist view the land as a spectacle. If this was true of the past, when Baedekers prepared the young for the Grand Tour, promoting new ways of seeing, it is even more so nowadays. The degree to which tourists are now directed to view features of landscape by the array of media, TV, films, magazines, brochures and travel books, is such that much of the pleasure of travelling is not in the experience itself but in the anticipation of it. If the Grand Tour had an important role in the education of the English gentleman, tourists today visit places famous for being a social “must”. The aesthetic appreciation of beauty, which was part of the cognitive function of travelling in the past, is now a routine practice taken for granted. Limited as it is now to the vacation period, travelling is more often associated with recreation than with knowledge. Professional experts in fact arrange our travelling to cater for other needs, directing the tourists towards construed attractions and pseudo pleasures, or inventing an aura of authenticity around places in which the natives are paid to stage their diversity. Separated from the place of residence, but also isolated from the local people and their environment, the tourist seeks something different from the ordinary life he leads that, however, will not engage him in the disquieting experience of otherness. In visiting Paris, or an English village, or an exotic country, tourists look for those signs which they have derived from pre-established notions and ideas of Frenchness, Englishness or exoticism. Many tour operators also provide a type of journey where there is no packaging. But in this case too the character of the tour and its itinerary are construed to attract the exclusive traveller who still dreams of the voyage of discovery. No matter whether the tour is cultural, recreational, “romantic”, industrial or ethnic, the operator is intended to supply a set of *stimuli* perceived by the tourists as a change from the daily routine or as a break from the artificiality of urban life.

What is eluded in industrialised tourism, or in the sponsored hi-tech exploring expeditions of our times, is the crossing of cultural frontiers and the questioning of identities, values and notions which the contact with diverse cultures brings forth. Much effort is made in fact to increase the speed of transportation in order to reduce the travelling time, compress distances and minimize the fatigue of the journey and the disorientation of changing places. Those localities where tourists spend most of their travelling time, which the anthropologist Marc Augè includes in his list of non-places, i.e. railway stations, airports, or motorways, are transit zones with no identity or heritage, not meant to promote sociality or cultural exchanges.

The migrant too takes with him the history, the traditions, the language, the religion, the ways of thinking, acting and feeling of his society. But, as the sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad argues in his study of Algerian immigrants in France, the migrant lives in two places and he is absent in both². Leaving one's native country with the hope of finding a better job and of improving the living conditions, implies in fact a double loss: the loss of a place in the community of origin and of a social and political position in the country of arrival. The first loss is generally very traumatic, as it means a break not only with relatives and friends,

but also with the values, rules, activities, temporal and spatial rhythms which usually belong to rural or fishing communities. The second loss may be even more difficult for the moral and physical sufferings it causes to the immigrants, who remain subject to all the prejudices attached to their plight even when naturalization is achieved. The double loss the migrant suffers makes him twice an alien: as an emigrant in his mother country for having abandoned it, as an immigrant in the host country where he becomes the personification of otherness. In Sayad's opinion, the migrant paradoxically exists in default in his country of origin and in excess in the host country, which means he is neither part of the Same, nor of the Other.

The image of the traveller has been used in literature and religion since ancient times to depict the process of living, learning and even of writing. In our globalized world this image has been replaced by that of the migrant as it represents more aptly the homelessness of postmodern man. But the real sufferings of migrancy are such that no comparison should be made with the feelings of the globalized élite or of the intellectual navigating on the Internet. Where the latter enjoy the freedom of movement, the migrant is often under the pressure or compulsion to move. And the way to paradise they both dream of finding usually turns into a short-termed delusion for the tourist, and into a real hell for the immigrant.

Tourism and migrancy differ totally in terms of origins. One is a product of the affluent industrialised world, the other of the underdeveloped countries. But poverty and wealth in the world are interrelated, as the former is very often the result of past colonial practices. There is always a subversive character to the migrants' journey, implicit in their need for a change and in their yearning for improvement and emancipation. Emigration and immigration therefore must not be considered as two separate phenomena, but as the two sides of the same social phenomenon, one occurring 'there', the other 'here'. The problems of the immigrant in fact depend on the social, economic, and political conditionings of both his native society and of the host country.

No tourist is expected to integrate in a different culture. This is instead a very long and difficult process for the migrant, which does not end with the bureaucratic achievement of a new nationality. New models of integration, which take into account the multi-faceted aspects of the problem, are being debated in many countries that have this issue in their political agenda.

Integration demands mutual obligations, but from the migrant's point of view it also involves a translation from the culture of origin into the culture of arrival. In the transformation, which every form of translation requires, something is lost and something is gained. The losses and the gains are what we read about in the literary production of migrancy. This production is composed mostly of autobiographies or of autobiographical novels describing both the physical violence of uprooting and its causes (war, famine, poverty, political repression, natural catastrophes, etc.), and the psychological pain of being torn between the nostalgia of the native traditions and the yearning for integration in the new culture. By recounting the odyssey of their passage, migrants are not only producing texts that displace the master narrative literatures written in the language they have appropriated, but they are also experimenting with the making

of new identities. It remains to be seen whether these new identities, born of a process of cultural hybridization, will also change the host community. The frequency with which the terms “translation”, “interpretation”, and akin, recur in these narratives from the very titles is significant³ if, according to George Steiner⁴, every model of communication is at the same time a model of translation, and a vertical or horizontal transfer of meaning. There is always a problem of understanding and communication which the plots put forward. Some of these narratives end in tragedy for the incapacity of the characters to adopt, learn a new language and find their bearings in the New World. Others recount successful translations into the new culture through the pitfalls of misunderstandings and the anxiety of conflictuality. This conflict occurs not only between the migrants and the host community but also between the first and the second generation of immigrants. As these autobiographies or novels reveal, recovering one’s past is a pre-requisite to the transformation requested: moving forward implies also a movement backwards. In the process of developing a new vision of one’s self, remembering and forgetting become therefore two complementary functions, or two sides of the same process. Thanks in fact to the discontinuity and instability of the relationship between remembering and forgetting, the narrator finds an empty space where he can elaborate new meanings and create new identities.

To some extent the migrant’s journey brings us back to the character travelling had in the past when it was considered the best mode for improving one’s social position and for acquiring fortune and honour. As Eric J. Leed explains in *The Mind of the Traveler – From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*⁵, in ancient times the hard trials and deprivations suffered during the long journeys were interpreted as signs of one’s fate, as in the *Odyssey* or in the *Aeneid*. In the Middle Ages, travelling maintained the character of an exceptional experience or of an heroic event which knights and penitents undertook to prove their virtues or to purge their soul. Traces of this ancient significance of travelling are evident in the English term “to travel” deriving from the French “travail”, a hard task, a term similar also to the Italian “travaglio”. Only recently travelling has become a manifestation of freedom or an escape from need, coming a full circle in the meaning. As a pleasure-seeking experience it has generated the routine of industrialized tourism, a great asset only from an economic point of view. The migrant’s journey, with its loss of social connections and of certainties, gives back to travelling the subversive and creative character it had in the past.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2004: “This Earth of Migrations, Immigrations, Emigrations Produces Languages, Literary Texts and Works of Art”.

¹ Cf. Elleke Boehmer, *Migrant Metaphors*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 1995.

² Cf. Abdelmalek Sayad, *La doppia assenza, Dalle illusioni dell'emigrato alle sofferenze dell'immigrato*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2002 (first edition: *La double absence*, Éditions du Seuil, 1999).

³ See the title of Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), or the title heading the third part of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), “The American Translation”.

⁴ See George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*, 1975.

⁵ See Eric J. Leed, *The Mind of the Traveler*, Basic Book, 1991, translated into Italian for Società editrice Il Mulino in 1992 with the title *La mente del viaggiatore – Dall'Odissea al turismo globale*.

Travelling between Worlds: Toru Dutt, a Syncretic Writer*

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This essay aims at giving a brief presentation of a still relatively little known woman writer with a special focus on her novels. While so far I have not (or at least not very often) practiced the analytical approach based on examining the similarities and differences between a writer and his or her characters, I intend to do so (to some degree) in this text, for I think that Toru Dutt's fiction offers an interesting example of an author-like persona and reading her novels may provide insight into the way she saw herself and the identity she may have wanted to construe for herself.

Toru Dutt was born on March 4th, 1856, and died at the very early age of 21 and 6 months on August 30th, 1877. Dutt was born into a literary family; whose members published a collection of poems entitled *The Dutt Family Album* (1870). Her father, her cousins, her uncles all wrote; it is therefore hardly surprising that both Toru Dutt and her sister Aru should develop a literary vein as well. The Dutt's often wrote in a Western persona (Mehrotra, 58) and were influenced by religion, being Christian converts. As we shall see, these characteristics inform Toru Dutt's writing too. In fact, from what I could notice, Dutt's novels are more Christian than her poetry. Her closest family was divided along the lines of creed, for Dutt's father was Christian while her mother was Hindu.

The broader socio-cultural background into which Dutt was born and in which she developed must also have contributed to the shape her writing was to take. First of all, the first half of the nineteenth century saw the development of English education in India, which contributed to developing the taste for English and European literature. Dutt was interested in the relatively new style of education, as her essay on Henry Derozio, a controversial teacher, proves. Besides, during the same period a proliferation of writers beginning their career in English and then switching to Bengali can be observed. An example Toru Dutt must have been familiar with was Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a classmate of her father's. The switch from the language of the politically dominant invader to the native language of the country mirrors Toru Dutt's own evolution for, towards the end of her life, she turned to translations from Sanskrit. A third factor which certainly encouraged Dutt to write was the growth of women's writing in India in the nineteenth century, and that in spite of a climate which was hostile to it. Indeed, it has been observed that Indian women writers tried to create a "new, resilient self" in writing in the late 19th century (Knippling, 1998, 10). Last but not least, a revival of Indian studies in Europe in late 19th century influenced the popularity (albeit brief) that Dutt's work enjoyed at that time.

It should also be noted that Dutt and her sister received a European education: first in Nice, where they were enrolled in a school for girls, and then in Cambridge where Dutt attended the Higher Lectures for Women. Dutt and her family spent a few years in Europe and were therefore familiar not only with the literature of that continent, but also with its lifestyle.

Dutt's literary output, extremely varied, includes both poetry and prose, both fiction and non-fiction. She published two collections of poetry, which consist

mostly of translations from Sanskrit and French into English, even if a few poems of striking beauty penned by Dutt herself are also included: *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882, introduction by Edmund W. Gosse) and *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (trans., 1876). She was also the author of essays on many subjects, which were published in magazines, for instance the *Bengal Magazine*. In these essays, she dealt with current European political issues, but also with the work of poets such as Leconte de Lisle or Joséphin Souley, and finally with figures active on Indian soil, such as Henry Derozio. Last but not least, she wrote two novels. The first of these, unfinished, entitled *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden*, including only 47 pages, was published in *The Bengal Magazine* in 1878. The second, complete, was published the following year in France; *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (Paris, 1879) was preceded by an introduction written by Clarisse Bader, a woman scholar who wrote *La Femme dans l'Inde antique (Women in Ancient India)* and who corresponded with Toru Dutt before the latter's untimely death. The publication of Dutt's novels was perhaps not intended by their author: her father discovered them after Dutt's death and decided to make them widely known.

Most critics focus on Dutt's poetry and she is known for a few poems such as "Sonnet – Baugmaree", "Our Casuarina Tree", "Sita", "Savitri", "Sindhu", and "Prehlad" (the last four are based on Hindu mythology). However, her fiction, which has not been re-edited since the 1870s, is virtually ignored: for instance, Alpana Sharma qualifies her as a *poet* and a *translator* but not a *novelist*.

At this stage it becomes apparent that Dutt worked in various languages, genres, types of language, combining the career of an original writer with that of a translator. Note also that her translations are sometimes more or less free, which enables her to express her own views. It could be said that she was trying to express a colonial self, a migrating subject, mimicking the movement of her own travels in the emigration of literary (translated) texts.

Dutt is considered a model by contemporary feminists such as Alpana Sharma aka Alpana Knippling because she has not entered into any binary oppositions: female/male, colonized/colonizer, Indian/Western, original/imitative, young/old, sheltered/free (see Knippling, 1998, 25). On the whole she receives little critical attention because she is perceived as an isolated precedent to Indian literature in English (Knippling, 1998, 14). However, this might be changing as a chapter is devoted to her and her family in *A History of Indian Literature in English* edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (2003).

In her own time she was criticized both by European readers, who often adopted a patronizing glance (for instance Gosse calls her a "fragile exotic blossom of song"), and Indian ones, for whom she was not nationalistic enough.

Toru evoked the superiority of fiction over history in her repartee "Novels are true and histories are false". In the latter part of this essay, I am going to focus on Dutt's two novels.

Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers, written in French, begins as a first person narrative, but switches to the omniscient third person in its final pages dealing with the main character's childbirth and death, thus giving the impression that the diary constituting the main body of the novel was edited by someone else for the education of the reader. The plot is set in the 1860s. The protagonist,

Marguerite d'Arvers, is a Frenchwoman from Brittany whose first name (the French for "daisy") is the name of the flower which stands for purity and honesty. Marguerite displays physical similarity with Toru Dutt, since she is described as having abundant dark hair and dark eyes. There are other conspicuous links between Marguerite and Dutt: not only Marguerite's physical appearance evokes Toru's own, but certain events which shape her destiny evoke the realities of the Dutts. Earlier on in the novel, Marguerite loses a friend who is like a sister to her, and who is indeed a "sister", being a nun at the convent boarding school where Marguerite studies. Likewise, Dutt's sister Aru died at a young age. Besides, Marguerite has a special relationship with her father although she loves her mother too, which may recall the family relationships in Toru's own family.

The text begins with Marguerite's fifteenth birthday and is an account of her unrequited love for one of her neighbours, Dunois count of Plouarven, and her subsequent marriage to her parents' favourite, Louis Lefèvre. It may be noted at this point that the flower daisy was also associated with a public confession of love, particularly in the Middle Ages (but also later on) and in the love-language of flowers it was linked to faithful love. Thus the double love depicted in the text, albeit described as faithful and sincere, is also a reflection of the author's double (if not triple) cultural heritage and split identity.

If Dutt chose to write this text in French, it was often felt (for instance by her father and by Clarisse Bader) that she intended to express the love she felt for France and the French. Thus, casting herself in the persona of a French woman from the provinces may have corresponded at a certain level to Dutt's own heart's desires. The admiration Dutt is said to have felt for France was visible not only in her choice to write in and to translate from French, but also in her personal diary. Excerpts of this diary can be found in Clarisse Bader's introduction to *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*. There, Dutt evokes the war (1870-1871) and says she sympathized with the French although they were sure to lose the war in her opinion, and she speaks of herself as a Frenchwoman.

It would be interesting to evoke certain points made by Clarisse Bader in the introduction to the novel. According to Bader, the novel was inspired and shaped by French literature although some echoes of India are very present there. The French scholar claimed the text was like the exotic flowers which, even when one grows them in Europe, still keep "the perfume of their native country". In fact, Bader finds that *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* is a syncretic text, a mixture of Indian, English and French elements. First of all, the vision of love in the novel is inspired by Indian customs and realities, in particular as far as Marguerite's object of love, Dunois, is concerned. However, the English influence is present too, for the novel keeps stressing the charm of the home. Besides, Dutt gives a realistic description of the feelings of a Catholic from Brittany. Last but not least, the narrative is endowed with a certain sobriety and precision which for Bader are rare in Indian narratives.

Dunois, count of Plouarven, is described like a nobleman from India according to such early reader as Edmund Gosse, the man who was an enthusiastic reader of Dutt's translations from French. Gosse focuses on Dutt's statement that Dunois' white complexion was a sign of his noble birth and comments that in the European context this sentence may be meaningless, but in India it hints at the difference

between the conquering Aryas and the indigenous Dasyous. It should be added that for a modern reader, there may be a colonial legacy too. Marguerite writes about Dunois as if she were unworthy of his love, although at the same time she hopes to acquire it in the end. While such statements may be a realistic representation of what an insecure teenager might feel when she first falls in love, they may also be considered in the “colouristic” context provided by the novel, and therefore depict a love which is loaded with unspoken taboos.

The personality of the protagonist of *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* betrays a link with certain heroines of ancient Sanskrit poems (some of which Toru translated). At the same time, she is unlike the image of the totally submissive Indian woman popularized in Europe at that time. Marguerite is independent, strong willed, healthy and capable of taking care of herself early on in the novel. She is quite free to do what she wants and roams about on horseback, after she has mastered the skill of horseriding in the record time of a few hours. These qualities give way to weakness by and by. When Marguerite loses the man she loves, she falls into a long and debilitating illness which lasts for a couple of months. Then she recovers temporarily, and marries a man her family approves of. As soon as she gives birth to a child, she contracts a fever and dies. In short, this conspicuously French character epitomizes certain women-related issues under debate in the nineteenth century, especially the laws concerning the legal age for marriage in India, which was a subject of controversy between the British and native population. On the one hand, she is unlike stereotypical Indian girls insofar as she has a strong personality. On the other hand, she acts like them because she marries young and becomes a mother. Significantly, her delivery spells out her death. It should be added that Gosse ignores the latter part of the novel dealing with Marguerite's marriage and death, focusing instead on the first part of her novel and praising the tale of the two brothers' passion for the servant girl which leads to tragedy.

The second novel Toru left unfinished is entitled *Bianca*. This text is a third person narrative with omniscient narrator who occasionally expresses judgments over characters. The plot is set in the 1850s: in the last of the published chapters, Bianca's fiancé leaves for the Crimean War (1853-1856) which had just broken out.

As in *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*, also in *Bianca* the main character displays certain similarities with the author of the book. Once again, a special relationship links this character to her father, which may evoke Dutt's own attachments: note that Toru's father influenced her education; they would read together and discuss literature evoking linguistic and lexical difficulties, just like Bianca's father does with her. In this novel, the mother is absent altogether. Besides, Bianca loses a beloved sister (the text opens with the funeral of the girl, even if the second chapter moves on directly to one year later) which reminds the reader of a similar loss suffered by Marguerite and by Toru Dutt herself. A notable difference between Bianca and Marguerite is that while the latter is the native of the country in which she lives, the former is a foreigner. Bianca Garcia is a Spanish girl who lives in England and whose physical characteristics fit Toru's photo. Many times in the text, other characters refer to Bianca's dark skin and “gypsy” looks, othering her even if she seems to be quite well integrated in the English society. In this context, the first name of the character, Bianca, can be read

as a reference to race relations. At the same time, it also provides a tie to Marguerite's name, for Bianca connotes white, and therefore stands for purity.

As it was the case in *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*, also here French occupies an important place, even though this novel was written in English. Indeed, French is often used in the text. First of all, many sentences are punctuated by single French words, almost as if the author didn't know enough English to find fitting equivalents (e.g. "Bianca's heart 'se serra'", 3), which seems very unlikely given Dutt's outstanding translations of poetry and original poems. Besides, whole poems or parts thereof are quoted (which was also frequent in *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*). Most curiously perhaps, Bianca's father, albeit a Spaniard, speaks French when he is excited or troubled, and Bianca does the same in her fever (37).

French is not the only "foreign" language or idiom appearing in this text. The reader can't help but notice the use of the Scottish dialect, or at least of Scottish words. This characteristic is also visible in the poems written by her family and published in *The Dutt Family Album* which were influenced by Walter Scott. However, in *Bianca* it seems more or less natural because the novel features a Scottish character, whereas in the poems there is a clash between the idiom used and the themes treated, since the latter are Indian.

The novel is pervaded by a morbid mood. First of all, it opens with Inez Garcia's funeral. It soon becomes evident that there were other children and Bianca's mother who died also before the plot started, which places Bianca and her father in the eternal grief and a certain isolation. The motherless character deprived at once of her biological mother and of her motherland may hint at the situation of the colonial subject. The illness and death of loved ones is often mentioned, even of cats (34-35). This novel too includes a love plot and once again, two men are in some way involved with Bianca. Two young men propose to Bianca, one she doesn't want and one she loves but he is rich and his mother despises Bianca due to the young girl's ethnic background.

Let us now stress once again some common points between *Bianca* and *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers*. The heroines of both novels are firm believers and Christian creed provides a guideline to their lives. Marguerite and Bianca are both gifted for literary studies, but at the same time they have strong bodies and strong personalities. They are different from the colonial imaginings of Native women as passive, tropical females. They are also depicted as different from other women characters that people the pages of the two novels because they are endowed with strong will, are independent and capable of fending for themselves. In short, they are similar to Savitri from Dutt's *Ancient Ballads*, which is a free translation of a legend from the *Mahabharata*, the source of the myth of the self-sacrificing wife. Toru Dutt focused on the "neglected aspects of the myth", that is to say Savitri's freedom, mobility, individuality and right to self-determination (Knippling, 1998, 20). The same can be said of Dutt's fictitious characters. However, at the end they both succumb to femininity which brings about their illness or death: Bianca falls ill when she is told she cannot marry lord Moore, the same happens to Marguerite when Dunois is judged; later Marguerite dies in childbirth.

Toru Dutt seems to have invented a persona in her fiction that is close to her and that, at the same time, hints at feminist thought in our day.

Endnote

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2004: “This Earth of Migrations, Immigrations, Emigrations produces languages, literary texts and works of art”.

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Losing Japan: Western Identity in Contemporary Japanese Literature*

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Words should be an intense pleasure just as leather should
be to a shoemaker.
Evelyn Waugh

Literature is more than a mere spring of spiritual pleasure and erudition, but it may also stand as a *caveat* for certain imperceptible social problems. Hence this study has a dual objective. First of all, to analyze the literary production of two renowned Japanese contemporary writers, namely Murakami Haruki and Yamada Eimi. Secondly, to “filter” their stories and look into their words, which reveal a bewildering absence as well as a continual underrating of their own culture.

“Murakami Haruki is here. Instead of submerging himself in the beauty of Japan, Murakami lets his mind and his characters wander into other worlds (...)”¹. The decision to begin our reasoning with a quotation by Jay Rubin on what we could call a curious and daunting *symptom in progress* throughout Japan’s literary world proved to be quite appropriate. Rubin is a translator and a distinguished expert of Murakami Haruki’s production. This *American Scholar*, borrowing Emerson’s enlightened words, also produced some very relevant speculations on the evolution of the Japanese language by means of its recent literature, thus helping us to behold a situation which is steadily impelling the society of the Archipelago towards a cultural renewal, here considered rather as a *loss of identity*.

Following the study of Murakami, we shall consider another, and stylistically rather different, author. In fact, *Norwegian Wood* is an instance of how society is rapidly changing in Japan. Yamada Eimi’s *Trash* is the description of how the Japanese amiably detach themselves from their origins when living abroad: two quasi-identical artistic episodes proving that no matter whether at home or in a foreign environment, the inhabitants of the Rising Sun are painlessly drifting away from their traditions. Moreover, such *process* is vital and flourishing, thus the utilisation of a continuous tense (i.e. *losing*) in our title. In other words, this ancient and immensely rich civilisation is progressively losing its own identity and this is fully proved by its contemporary literature.

The novels our analysis is focusing on will be regarded as separate examples bearing a mutual attitude: intolerance towards Japan’s historical tradition. This is clearly depicted in *Norwegian Wood* (“Noruwei no mori”), Murakami’s fifth novel, which is stuffed with Western culture. Everything in this intense and passionate story is related to the West. Right after the first few lines, we meet an unquenchable desire for English: “Before long one of the German stewardesses approached and asked in English if I were sick”². In addition, Rubin himself writes about Murakami’s extended Anglophilia: “That language could hardly have been anything other than English”³ and he continues by saying “(...) he could not seem to find his voice until he tried writing in English and then translating himself into Japanese”⁴, thereby affirming the stout *liaison* that binds this novelist to foreign culture, chiefly to the one of the US: “American music was another source of

attraction”⁵.

Norwegian Wood is the story of young Tōru and of his *sentimental education* during college life in Tōkyō. Although he is well above thirty years old at the beginning of the narration, Tōru is just 18 as the main part of the plot is unravelled: “Eighteen years have gone by, and still I can bring back every detail of that day in the meadow”⁶. Therein, one of Murakami’s most charming stylistic features: he skilfully evokes memories in his characters by creating a sensual and mellow effect similar to the blowing of a gentle breeze. Often it is a mere anecdote, a glimpse outside a window or simply the tune of a song, alike the beginning of *Norwegian Wood*. This novel is structured as a long monologue by the protagonist, thus allowing memory to play a fundamental role in the story. By so doing, a sense of sweet and restful nostalgia is conveyed to the reader and this can definitely be acknowledged as one of the great appeals of Murakami’s style.

Nevertheless, the issue which is of interest to us is to highlight a particular and almost violent cultural denial present in this novel: “To be quite honest, I could not feel that kind of fascination from the contemporary Japanese fiction I also read at that time”⁷. It should not be surprising to find a crystalline correspondence between these last words, uttered by Murakami himself, and the literary tastes of his protagonist Tōru: “They liked Kazumi Takahashi, Kenzaburo Oe, Yukio Mishima, (...) which was another reason I didn’t have much to say to anybody but kept to myself and my books”⁸. Needless to say, these books are written in English, thereby fostering a foreign, notably American style in his writing: “What is wrong with Murakami? (...). Even his style is un-Japanese”⁹. It stirs up interest the utilisation by Rubin of the negative prefix “un”, which in the English language denotes the absence of a quality or state. In other words, Murakami in *Norwegian Wood* doesn’t reveal himself as a Japanese author, willingly divesting his literature of any national connotation. Actually almost everything in this novel is “un-Japanese”: music, books, even Western alcoholic drinks, such as beer and whisky, overrule the most typical sake. It would not be too daring to affirm how *Norwegian Wood* would have found itself perfectly at ease in a Western setting.

Besides, as a result of the analysis of Murakami’s world, the scholar Aoki Tamotsu concludes how this author depicted “both the maturation and the forfeiture of modern Japanese culture”¹⁰. We feel close to Aoki’s opinion: in the art of some contemporary authors, namely Murakami, one can notice a discouraging abandonment of traditional culture which throws modern criticism in disarray: “If Murakami’s copious pop references represent anything, it is his entire generation’s rejection of their parents’ culture”¹¹. We are actually deprived in this case of a so called “Japanese literary canon”¹². Here we encounter the main reason for what might be called the *notorious aspect* of Murakami’s work, due to the lack of consideration that his novels bear in the academic milieu. Nowadays influent groups of Japanese scholars still censure this famous and fashionable writer, judging his style deprived of all those “precious qualities” belonging to the literature produced in the Archipelago since the Meiji Restoration and also accusing him of depicting an increasingly alienated and consumeristic society. Nevertheless, we can still single out, and to some degree embrace, positive views like the one here expressed by Mathew C. Stretcher, who considers Murakami: “(...) a chronicler not only of Japanese youth from the 1960s, but of the development and maturation of Japanese culture in the present day”¹³. Be as it

may, we simply need to add how that kind of palpable isolation often present in Murakami's works ought to be perceived as another aspect of Japan's latest palingenesis.

Notwithstanding such a relevant issue, let us return to our key topic to spot a baffling underrating and, to a certain extent, loathing of Japan's historical identity in *Norwegian Wood*: "I looked out of the window and realized there was no flag on the pole. It was probably p.m. so, raising the flag served some purpose after all"¹⁴. Japan idly vanishes, leaving a huge void filled with distress and alienation. Murakami's protagonists act as members of a guiltily absent society, being deprived of any real emotion and ambition: "The hero in Murakami's stories is quite happy to live the alienated lifestyle characteristic of cosmopolitan city people"¹⁵. This situation embodies the same uneasiness towards society present in the American beatnik movement of the late 50s, which eventually engendered the word *displaced* and the related culture. It is most peculiar to see how Murakami, similarly to many other Japanese artists of the recent generations, commits himself to a frankly senseless aping of the Beat Generation's style, whilst the latter is nowadays of little literary interest for contemporary authors in the West. A possible explanation is given by Murakami's own words which reveal an unquenchable desire for America: "What I like about America is I'm really free here"¹⁶.

If *Norwegian Wood* is a good example of how Japan and its culture disappear in what we may call a "home set" narration, Yamada Eimi, in her novel *Trash*, shows us a much similar tendency, though this time placed in a foreign environment, namely New York.

Yamada suffers too from misjudgement, as well as scarce consideration, amongst notable exponents active in the Archipelago's intelligentsia who exclusively acknowledge a sexual streak in her style: "(...) she elicited the key bits of information she needed to determine whether or not he would be a fit companion for the night"¹⁷. As shown by these few words, *Trash* is a novel comprising a sophisticated, and as in some cases explicit, presence of sex. Thereby nourishing that unjust "pornographic reputation" which haunts most of Yamada's novels: "Her works have invalidated a myth, that of the Japanese woman submissive and satisfied with her traditional role, often present in literature, by generating another one, that of a feminine pornography which has found in her [Yamada] an unconventional spokeswoman"¹⁸. This stubborn conviction of her stories being "erotic" or worse "pornographic" is here believed to be most inaccurate. If we compare the two novels hitherto studied, it would not be excessively difficult to locate a greater number of sexual scenes in *Norwegian Wood* than in *Trash*. The stout presence of sex in the former does not really upset the critics' taste, whereas it is *the* pretext to depreciate Yamada's literary production. Unfortunately, we cannot linger forth on such an issue regarding this controversial author, because we have to go back to the main theme of our study. However, it may be wise to suggest to those who artistically undervalue Yamada's style to refrain from accusing her of pornography and concentrate instead on that charming literary world that she skilfully managed to create in all her novels, where the human body is the centre of the Universe and emotions are communicated by physical sensations.

Returning to our main stream of reasoning, we could infer that if Japanese

culture and identity are somewhat judged banal in *Norwegian Wood*, they are almost completely absent in *Trash*, vanquished by American customs. This novel tells the sentimental life of Koko, a young Japanese woman living in New York. The whole story is perceived through her eyes and filtered by her feelings. She lives with a black man (Rick) and his teenage kid (Jesse). Fulcrum of the narration is the edgy and uneasy relationship between Koko and naïve Jesse. Moreover, Yamada's work might as well be considered a sour depiction of this youngster's coming of age, as he experiences sex and certain incurable scars of life: the tragic death of his father. This ambivalence in the plot is undoubtedly one of the most appealing aspects in the story.

Koko is much more than the simple narrator of her "sentimental adventures", she is also a biased observer of Jesse's maturation: "Jesse did as he was told, and Koko put her arm around him. Every time she saw him, his frame and posture appeared adult"¹⁹.

A topic from which we shall refrain from thorough analysis is the well-known abundance of black male characters in Yamada's novels; for instance in *Trash* both Koko's lovers, Rick and Randy, are Afro-American. A number of stimulating dissertations have already been written on this matter. Hence, we shall basically focus on the datum which confirms our thesis: Yamada Eimi considers Japanese men and society clearly unattractive. On this topic we are going to quote the opinions of two Italian Scholars with whom we share a common view. Giuliana Carli simply, but effectively, says that in Yamada's stories: "The black race (...) is unique and superior to the Japanese"²⁰, whilst Laura Testaverde spots how this literary feature has *doubled reality*: "Many of Yamada Eimi's male protagonists are black men, thus parallel to the success of her novels, the fashion of the black arose in Japan"²¹. This is quite a relevant issue, especially when we encounter racial matters in the novel and where we are baffled to acknowledge how Koko naïvely denies her roots. This occurs, for example, when this woman first meets Jesse's mother (June). Although they are both Japanese, Koko utterly neglects the fact they come from the same country:

Koko: "I don't understand what you mean by tab."

June: "You wouldn't, would you? Not a nice young lady like you. It was a miracle that a person like you lived with him for a few years. But that miracle was a reality for me"²².

In addition, Koko's ingenuousness is so bold that she never fully realises her condition: a young Japanese woman living with a black man in New York and, even more crucial, that her friends are well aware of this: "People will think we picked up two punk teenagers", to which her friend Sue answers: "Koko, Japanese people think too much about what other people think"²³. Just once she is really conscious of her roots. This happens when she recalls her unpleasant life in Japan:

- What kind of kid were you, Buckey?
- A weird one.
- (...)
- Me too. That's probably why I left Japan.
- I didn't know you were Japanese, Koko.
- Of course I am. What did you think I was?
- I don't know.

— Not that it matters.

Reaching the end, there is still one important element needing clarification, so that we may hinder unjust innuendoes. It was never in the spirit on this study to neglect the right merits of *Norwegian Wood* and *Trash*: the former being a world wide best-seller, whilst the latter was awarded the prestigious *Joryū bungaku shō*. Our single intent was to highlight an obstinate negation of national identity in some modern Japanese writers, therefore we chose two amongst the best. Anyway, let us recollect how such an issue is not only restricted to literature, but it mirrors instead a progressive cultural disruption which Rubin once again brilliantly defined as: “Japan’s modern malaise”²⁴.

More words could be added to this argument, so that we might push well beyond our *quest for identity* in modern Japan. However, we reckon that, for the moment, Murakami Haruki’s own words are fully explanatory:

Where was I now? I had no idea. No idea at all. Where was this place? All that flashed into my eyes were the countless shapes of people walking by to nowhere. Again and again I called out for Midori from the dead centre of this place that was no place²⁵.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2004: "This Earth of Migrations, Immigrations, Emigrations Produces Languages, Literary Texts and Works of Art".

¹ *The other World of Murakami Haruki* by Jay Rubin, in *Japan Quarterly* 39, n. 4, 1992, pp. 490-500.

² *Norwegian Wood* by Murakami Haruki, Vintage, Croydon, 2000, p. 1. From now onwards referred to as NW.

³ *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words* by J. Rubin, Harvill, London, 2003, p. 16.

⁴ *The Other World of Murakami Haruki*, p. 491.

⁵ *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, p. 16.

⁶ NW, p. 2.

⁷ *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, p. 36.

⁸ NW, p. 37.

⁹ *The Other World of Murakami Haruki*, p. 491.

¹⁰ *Murakami Haruki and Contemporary Japan* by Aoki T., in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, Curzon, 1996, p. 274.

¹¹ *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, p. 17.

¹² An interesting comparison can be made with Harold Bloom's famous essay *The Western Canon*.

¹³ Stretcher actually renews Aoki Tamotsu's opinion in his preface to the paper *Murakami Haruki and Contemporary Japan* by Aoki Tamotsu, in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, Curzon, 1996, p. 266.

¹⁴ NW, p. 289.

¹⁵ *Murakami Haruki's Postmodern World* by Murakami Fuminobu, in *Japan Forum* 14, n. 1, 2002, p. 127.

¹⁶ Interview given to the *Los Angeles Times*, on the 8th of December 1991.

¹⁷ *Trash* by Yamada Eimi, Kodansha Int., New York, 1994, pp. 20-21. From now onwards referred to as TR.

¹⁸ *Yamada Eimi: mito dell'erotismo e realtà sentimentale in Occhi della notte* by Giuliana Carli, in *Atti Aistugia XVIII*, 1994, p. 49. All the critical quotations on Yamada Eimi were translated by me.

¹⁹ TR, p. 297.

²⁰ *Yamada Eimi: mito dell'erotismo e realtà sentimentale in Occhi nella notte*, p. 56.

²¹ *Yamada Eimi: le emozioni del corpo* by Laura Testaverde, in *Il Giappone XXXIII*, 1993, p. 192.

²² TR, p. 312.

²³ TR, p. 121.

²⁴ *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, p. 18.

²⁵ NW, p. 386.

Liu Sola and the Shadow of Chineseness: A Woman's Literary Sphere in Transnational China*

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I

Since the mid-late Eighties of the past century, the study of Chinese literature has acquired a “global dimension” and a new transnational aura. Several Chinese and Western scholars have started advocating the study and consolidation of a new rich textual coalition¹, often referred to as *shijie zhonghua wenxue*, or the “Commonwealth” of Chinese Literature, made up by texts produced by Chinese-language diasporic writers all over the world. In the context of a new world order, new forms of cultural and literary exchange between different “Chinese” worlds – such as the People's Republic, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other satellites of the Chinese diaspora – have started to flourish in the Eighties and Nineties, under the vigilant and attentive eyes of the powerful West. According to several scholars, such “internationalization” of Chinese literature should push it into the direction of acquiring prominence and gaining momentum onto the world's literary stage². Besides, since a great deal of contemporary diasporic Chinese literature is produced by women writers, issues regarding Chinese women's literature as a distinctive field of research, women's consciousness, gender, and women's transnational networks of solidarity and culture add other interesting and problematic dimensions to these multilayered discourses³.

Framed in a postcolonial disciplinary context, these new forms of cultural exchange have recently accompanied a transnational debate on the general terms of “Chineseness” in literary and cultural fields, under the influence of postcolonial theory⁴. I am inclined to share Zhang Longxi's view, who contends that the opening of Chinese literature and culture to a theoretically-informed practice of comparative literature holds the potential of pushing them out of a “cultural ghetto” – a space of confinement where Chinese literature is located “to the extent that it does not participate in a dialogue with studies of other literatures and does not address critical issues of interest to a wide range of audiences beyond the boundary of local specialties”⁵. In the context of a recent opening of comparative literature to literary theory – prompting, among other things, a new perspective on the vexed question of East-West comparative literature – broad cross-cultural issues have been raised, such as: what is Chinese literature today? How are the literatures of the Chinese diaspora to be discursively located in a world where “globality” and “locality” are increasingly vexed (and interconnected) issues? Where are the borders between Chinese diaspora literature and “ethnic Chinese” literatures – such as Chinese American and Chinese British – to be situated?⁶

Discussing the issue of women's consciousness and women's culture, anthropologist Mayfair Mei-hui Yang has argued for the consolidation of a new, growing “women's public sphere in transnational China”⁷. In Yang's terms, “women's public sphere” is a (material and discursive) space of cultural production, where discourse is produced and circulated among women, while holding, at the same time, a power to affect and change consolidated, established masculine spheres of public discourse (such as, for instance, State discourse in

Maoist and post-Mao China). Within Yang's theoretical frame, woman poet and literary critic Zhang Zhen reads diasporic Chinese women's writing as contributing to the creation of a Chinese women's transnational cultural space, in that – she argues – such writing often moves in the direction of re-creating an in-between space, a middle passage in cultural enunciation, a distance between “Chinese woman” as “signifier” and “Chinese woman” as “signified”. According to Zhang Zhen, contemporary literature by Chinese diasporic women writers creates a discursive space where women come to terms, critically and gender-consciously, with their Chinese cultural inheritance and (gendered) cultural identity. In Zhang's words: “The writings of the women writers situated in the diaspora are conditioned by the historical and spatial *distance* between their present dispersed lives and the immediate past and present political life back home”⁸.

For all of these reasons, I would argue that a self-reflective act of reading literary texts produced by these writers is situated in a critical space that overlaps several established disciplinary fields. Diasporic Chinese women's writing holds a (comparative) potential to question borders between “internal” matters of Chinese culture and “external” ones. Taking into consideration these overlapping cultural and reading spaces, I will now turn to the literary work of Liu Sola – singer, composer, artist, fiction writer, and a prominent figure in contemporary Chinese diaspora literature. Liu Sola, a versatile multimedia artist, has been living in Britain and the U.S. since 1988⁹. Here, I will consider her highly acclaimed novella *Hundun jia li-ger-leng*, originally published in Hong Kong in 1991¹⁰. I will presently attempt to read Liu Sola's work as problematically overlapping a powerful Chinese cultural conscience with the transnational conscience of a diasporic woman writer, artist, and intellectual in contemporary global networks of exchange – networks dominated (for the time being) by the hegemony of the West. In other words, my aim is to read Liu Sola as a cultural translator between the Chinese and Western cultural worlds, while keeping in mind that both these “cultures” are internally fraught with tensions, hybridity, and power inequalities.

As Lydia H. Liu argues, any act of translation has to take into account disparities in power between enunciative positions, in order to account historically for what she calls the “economic” circulation of signs among different cultures¹¹. Using Naoki Sakai's terms, it could be argued that, because of the fundamental “inequality” of any exchange between different linguistic and cultural systems, an uncontainable surplus is created in the *labor* of translation: in Sakai's words, something is created “that (...) cannot be contained in the economy of equivalence in a transnational translational exchange”¹². In Liu Sola's novel, Huang Haha's cross-cultural experience as a diasporic Chinese woman is fraught with internal tensions – the uncontainable surplus, or the labor of translation – overshadowing the protagonist's track in a polycentric world. Such “shadow”, I contend, is Chineseness itself as a force of cultural identification and cultural production. In *Hundun jia li-ger-leng*, Liu creates a postmodernist structure of mutual framings (playing different styles, narrative elements, and narrative stances against each other) whereby she manages to (re)establish a critical distance between “signifier” and “signified”, coming to terms with “Chineseness” as a charged cultural and discursive space – yet, a space produced and reproduced *in translation*. As Rey Chow would say, re-establishing a distance between “signifier” and “signified”

opens up spaces for a (critical) re-articulation of “Chineseness” itself¹³. As I will presently attempt to demonstrate, a reading of Liu’s literary strategies highlights a manifold cultural investment in Chineseness. Chineseness works as an ideological network of identification and power (produced, as it will be seen, “under Western eyes”); such ideological network of subjective positions is nonetheless open, *orientable*, and transformed according to individual investments and positionings in its scheme¹⁴.

II

Hundun jia li-ger-leng works through a bipartition of narrative levels, one framing the other. The level of the “present” is told by a third-person narrator. We are told by this narrator that Huang Haha, a young Chinese woman, has been awarded a scholarship and is attending college in late-Eighties London. While she has “no real friends in London” (8)¹⁵, she is nonetheless a party animal and dates Michael, a British professor teaching at her university. The two become lovers and eventually split up, for reasons that Haha cannot properly figure out (32)¹⁶. As the “first” narrator tells us, Haha uses “her past to overshadow (...) their presents” (26)¹⁷. In the midst of her new life in London, Haha is haunted by memories of her past, from childhood to young adult years: such memories include life in Beijing, her family, the Cultural Revolution, her father’s suicide, and her everlasting friendship with Little Ding and Wazi. Apparently, she starts to write a novel out of her memories. Her writing constitutes the novel’s bulk and “second” narration, told by Haha herself in a highly ironic, even comical style. The two levels of the story are told in very different tones: while the “frame” displays a self-conscious, third-person, omniscient narrator, who is openly ironic in its relationship to the protagonist, the story of Haha’s past life derives a sharp, “contextual” irony from a juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements and from the device of understatement.

A postmodern dialectics between “playfulness” and “earnestness” – as well as between cultural transgression and tradition, empty “signifier” and charged “signified” – is consciously thematized in the protagonist’s very name: while the surname “Huang” evokes the *Huanghe*, or the Yellow River – the cradle of Chinese civilization – “Haha” is an onomatopoeia that stands for the sound of laughter. The title of the novel, *Hundun jia li-ger-leng*, is also an onomatopoeia (recalling, among other things, the writer’s musical background) fraught with cultural power and contrasts. As noted by translator Richard King, it blends two terms from two very disparate linguistic registers: *hundun* is borrowed from the Taoist classic *Zhuangzi* and refers to the primordial chaos preceding the emergence of all things; *li-ger-leng* is Beijing slang, referring to a string of sounds imitating classical opera voices while at the same time meaning “bullshit”.

As a modern urban member of the Chinese diaspora, Haha is living a new life in a multicultural Western context (or, as Homi Bhabha would say, in the metropolitan center of the post/colonial empire): “London was a nice enough place. People were flocking to it from all parts of the world, searching for freedom. More and more of them all the time, so that this freedom was going up in price and became more elusive the later you arrived” (8)¹⁸. “There was always a party at Antonia’s place, full of students from all over the world, a Babel of different

languages” (49)¹⁹. In spite of that, or perhaps *because of* that, the shadow of Chineseness – or the return of the uncontainable surplus of translation – haunts Haha in several disguises, making it difficult for her to “translate” herself smoothly into the new cultural context. Interestingly enough, Haha’s un/translatability in the new British context is presented (as noted by Zhang Zhen) as a conflict of heterogeneous temporalities, often resulting in an exasperate foregrounding of her Chineseness. Haha feels like a Chinese cultural item, frozen and displayed, as if in a showcase in a museum of ethnological specimens:

(...) she forgot the real world of the present: the present became the past, and she immersed herself in a real world that was gone forever. (...) Particularly since her arrival in London, she had felt (...) that she had suddenly become an example of a Chinese cultural heritage, stretching from Confucius to patent herbal hair restores, that was both alien to the world in which she now found herself and incompatible with it (46-47)²⁰.

Michael’s relationship with Haha is an illustration (in scale) of this process of “foregrounding Chineseness”. Ironically represented as a Western male infatuation with China and the “Orient”, exoticism, and mystery – with patronizing overtones – it reveals the sexualized and gendered structure behind this foregrounding. Grotesquely, Haha reverses Michael’s projection of desire on her body, projecting on herself images of dirtiness and illness associated with peasant life during the Cultural Revolution:

He put his mouth on hers to shut her up.

As soon as she had the chance to draw breath she asked, “And what if I’d caught leprosy?” (...)

Michael was impatient to offer his heart to this mysterious lover who had endured so much. There were tears in his eyes as he embraced her. From underneath his body, she asked him, “You ever heard of snail fever?” (26-27)²¹.

Liu’s choice of the name “Michael” is meaningful: “Michael” (*Maike* in Chinese) also means “microphone, mike” (*maikefeng*). Once again related to the author’s musical and multimedia background, this choice also highlights Michael’s role in the novel as the possessor of a (masculine) gaze putting Haha into perspective, thus contributing to the creation of a frame, a *stage*, from where her voice resonates:

Michael’s love for her gave her a platform from which she could flaunt her eloquence and her charm. She talked and he listened; she performed and he watched (26)²².

The London context works as a *performative* background, setting off Haha’s re-lived past, her present turbulent life, and her Chineseness as a pattern of uneasy tension between the two. Such tension is reflected in a sort of stage panic, a mixture of foregrounding and receding into the background into the eyes of the West:

Everything she did was in competition with the people of London (...) Does *The Story of the Stone* really have to be greater than the works of Shakespeare? Must the Chinese poet Li Po be greater than Goethe? (10-11)²³.

When Michael started to talk about what was wrong with China, she could always respond with, “Who cares? England is just a piddling little country anyway, and for that matter so’s France” (48)²⁴.

This tension involves a relationship with “culture” in terms of conservation, display, and “musealization” on the one hand, and absurdity, bitter irony, and iconoclasm on the other:

Londoners restored antiquities, displayed them prominently, and left them alone; the people of Peking picked up the shards of their past and either sold them off or smashed them for the hell of it. It was enough to set Haha wondering about the meaning of life (10)²⁵.

In an ever-changing, globalized world, “China” turns into a cultural capital, going up and down in price. “Chineseness” as incarnated in Haha is an element overinvested with cultural and cross-cultural significance – signifier and signified, cast in different scales, as if put under a magnifying glass or in a showcase. The sexual relationship between Haha and Michael is an instance of such cross-cultural investment.

III

I have just argued that, in Liu’s novel, the surplus of translating Chineseness takes the form of an iterative return of the past, triggering the narration process and making up the very core of it. In a self-conscious (*meta*)literary gesture, Haha takes to writing down regularly the memories of China that resurface uncontrollably in her life in London. Simultaneously, she keeps asking herself:

Was this *writing a novel*? Haha stared blankly at what she had written (...) a mass of material had come gushing out of her mind, a ragbag of half-told stories, half-formed ideas and half-remembered incidents. She forgot them when she was trying to write, and then they leaped out at her when she was distracted, as if determined to drag her away from her daily life in London (7-8; my emphasis)²⁶.

To my mind, it is crucial to remark that Chineseness in Haha’s life casts its shadow (evoking Gayle Rubin’s terms) in a sex/gender system²⁷. Haha’s (and Liu’s meta-) literary consciousness is closely and explicitly related to her sexualized and gendered discursive position as a diasporic Chinese *woman*. References to love, sex, and gender abound, and they are – interestingly – mostly related to literature and language. Conversely, performative responses in the shadow of Chineseness are deployed through *sexuality as a language*, a repository of signs and meanings, rich and changing. Sexuality as a self-conscious language, a *metalanguage*, (and, conversely, the construction of a language suffused with gender consciousness) constitutes one important key to the construction of a speaking position for Chinese women writers in and across diaspora: such are, to my mind, the stakes of the gendered (re)production of Chineseness “under Western eyes”.

In *Hundun*, Liu retraces the history of sex as a private/public discourse in the PRC from “gender erasure” during the Cultural Revolution to the construction of an increasingly sexualized public sphere in the 1980s and 90s²⁸. Simultaneously, she intertwines such history with literary references. As a young girl growing up during the Cultural Revolution, Haha is puzzled by the classical literary expression *yunyu* (“clouds and rain”), widely used in classical Chinese narrative to refer to the sex act, and also used in classical novel *Hongloumeng* (*The Story of the Stone* or

The Dream of the Red Chamber), which she is reading covertly (63-64)²⁹. A true son of the Cultural Revolution is Lao Gu, a Beijing man living in London and an old friend of Haha's. Lao Gu claims to have transcended sexual desire and to despise women – yet he is, ironically, the sexiest man in the novel, and ends up married with a no-name woman in the last pages (124-25)³⁰.

Two very disparate models of femininity are Haha's "Auntie", on the one hand, and Haha's mother on the other – the former self-consciously traditional, the latter highly theatrical and foreign-imported. Both are related and compared to literary models. Haha casts a glance back to her Auntie's "Confucian" femininity through the lens of a contemporary (and controversial) novel, Zhang Xianliang's *Nanren de yiban shi nüren* (1985): "There's a novel out called *Half of Man Is Woman*, but Auntie got to be perfect all on her own" (69)³¹. On the other hand, Haha's mother thinks of herself as Anna Karenina (66)³². Other patterns of femininity are compared to, and parody each other: for instance, Haha's childhood friend Little Ding composes a long poem inspired by an operatic aria. She parodies the story of the dutiful and chaste wife Wang Baochuan, turning the verses of the aria into a self-affirmation and an apology of sexual freedom (89-91)³³. In her adolescent years, Little Ding turns to literature as a substitute for male love, which she finds disappointing: "In a couple of years Little Ding had read the masterworks of Chinese fiction, not to mention Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and the collected works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin" (99)³⁴. She ends up being an expert in both:

"The hell with them. I'll go with whatever fucking man I want!"
 (...)
 "(...) What was it Isadora Duncan said? That men are like instruments?"
 "Like songs".
 "Yeah, songs. A different tune to each, right? Well I'm not just going to sing one fucking tune!" (102)³⁵.

The increasing sexualization of the Chinese public sphere in the Eighties is comically represented in the second part of the novel (set after the end of the Cultural Revolution) through the character of a classics professor (a sort of comical alter-ego of Michael's) supervising Haha's undergraduate work at Beijing University. His ideas are "a mishmash [of Chinese and Western philosophy] (...) His lectures increasingly became a blend of 'discourse on everything but analysis of nothing'" (106)³⁶. His main feature is constituted by the fact that "he can't keep sex off for long" (109)³⁷ while speaking, and he refers repeatedly to sexually explicit classical novels such as *Jinpingmei* and *Rouputuan*. The parallel between sexual love and literature resonates, once again, in the overall context of chaos, nonsense, and laughter: "Does love has to be so serious? It's only love!" (104)³⁸.

IV

"Chineseness" in Liu's novel holds a changing meaning, connecting Haha's past and Chinese cultural heritage to her present speaking position within Western culture. Through her postmodern and parodic narrative stance(s) – and through the creation of a performative circuit between language, literature, gender, and sexuality – Liu Sola has opened up a space for translation and comparative

literature. It is my contention that Liu has created a site for an openly productive discourse of cultural consciousness, alternative to both the musealization of culture and sheer iconoclasm. Such discourse operates as cross-cultural and cross-literary translation, where literature and culture are dealt with as (once again in Zhang Zhen's terms) histories to be critically (playfully and ironically, yet consciously and earnestly) rewritten, because a surplus is always generated in translation; or (as Rey Chow would say) as signifiers to be re-appropriated and re-articulated³⁹. Writing her own story in a new context, Liu's Huang Haha creates a Chinese cross-cultural "literary sphere". In my opinion, the novel can be read as a meta-literary reflection on the writer's own relationship with "Chineseness" in a polycentric world. "Chineseness" itself acquires new contexts and new meanings and asks for a critical reflection on its sheer cultural survival, force, and power of cultural attraction. Ien Ang's vexed question "why still identify ourselves as 'overseas Chinese' at all?"⁴⁰ resonates in a (meta)literary con/text, calling into question established borders between Chinese literature and other literatures of the Chinese diaspora, such as Chinese British, Chinese American, and others. Such borders are productively questioned *through a confrontation with Chineseness as a changing cultural signifier and/or signified*, criticized and reappropriated through distance and irony. *Irony* as a literary device – put to work in the novel at several levels – creates a distancing, a doubling of Chineseness, while the bipartition between different narrative stances constitutes a metaliterary frame that allows for a continuous rethinking and problematization of Culture as a system of identification. The play of distances in the novel questions any fixed boundaries between "Chineseness" and "un-Chineseness".

In order to achieve (in Rey Chow's terms) a re-articulation of "Chineseness" as a cultural signifier, Chineseness itself should be read as a material and linguistic space for cultural *translation*. Liu Sola's literary sphere is self-consciously dramatized in the novel as Huang Haha's discursive and literary gendered sphere – in London? In diasporic China? In a chaotic world? As in Haha's case, the very possibility of creating (in Yang's terms) a woman's literary sphere in contemporary transnational China resides in a postmodern relationship with one's cultural past and with one's Chineseness *as the uncontainable surplus of a translation process* in a polycentric world. As the last couplet of Little Ding's poem goes,

Ho-ho-ho, off you go,
The world's in chaos, don't you know (91)⁴¹.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2004: "This Earth of Migrations, Immigrations, Emigrations Produces Languages, Literary Texts and Works of Art".

¹ The idea of "textual coalition", with its emphasis on the act of creating and maintaining intertextual relationships as a fundamentally political choice, is borrowed from Sau-ling C. Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993).

² See Joseph S.M. Lau, "Text and Context: Toward a Commonwealth of Modern Chinese Literature", in *Worlds Apart: Recent Chinese Writing and its Audiences*, edited by Howard Goldblatt (M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1990). See also the essays in *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, a special issue of *Daedalus* 120:2 (1991), especially "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center" (1-32), and Leo Ou-fan Lee, "On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse: Some Personal Thoughts on the Cultural Meaning of the Periphery" (207-26).

³ "[Chinese] women writers (...) have swelled the tide of a tremendous outpouring of high quality literary works that have *once again brought Chinese literature, regardless of where it is written, onto the stage of world literature*". Micheal S. Duke (ed. by), *Modern Chinese Women Writers: Critical Appraisals*, (East Gate, Armonk, 1989), Introduction, ix; my emphasis. See also Zhang Kangkang, "Women xuyao liangge shijie", *Wenyi pinglun* 1:57 (1986); Li Ziyun, "Women's Consciousness and Women's Writing", trans. Zhu Hong, in *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, edited by Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1994); and Lydia H. Liu, "Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature", in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, edited by Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993).

⁴ "Chineseness" as a term and a concept has been discussed a great deal by Rey Chow. See her *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993), and her edited collection *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2000).

⁵ Zhang Longxi, "Out of the Cultural Ghetto: Theory, Politics and the Study of Chinese Literature", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 22 (1994), 21.

⁶ For some recent perspectives on the vexed issue of East-West comparative literature, see *China in a Polycentric World: Essays in Chinese Comparative Literature*, edited by Zhang Yingjin (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998).

⁷ See Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (ed. by), *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1999).

⁸ Zhang Zhen, "The World Map of Haunting Dreams: Reading Post-1989 Chinese Women's Diaspora Writing", in Yang, *Spaces of Their Own*, 313; my emphasis.

⁹ While the "exilic" tradition in Chinese literature has a long history, a new flow of self-imposed, self-conscious intellectual émigrés has streamed from the People's Republic following the tragedy and shock of the Tian'anmen massacre in June 1989.

¹⁰ Liu Sola, *Hundun jia li-ger-leng* (Breakthrough Publications, Hong Kong, 1991). This brief, caustic, and highly irreverent short novel has been masterfully translated into English and published as *Chaos and All That*, trans. Richard King (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994). From now on, I will quote from this translation; page numbers will be parenthetically included. As for the Chinese text, I will refer to a later edition: Liu Sola, *Hundun jia li-ger-leng* (Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe, Beijing, 1994). It will be referred to as HJL. Quotations from the Chinese text in *pinyin* romanization, with page references, will be provided in the notes.

¹¹ See Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity, China 1900-1937* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995); also see Id. (ed. by), *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1999).

¹² Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1997), 119.

¹³ I also believe that Chinese diasporic women's writing such as Liu's holds a cross-cultural potential to dislocate fixed discursive positions not only in Chinese cultural worlds but also in Western ones (such as, for instance, Chinese American or Chinese British) to the extent that it prompts a self-critical reflection and re-examination of Western cultural and literary discourses that are – too often – taken for granted and loaded with universalism (as opposed to Eastern irreducible specificities). On the question of universalism and particularism, see Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*.

¹⁴ "What else could be [Althusser's] 'existing relations' of production but the *mental attitudes, wishes, sufferings, and fantasies* of the individuals involved in the processes of active production? (...) This understanding of ideology, then, includes the understanding that any reception of culture – however 'passive' and thus 'ideological' – always contains a *responsive, performative aspect*. However neglected by cultural theorists busy with the criticism of ideology-as-falsehood, this aspect of reception is crucial to the notion of "illusion" that [Teresa] de Lauretis would like to dislodge from a deeply ingrained, Platonic tradition of criticism and *reinvest with the meaning of social survival*". Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991), 22; my emphasis.

¹⁵ "Zai Lundun mei pengyou" (HJL, 9).

¹⁶ HJL, 31-32.

¹⁷ "(...) ta yong 'guoqu' yinchu taliangrende 'xianzai'" (HJL, 26).

¹⁸ "Keshi Lundun hao ya, quan shijie de ren quan wang zher yong, shuo shi xunzhao ziyou. Ren yu lai yu duo, ziyou bei qiangde zhi zhangjia, yu houlai de ren yu zhaobuzhao" (HJL, 9).

¹⁹ "Haha de yidalide tongxue Anduonala ku ai zai ta zhu de difang juban neizhong chongman xueshengqi de juhui, geren quan lai zi butong guojia shuo buyiyangde hua" (HJL, 47).

²⁰ "Ta chedi wangle xianshi, zhidao xianshi zai biancheng guoqu ta cai kaishi zhuomo neige yi guoqule de xianshi. (...) Youqi zai Lundun (...) ta turan bianchengle ge 'guocui', cong Kongfuzi yizhi xiangdao 'wu ji bai feng wan', dian san dao si dou shi gen Lundun hao wu guanxi de shiqing" (HJL, 45).

²¹ "Ta yong zui du zhu tade zui. (...) 'Yaoshi na shi wo dele mafengbing ne?' ta gang yi you gongfu chuanqi jiu shuo. (...) Ta [Maike] po buji dai de yao ba ai fengxian

gei zheige 'li jin cangsang' de 'yiguoqingdiao', hanzhe yanlei louzhu ta, ta zhishi zai ta shenzi dixia wen: 'Ni zhidao shenme jiao xuexichongbing ma?'" (HJL, 25).

²² "Maikē ai tīng, Haha ai shuō, Maikē yǒng ai de qīfēn gēi Haha zhīzāo le yīgè yǒu tā cháng kāishuō de wutai, napa Haha zìjī yě huàiyī Maikē shì fǒuzhēn tīngdedōng, dān tā yìjian Maikē, yāo shuō de huà jiù gēn hōngshuǐ fānlán sī de dāngbuzhū" (HJL, 26).

²³ "Cao Xueqin shì bù shì fēidei zhànshēng Suoshìbìyā? Lǐ Bó shì bù shì fēidei zhànshēng Gēde?" (HJL, 10).

²⁴ "'Yingguo Faguo dou buguo shì pigudade guojia', zhiyao Maikē yì shuōqǐ Zhōngguó de duānchū Haha jiù zhème huānjī" (HJL, 47).

²⁵ "Lundunrén gōngzhe gūdōng gèxíngqíshì, Běijīngrén jiānqī dāsui le de gūdōng suǐ chāzǐ, yāobu mǎi, yāobu zā rén wǎnr. Haha yǒu kāishǐ luàn gēi shénghuó zhāo dīngyī" (HJL, 11).

²⁶ "Xié xiǎoshuō? Huáng Haha kǎnzhe gāozhǐ fādai. Xiāng xié yǒu xié bù chūlai de dōngxī huòhuó chéngpō nǎodai, shì sīxiāng hái shì gūshi? Huó chūnzhu shì bié chūlai de fēng huà? Chōngzhāo qiāng shuō chūlai jiù wǎng, bù shuō shì yǒu xiāng qílái" (HJL, 8).

²⁷ The term "sex/gender system" was first used by feminist scholar Gayle Rubin in "The Traffic in Women: Notes toward a Political Economy of Sex", in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna Reiter (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1975). It has been subsequently elaborated by Teresa de Lauretis in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987).

²⁸ For an anthropological approach to this topic, see Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China", in Id., *Spaces of Their Own*.

²⁹ HJL, 60-61.

³⁰ HJL, 115-16.

³¹ "Yǒu bēn shū jiào 'Nǎnrén de yībān shì nǚrén', kě wǒ Dàbiāogu yīgè rén jiù 'quānhu' le" (HJL, 65).

³² HJL, 63.

³³ HJL, 83-85.

³⁴ "Guóle liáng nián, Xiǎo Dīng kǎn wǎnlè suǒyǒu Zhōngguó míngzhū wài jiā Suoshìbìyā Tuǒersítái Mǎ-Ēn-Liè-Sī 'Quānjī' " (HJL, 91).

³⁵ "'Mǎ lè gē tuī de, wǒ tāma piān xiāng gēn shuǐ gēn shuǐ! (...) Dēngkēn shuō shénme lái zhè? Nǎnrén xiāng yuèqǐ.' 'Yuèqu.' 'Dùì, yuèqu. Měigē diào dōu bùyíyāng. Shì ba? Xìxì, wǒ jiù bù tāma ài cháng yīgē diào!' (HJL, 95-96).

³⁶ " (...) [zhōng xī wénxué de] 'luāncuān' (...) fānzhèng tāde kě yǔ lái yǔ duō de bā 'biān yìqie chū dān bù rú yìqie chū'" (HJL, 100).

³⁷ "Tā sān jùhuà bù lǐ 'xíng'" (HJL, 102).

³⁸ "Ài jiù fēidei nǎmē chēnzhōng? Ài buguo shì ài" (HJL, 98).

³⁹ The opening of new cultural possibilities and the hybridization of languages is also reflected in a close relationship between literature and other media, such as music, and between written and oral languages: Liu blends together prose, verse, songs, pop lyrics, anthems, and arias. Like in American postmodernist writer John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, literature comes to life through the human voice.

⁴⁰ Ien Ang, "To Be or Not to Be Chinese: Diaspora, Culture, and Postmodern Ethnicity", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 21:1 (1993), 14.

⁴¹ "Shuō shēng bye-bye zàijiān lè/ lǐ-ger-lǐ-ger-lēng-lēng-lǐ-ger-lēng" (HJL, 85).

Olive Schreiner's Female Alladeen: Migrations of Aladdin in the Colonial Space*

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My talk is entitled “Olive Schreiner's Female Alladeen: Migrations of Aladdin in the Colonial Space”. I will begin by reading a short passage from Schreiner's novel:

Alladeen buried her wonderful stone, and a golden palace sprung up at her feet. We do far more. We put a brown seed in the earth, and a living thing starts out – starts upwards – why, no more than Alladeen can we say—starts upwards, and does not desist till it is higher than our heads, sparkling with dew in the early morning, glittering with yellow blossoms, shaking brown seeds with little embryo souls on to the ground (Schreiner, 117)¹.

My research of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* began with a footnote. The passage I've just read to you, with its mysterious female “Alladeen” figure, has proven problematic for recent editors of Olive Schreiner's first published novel, printed in 1883. In the 1992 Oxford World Classics edition, Joseph Bristow calls it “seemingly a confused reference to Aladdin (...) from the *Arabian Nights*”, while more recently, in the 2003 Broadview text, Patricia O'Neill speculates that “Alladeen may be Schreiner's name for the wife of Aladdin”. Nearly every edition from the past twenty years reflect similar dismissals, with most editors writing off the young Schreiner as being simply mistaken, or, in a particularly belittling estimate, as being somehow confused about the gender of a well-known character from the *Arabian Nights*. In this essay, I will argue to the contrary, that Schreiner's employment of a female Alladeen figure is in fact a deeply significant historical reference, not only to the *Arabian Nights*, but also to an important and popular Victorian theater-form: the Christmas pantomime. In Schreiner's feminist *bildungsroman*, the female Alladeen is a densely packed cultural signifier, conjuring for the Victorian reader notions of dangerously blurred gender binaries both on stage and off, as well as a potentially volatile empowerment of the feminized colonial “other”. In tracing the origins of Schreiner's Alladeen, I will consider why Aladdin's cultural migration, from Baghdad and China to England and finally to South Africa, cultivates such fertile literary soil for Schreiner as a feminist and a resident of the imperial margin.

I. Aladdin Pantomimes

Traditionally performed on Boxing Day, Christmas pantomimes (or Pantos) are to this day an extremely popular tradition in England, Canada, Australia, and South Africa. The first Christmas pantomimes appeared on the English stage at Drury Lane in the early eighteenth century, and the first “Aladdin” pantomime was performed on December 26, 1788. By this point, the stock characters of the pantomime were already firmly established as the Principal Boy, the Principal Girl, the Dame and the Villain. The most striking characteristic of these fixed pantomime parts is the tradition of cross-dressing; the Principal Boy was always played by a young woman, the Dame by a middle-aged man with large false

breasts. Pantomime's gender-transgressive costuming is not to be confused with gender impersonation, however; the actress playing a Principal Boy such as Aladdin maintains her femininity, donning a short tunic and skin-hugging tights that reveal the legs up to the hips and buttocks, a sharp break with Victorian conventions of bodily display. Similarly, there is no gender confusion with the man playing a burly, masculine Dame such as Aladdin's mother, the Widow Chang Mustapha. This androgyny results in erotic confusion in the final scene of the pantomime, which traditionally concludes with the marriage of the Principal Boy and the Principal Girl, both played by women. The obvious suggestion of lesbian desire is suppressed, however, by the apparent "purity" and "innocence" of the panto love-story, in which the attraction seems to be asexual (Holland, 199). Although masked behind the levity of the Principal Boy's naïveté and the enormity of the Dame's false breasts, the threat of erotic desire hovers just beneath the surface. Thus, in the pantomimes, gender roles are not reversed so much as blurred; the figures enter a state of androgyny, retaining vestiges of both their "former" gender and their "new" one. As Cheryl Hepp notes, the Victorians viewed cross-dressing as "a disease, a confusing condition as threatening to the sense of stability deemed necessary to most individuals as was true physical hermaphroditism or an overt behavioral psychosis" (Herr, 264). Two years after the publication of *The Story of an African Farm*, these societal fears found their way into British law with the passing of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Bill, which made acts of "gross indecency" between two men illegal (Bristow, xxi). In Schreiner's day, then, when any hint of gender transgression or homosexuality was morally and socially unacceptable, the pantomime was the only niche of Victorian society in which sexual impersonation was tolerated and even expected.

In 1874, when Schreiner was beginning to conceptualize *The Story of an African Farm*, a survey of London theaters at Christmastime shows that "Aladdin" was the story of three of the twelve major pantomimes, and including "Sindbad the Sailor" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves", stories from the *Arabian Nights* made up 42% of all the Boxing Day pantomimes (Frow, 122). The pantomimes produced voluminous amounts of theater reviews and criticism from 1850s onward, which were published in all the leading newspapers of the day, including *The Theatre* and *The Illustrated London News*. English papers were regularly sent to the colonists in South Africa, and would have been readily available to Schreiner as she began writing *The Story of an African Farm* around Christmastime of 1875.

II. Schreiner's Alladeen

What is clear from the outset, then, is that Victorian theater culture was heavily steeped in the story of "Aladdin" played by a female lead, and that even writing in South Africa, it is highly unlikely that Schreiner could have avoided an awareness of this figure. The fact that the Alladeen figure in the "Times and Seasons" section of *The Story of an African Farm* is a "she" only goes to support this. Indeed, the chapter entitled "Times and Seasons", dismissed by Dan Jacobson as a weak display of Schreiner's immaturity and "second-hand lyricism", in fact ushers in Part II of the novel, in which some of the most striking gender transgressions

occur.

What is most striking about Schreiner's allusion to the *Arabian Nights* is the transformation of a male character into a feminine androgynous one. With the exclusion of the narrator Scheherazade, the women in the *Arabian Nights* are frequently passive victims, often buried alive by male tyrants before a rescuer – always a man – can save them. Aladdin, on the other hand, as an active young man, is able to escape after being buried alive with the help of a magical genie. Aladdin takes his agency one step further, using the genie to transgress class boundaries and marry the Princess Balroubadour. It is significant that Schreiner focuses on Aladdin's "gold palace", which is the supreme symbol of his independence and newfound class mobility. Schreiner's version of the Aladdin story, with its "golden stone", may be a variation on an earlier Italian adaptation of the tale, in which the pair of lovers must bury a magic stone under the pillow of the African Magician in order to kill him and win back the palace (Broadbent, 160).

III. Alladeen in Colonial South Africa: Schreiner's Problematic Anti-Imperialism

More likely, however, Schreiner chooses a female Aladdin as a figure of self-improvement and an example of a self-made individual. At the beginning of Antoine Galland's version of the tale, Aladdin is a street urchin, a boy who rebels against the authority of a mother who mocks him for his lofty ambitions. Schreiner's patriarchal villain, Bonaparte Blenkins, is strongly suggestive of the African magician, who pretends to mourn the death of a loved-one that never existed and thus wins the sympathy of Aladdin's mother. Aladdin, like Lyndall, is a child who is at the mercy of adult brutality in the hands of his new "uncle". Unfettered by the bounds of class or youth, Aladdin remakes his destiny by transforming himself from an uneducated pauper into a worldly prince. Like Lyndall, he refuses the path dictated to him by society and sets his sights higher, on the emperor's palace. Perhaps even more importantly, Galland's Aladdin is self-educated, and learns his profession by studying the secrets of the bazaar. In Schreiner's version of the tale, Alladeen's creation of her palace is likened to a child discovering the mysteries of nature. Schreiner's unnamed child, whose development reflects either Lyndall's or her own, plants sunflowers and dissects animals in a feverish pursuit of knowledge, experiencing a "startled feeling near akin to ecstasy" (Schreiner, 117). While Alladeen had the help of magic, Lyndall knows that a Victorian woman must have the advantage of an education in order to break out of a sphere designated only for mothers and wives. It is the inability for women to "make themselves" in particular that Lyndall blames for the oppression of her sex, declaring, "It is not what is done to us, but what is made of us (...) that wrongs us" (Schreiner, 154). By gendering Alladeen as a female figure, Schreiner creates a woman who is free to transgress class boundaries and to educate herself in whatever subjects she chooses, freedoms that are denied to Victorian women in Schreiner's world.

The spelling of Alladeen is notable in that it corrects the previous anglicized pronunciation and more closely imitates the Arabic version of the name, *Allah al*

din, which translates to “the nobility of the faith”. In renaming the figure “Alladeen”, Schreiner reverses the common imperial practice of “naming” the spaces and peoples of the colonies with no respect for original native traditions. What, then, does the story of Aladdin have to do with Schreiner’s own understanding of colonial oppression? The story “Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp” borrowed from Persian sources, was largely invented by a Frenchman, and takes place in a Baghdad thinly disguised as a city in China. What is easy to forget amongst this confusing web of migrations, however, is that the story’s denouement occurs in Africa. In both Galland’s version and in most pantomimes, Aladdin follows the African Magician to his home continent in order to rescue the princess and reclaim his palace. Thus, the Principal Boy Aladdin of the Victorian pantomime was strongly associated with South Africa. This was especially true at the outset of the Boer-War, when at least one actress even dressed in the new military khakis to play the part in 1899. As Jim Davis discusses, the Drury Lane pantomimes of the late nineteenth century “appeared to celebrate Britain’s imperial strength and to support or encourage patriotism within its audiences” (Davis, 148). The militarism of the British Empire was reflected on the stage, on which Principal Boys such as Jack (from “Jack and the Beanstalk”) sang rousing patriotic ballads along with audience members (Davis, 148). For Schreiner, a woman in colonial Africa, the Aladdin pantomime would clearly have had an added significance. The female Alladeen, like Schreiner herself, is doubly “other” as a woman and as an inhabitant of the imperial margin. Schreiner adopts the pantomime’s female Aladdin for her own, but only after rescuing the name “Alladeen” from the lost colonial vocabulary. Schreiner’s Alladeen repossesses the feminized Eastern name from the imperial lexicon, bringing the marginalized back to the center.

But can this re-appropriated female Alladeen, appearing in a novel fraught with disturbing treatments of racial difference, truly be seen as an anti-Imperialist gesture? Beneath the light-hearted spirit of the Victorian Aladdin pantomime lurked an undercurrent of racism in the form of derogatory Middle-Eastern and Chinese stereotypes. Similarly, many critics have discussed Schreiner’s disconcerting mistreatment of the indigenous Africans in *The Story of an African Farm*. To an optimistic reader, some of the most problematic passages seem to be Schreiner’s sardonic way of criticizing certain characters, such as Tant’ Sannie’s pseudo-scientific racism and Lyndall’s mocking of Gregory Rose with her description of the Kaffir man as “the most interesting and intelligent thing I can see just now, except, perhaps, Doss” the dog (Schreiner, 195). Patricia O’Neill further argues that although the word “Kaffir” was disparaging even in Schreiner’s day, the fact that Schreiner even records the dependence of white settlers on Africans such as the Hottentot maid was a revolutionary step for a late-Victorian novel. A hopeful reading can view Schreiner’s alternating silence and dismissal toward native Africans as further commentary on the impossibility of progress within the contemporary violence of the colonial space. Despite her troubling depictions of race in *The Story of an African Farm*, writings from Schreiner’s later life speak out passionately against the brutality of the British toward native South Africans. *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897), which was later praised by Virginia Woolf, condemns the atrocities committed by Cecil Rhodes against colonial Africa, and argues for an overhaul in British imperial policy. For Schreiner, the colonial practice of carving and conquering new lands was yet

another example of patriarchal oppression, one that she was especially fit to speak out against as a doubly “other” figure of a woman on the imperial margin.

In *The Story of an African Farm*, the figure of Aladdin migrates not only across national and colonial borders but also across boundaries of gender. Schreiner reclaims her female Alladeen from patriarchal gender strictures and the colonial lexicon, thereby creating a hopeful prototype for a “New Woman” who would thrive outside the chauvinist and cultural oppression of Victorian imperialism. By using the conventions of the pantomime, Schreiner undermines societal oppression and attempts to create an ideal genderless space in which an individual is free to pursue his or her destiny. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as a “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha, 86). The “menace” of this mimicry is that it “liberates marginal elements and shatters the unity of man’s being through which he extends his sovereignty” (Bhabha, 89). In *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner’s South African homestead is a pantomime of British society, a mimicry that inverts the “proper” gender binary of masculine versus feminine and by extension threatens the colonial hierarchy of center over margin. The female Alladeen is a dangerously empowered figure, both as a woman and a migratory inhabitant of the colonial periphery. Although the pantomime structures of gender transcendence eventually fails for Lyndall, the prototype of this androgynous colonial “New Woman” remains, rearticulating the need to subvert the violence of patriarchal imperialism, both in Victorian England and its colonies.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2004: "This Earth of Migrations, Immigrations, Emigrations Produces Languages, Literary Texts and Works of Art".

¹ All quotes from Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* are taken from the 1992 Oxford World's Classics edition, edited by Joseph Bristow.

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Chinese Literature in English Translation: the Chinese Scholar in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin*

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The eighteenth century Chinese novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* written by Cao Xueqin is not simply what may be called a novel of manners, as it deals with the multicoloured world of the Chinese society of the time, but it is generally considered *the* Chinese novel, which brings within its pages the experience of life with all that a human mind and heart can be involved in. Thus, it can be said that one of the main features is the extreme and passionate humanity shown by the characters populating the novel. The characters are, in fact, endowed with a psychological relevance that makes them, to a certain degree, *real* men and women with their own vital complexity, more than *fictitious* people just playing a “role”.

It is the whole Chinese universe the one we are presented with: society – with its traditional rules of behaviour, moral progress, political effort, education, religion and its concept of family – is in evidence through the amounts of details on places and people that the author gives to the reader. The aforesaid typical aspects of Chinese culture are the fundamental bases of a State that is eager to reach a perfect social order, the same order the characters themselves in the novel are searching for while interacting among one another.

The themes dealt with, the realistic description of the events, the so-called “vulgar” style, chosen to write this novel, give a “natural” touch to the story. By this, I mean that the reader is given the chance to get closer to the novel itself and to have a deep insight of what it is showing and suggesting. That is the reason why *The Dream of the Red Chamber* has gained the place of honour among the works of art in the history of Chinese literature.

The novel is divided into 120 chapters and, apart from the scholars’ discussions about who really wrote the last 40 chapters, it can be supposed that the whole novel was approximately written between 1754 and 1764 and that it was already circulating in those years in handwritten copies of either 80 or 120 chapters. The first printed edition appeared in January 1792 and was published by Gao E and Cheng Weiyuan with the title of *The Story of the Stone*. This was considered the primary model to the main editions that later on were published.

The novel began to elicit literary interest from the English people around the mid-nineteenth century when a first attempt at translating the story into English is found in *The Chinese Speaker* (Presbyterian Mission Press, Ningpo, 1846), where the British consul Robert Thom translated a few extracts giving them the name of *The Dreams of the Red Chamber*. More than twenty years later, E.C. Bowra, another Englishman, was busy in translating the first eight chapters that were published in *The China Magazine* (Noronha & Sons, Hong Kong, 1868-1870) entitled *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. A translation of the first two volumes was then written by Bencraft Joly (Kelly & Walsh, Hong Kong, 1892-1893). Later on Chi-Chen Wang worked on an abridged version in English (Doubleday, New York, 1929): *Dream of the Red Chamber*, while Florence and Isabel McHugh proposed a translation into English from Franz Kuhn’s German translation of the novel dated 1932: *The Dream of the Red Chamber: A Chinese Novel of the Early Ch’ing*

Period (Pantheon Books, New York, 1958; Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958). Last, but undoubtedly noteworthy in this list of main editions of the novel, is the integral translation in five volumes by David Hawkes and John Minford entitled *The Story of the Stone* (Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1973-1986). Still nowadays other translations keep being published or re-edited in the United States and in Great Britain.

It is curious, indeed, to note that the first translations into English of the novel were made in China during that very century of political and social unrests started with the Opium War (1839-1842), followed by the Taiping Rebellion (ca. 1847-1864), the war against France in 1885 and against Japan (1894-95). To a certain extent, China was mainly forced to open up to the West, thus losing that stability, order and independence that had characterized this Eastern country for such a long time. It can be rightly asserted that China was not willing to interact with Western Countries as the Good, according to the Confucian thought, dwelled in the past tradition. In other words, in order to preserve the social, political and economical balance it was necessary not to have contacts with the West. China has been usually seen as a country cut off from the world with a tendency towards seclusion while, on the other hand, there was Imperialism that was pushing Great Britain, above all, towards a relation with this country mainly based on an imperialistic *one-way* trade with China. By this, I mean Europe in general, and Great Britain in particular, appeared to be the only ones to benefit from the commercial exchange with China, as we can read in the "Letter of Advice to Queen Victoria" written in 1839 by Lin Zixu, the Chinese Commissioner in Canton. He affirms that, in actual fact, "(...) articles coming from the outside to China can only be used as toys. We can take them or get along without them. (...) The goods from China carried away by your country not only supply your own consumption and use, but also can be divided up and sold to other countries, producing a triple profit"¹. The British wished for more interaction with China, especially for economical reasons, but after all the Western impulse to get to know better this far away country that so deeply had fascinated the Europeans with its tea, silk, spices, its habits, its landscape was undeniable. Hence, when a translation came to the foreground, it stood not only as a means of better knowing that Eastern culture, but also as a way of controlling it.

The Dream of the Red Chamber, in this context, gives a picture of a whole Chinese world, rich of realism and humanity, which probably increased, at the time, the English interest in that exotic culture, and therefore a need for a translation. Indeed the novel highlights those elements so peculiarly belonging to the Chinese mind, such as the idea of family characterized by those features at the base of the society in eighteenth century China and in which the figure of the scholar is set as well.

The Jia family is, in actual fact, the real protagonist of this novel: it is the core all the events revolve around. The Chinese family system was based on a hierarchical structure usually with a male ancestor as a chief and with his descendants and their families living together in the same place. Family relationships were so important that it happened the whole family could live on a single member's fame; in other words, it was needed just for one to succeed and the family he belonged to naturally obtained that same reputation and honour. That's why it was so important for Bao-yu, the young heir of the Jia family, to

study and pass the civil service examination to get a place in the Chinese bureaucracy, but most of all to “be a credit to the family”².

The origin of the examination system in China can be traced in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - 220 A.D.) when the ruling family institutionalised a series of exams to select its officials by the degree of their knowledge of Confucian Classics and their ability to write compositions in a rigid literary style called eight-legged essays. According to his exam results, the candidate could earn a different place in the social and political ladder; however, once introduced in the scholar-official class, he could enjoy all the privileges of this rank. As Confucius had taught, the purpose of education was twofold: to gain an individual wisdom and to become a moral guide to the world. Hence, the primary importance of erudition and the following recruitment of the officials that was carried out by a system of meritocracy through the civil service examinations, which took a definite shape in the fifteenth century when it turned out to embody the main access to the administrative career. This system was, to the general opinion, considered as a means by which Confucian values could be spread over, and respect and seriousness to a “rule” to follow could be inculcated, so as to aim at a social harmony and a political stability. In short, this meant moulding the scholars’ *forma mentis* so that, through a common instruction, they tended to formulate the same ideas and opinions regarding different topics. Therefore, the mentality coming out from this system was mainly conservative and conformist, leaving little room to those brilliant wits of artists who were almost feared as potential causes of unrest.

In this last category, we may place Bao-yu whose wide intelligence, sharp wit and extreme sensibility have led him to be more interested in poetry than in the Classics, to his father’s sad regret. Since the beginning, in fact, we are presented with Jia Zheng, the boy’s father, as a man of “soul-searching integrity”³ – quoting the words of Cao Xueqin – who wishes his son could reach not only fame and success for himself, but for the entire family as well. This man is clearly concerned with his son’s studies because, first of all, he is worried about his family future and he stresses the utmost importance and care of his clan as a “whole” before the “individual” in these words:

The boy spends all his time loafing about in the garden – it simply won’t do (...) *If he should fall by the wayside, the whole future of the family could be threatened* (...)

Bao-yu’s present state of idleness is thoroughly unsatisfactory, and in my opinion the best solution would be for him to resume his studies at the Family School.⁴

On the other hand, Bao-yu’s scale of values seems quite different from the others’. What really matters to him, as far as the author tells the reader, is human relationships: feeling and emotion interacting with reason and sense are what he is searching for in order to enrich his heart, his soul, so as to be able to say his life has been worth living. He is no ordinary boy, actually as he is the incarnation of a divine stone come to the earth to experience mortal life, thence we may find the reason of such an extraordinary personality in his very original nature. He is not interested in reaching a good social and political position in the society he lives in: these things don’t mean anything to him – that’s why he is not keen on studying and doesn’t like to perform everything he is supposed to as a boy belonging to a wealthy family of scholar-officials. An example can be found in his following words:

(...) What use are my fine clothes but to cover up the dead and rotten wood beneath? What use the luxuries I eat and drink but to fill the cesspit and swell the stinking sewer of my inside? O rank and riches! How you poison everything!⁵

He may appear as a “good-for-nothing son”⁶ as Jia Zheng calls him, someone who just wants to fool around, but he is far from being superficial and silly because what he is really and deeply concerned with is neither fame nor reputation, which can be considered as earthly things, but the possibility of enlightening and enriching his soul. He seems, in conclusion, focused more on his “inside” than on his “outside”.

In another passage, he frankly expresses his idea on school that, once again, goes against the general opinion:

I can hardly believe it! Yes, Father did banish me to *that place* [school] – what an ordeal! I don’t know how I stuck it out! I thought I’d never see you all again! But now, one glimpse of you has raised my spirit from the dead!⁷

In this vent to his cousin Dai-yu, Bao-yu reveals his opinion on school as a place where he is banished and stuck and his spirit dies. He does not even utter its name but he just calls it “that place”, as if he was almost disgusted by school, which is actually an “ordeal”, a very unpleasant experience. He is also very critical towards the scholars who, in his mind,

(...) not content with botching together a few classical tags, (...) try to hide the fact that they haven’t got a single original idea of their own by churning out a lot of far-fetched purple passages – and then pride themselves on having been “subtle” and “profound”⁸.

This aversion to the scholars has been previously stressed by the author:

Bao-yu had always hated meeting or making conversation with senior males of the scholar-official class and detested all occasions which involved dressing up, such as visits of congratulation and condolence and the various other formal exchanges to which members of that class devote so great a part of their time⁹.

From this attitude, the reader can perceive a sense of disdain and almost derision towards the scholar-officials’ way of living, which does not look like the model the young Jia wishes to look up while, on the contrary, it plays a relevant part in most of the cases set in a “world” that does not seem to belong to Bao-yu instead.

In his “rebellious” – let us say – view of the examination system and all that it concerns, Bao-yu expresses his right to be original and a need to go beyond those schemes imposed by the Chinese culture. Though he is presented, on the one hand, as a boy criticizing and challenging the system, on the other hand, he accepts to willingly take up the so called four arts that a scholar should be practice of: music, painting, calligraphy and chess. The reason of this interest can be supposedly found in the chance given to the scholar, by the practise of those arts, of stimulating his own creativity and natural imagination instead of conforming his mind to the general way of thinking based only on books.

The author tells the reader that Bao-yu and his cousins spend time in the Garden in:

the most amiable and delightful occupations, such as: reading, practising calligraphy, strumming on the qin¹⁰, playing Go¹¹, painting, composing verses, embroidering in coloured silks, competitive flower-collecting, making flower-sprays, singing, word games and guess-fingers.¹²

Beside the four arts a scholar should work on, Bao-yu presumably enjoys also “arts” that are more typically female, in a way, such as “embroidering” or “making flower-sprays”. In this youth there is a sensitive soul that is eager to get closer to the female sensitivity as women, in his view, are regarded almost as superior beings. However, it cannot be asserted with certainty that this attitude was common to all the scholars, as we have to bear in mind that Bao-yu is an extraordinary boy, different from the average.

The Chinese scholar, as he has been dealt with so far in this paper, comes out to be rather an eclectic figure that focuses on several fields of interest, not only being a master of Confucian Classics but also of painting or even of the game of chess. In this particular view, the Chinese scholar-official shows firstly the importance of education, which his own political *status* depends on, and embodies, secondly, the twofold role of politician and literate.

For all that has been said, the Chinese culture presents us with a type of scholar whose main features are far from the ones of a Western scholar. While the latter is known, to a certain degree, to be focused on a too theoretical knowledge, the previous does concern himself with ideas and principles – let us say – but he gives much importance to and cares about practical experience as well. It seems to me, we are talking about another “level” of knowledge, maybe higher; by this I want to say that it is not simply a matter of learning to do or speculate on something, but learning, above all, to be someone of a higher moral rank. The figure of the Chinese scholar appears to be, in actual fact, characterized by different facets, just as those of a precious stone. All things considered, was not Bao-yu, in conclusion, but a “precious stone” himself?

Endnotes

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¹ Lin Zixu, “Letter of Advice to Queen Victoria” taken from Ssuyu Teng and John Fairbank, *China's Response to the West*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1954, repr. in Mark A. Kishlansky (ed. by), *Sources of World History, Volume II*, Harper Collins College Publishers, New York, 1995, p. 266-69:

<http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/com-lin.html>.

² Cf. *The Dreamer Wakes*, p. 251. All quotations from Cao Xueqin's novel are taken from the following edition: Cao Xueqin, *The Story of The Stone*, 5 voll., Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, England, 1973-1986: Vol. 1, *The Golden Days*, 1973; Vol. 2, *The Crab-Flower Club*, 1977; Vol. 3, *The Warning Voice*, 1980; Vol. 4, *The Debt of Tears*, 1982; Vol. 5, *The Dreamer Wakes*, 1986.

³ Cf. *The Dreamer Wakes*, p. 152.

⁴ Cf. *The Debt of Tears*, p. 44. Emphasis is mine.

⁵ Cf. *The Golden Days*, p. 178.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

⁷ Cf. *The Debt of Tears*, p. 51. Emphasis is mine.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁹ *The Crab-Flower Club*, p. 194.

¹⁰ The qin was a seven-cord sitar.

¹¹ This is the game of chess that is here called with its Japanese name of “Go”, as usually referred to in Western literature.

¹² *The Golden Days*, p. 460.

The Sour Sweetness of Displacement: the Acculturation in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet**

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The title of Timothy Mo's second novel, *Sour Sweet* (1982), is rich in implications. It is not just referring to one of the most popular flavours in Chinese gourmet cooking; it also symbolizes the fusion or co-existence of opposites – man and woman, old and new, East and West – and all the ambivalent sentiments they invoke.

A son of a Chinese man and a British woman, Mo has never been directly exposed to the hard struggles and mystic activities in London's Chinatown, and he speaks only a little Cantonese and cannot write in Chinese. Despite his connection with Hong Kong, Mo never regards himself as a "Hong Kong writer", let alone a "Chinese British writer". He admits, "I know nothing about Chinese culture. (...) I'm a Brit" (Hughes-Hallett, 150). According to Elaine Yee Lin Ho, "Mo's conscious positioning away from 'Chineseness', both his own and others', can be seen as a satirist's defense even though it falls short of the conventional apology" (13). Mo's claim of his "Britishness" aims at presenting himself as a writer who is fascinated by the viabilities and vitalities of both the Western and Eastern civilizations, and whose work addresses universal issues and concerns, not just those related to Hong Kong or Asia. Mo understands his "displaced" characters' predicament of being trapped by circumstances and illustrates their anxieties, visions, pains and joys in seeking an ideal cultural equilibrium.

In *Timothy Mo*, the first book-length study on the author so far, Ho points out that "Mo's early novels added an ethnic Chinese contour to the new literary map of British fiction" (2), and that "the fiction of Mo and those writers of his generation helps to institute post-imperial Britain's emergence as a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation" (3). "For many readers in Britain", Ho suggests, *Sour Sweet* "was a way into a world or parallel space which they vaguely knew existed but was as alien as the distant colony of Hong Kong itself" (50). Laura Hall contends that novelists like Mo create a cultural realm, in which "adaptation" rather than "assimilation" seems to be the only plausible way of displacement.

Set in Chinatown, London, *Sour Sweet* is a broader articulation of cultural transplantation or the cross-cultural adaptation experienced by the Hong Kong Chinese immigrants in Britain in the post-war period. Specifically, what Mo presents in the novel is a failure in adaptation that leads to the alienation and isolation of the Hong Kong immigrants from the host society, England. Mo creates a dismal world of the Chinese immigrants in London, a world that has never been portrayed in English fiction before.

In *Sour Sweet*, Mo made what Jonathan Yardley calls in *The Washington Post* (31 March, 1985) "a departure from past fictional treatment of the cross-cultural theme" by casting his novel with a family transplanted by circumstances in a totally alienated place. Mo maintains a very tight grip over the narration and the plot development through his omniscient narrator, who appears to be a cynical, dislikable and self-serving person, ridiculing his characters and smearing their surroundings with nonchalance. Mo's narrative stipulates that Chen, Lily, and Mui

look either listless, naïve, or even pathetic, struggling for a meager survival everyday in the strange, indifferent and often discriminating British society of London.

In his study of Hong Kong Chinese immigrants in England, Hugh Baker reports, "(...) the Chinese in Britain led lonely, frustrated lives, deprived for much of the time of the social contact which they would have had in their native environment, ill at ease in the host society which was inaccessible to them for linguistic and work reasons" (301). The dilemma of the Chen family is clearly accentuated by the opening of the novel: "The Chens had been living in the UK for four years, which was long enough to have lost their place in the society from which they had emigrated but not long enough to feel comfortable in the new" (1). What makes their life unbearable is a combination of their daily hardship and sense of alienation. Their sense of living in England is ambivalent, because they feel both "sour" and "sweet" about their place in London. On the one hand, they realize that they might have a chance for a better life, but on the other they find themselves straddling two cultures and dangling between identities that they cannot claim as their own. And Mo seems to attribute their futile attempts at cultural assimilation and negotiation between their native traditions and the ever-puzzling realities in their adopted country to their insistence upon speaking, dressing, and eating native, thus losing whatever it had left of their self-definition and self-esteem.

The Feminization of Chen

Chen, the head of the nuclear Chinese family, has come to Britain, the "land of promise" (1), in the early 1960s to make a living in the restaurant business, save enough money, and eventually return to Hong Kong. He is a phlegmatic and reticent hard worker, who conducts his life based on the precepts he acquired back in China. Increasingly, cultural differences become irritating and life does not make any sense to Chen. He feels helpless, confused, frustrated, and disliked by others. "As Chen waited at the bus stop in the mid-morning he was conscious of accusing looks" (8). Chen "had to stand self-consciously in a line of women with shopping bags" and "supposed the English wives stared at him because he was Chinese" (9).

He never gives up the possibility of a return to Hong Kong for a better life after earning enough money. During a family trip to the seaside, Chen shows his young son a ship on the horizon, saying: "it is the ship that will take us all back home when we are finished here. It will take you to your homeland, Son, which you have never seen" (155).

Chen never gives up his Chineseness. His motto of life is "Stick to what has been tried and don't adopt new ways just for the sake of them" (123). He eats Chinese food, watches Hong Kong movies, keeps Chinese company, reads outdated Hong Kong newspapers, spends his past-time on carpentry and gardening, and has no interest in what is going on in his host country. In other words, he is living within the impenetrable confines of his Chinese identity.

However loyal he is to his "Chineseness", Chen is never fully capable of

fulfilling his duties as a Chinese son or a Chinese father. Except the remittances, sent with a note signed by Lily on his behalf, Chen does not have any emotional ties with his parents. As a father, he is unable to understand what his son, Man Kee, has to go through as a first generation of Chinese British, nor offer the viable guidance in growth and education.

Though idealized by his wife who addresses him with a capitalized “Husband”, Chen’s authority is gradually but steadily undermined by his wife’s ever-increasing dominant role in the family. It is Lily who takes the initiative in leading and governing all affairs in the family, including their sex life. “He regarded the marital bed as less of a communion than, from the female point of view, some kind of pneumatic degradation ground”. It was only due to Lily’s delicacy in leading that “Chen thought himself the dominator rather than the dominated” (15). He has no clue that a role reversal between his wife and him has virtually taken place. His failure in being a son, a father, and a husband reveals that despite his ostensible adherence to his “Chineseness”, Chen seldom, if ever, attempts to assert his Chinese identity in life. Mo places Chen on a course of inevitable degeneration that is worse than being weak and “pitiable” (91). His disappearance at the end of the novel symbolizes his metaphorical emasculation and non-existence as well.

The Masculinization of Lily

Lily, Chen’s wife, is loyal to her Chinese heritage and sees little or no need at all to have contact with the British society. Lily has an unusual and tough childhood. Her mother died of giving birth to her, and her father chose her to make up for the absence of a son. “While Mui [her sister] devoted herself to the study of flower arrangements, embroidery, and the arrangement of refreshments on lacquered trays, Lily was occupied with sterner pursuits” (11). Lily began her learning of martial arts under her father’s guidance at the age of five. Her character has been fully formed from her unique upbringing and boxing training back in China. What has been instilled into her “Chineseness” has guided her for years in thinking and contact as well. Within the family, she knows her place and role quite well; she is devoted, caring, and tenacious in carrying out her duties as a wife, mother, sister, and daughter-in-law. Outside her family, however, she feels displaced and baffled, and she is critical, resolute and even aggressive in dealing with strangers.

While Chen tries to maintain Chinese cultural values selectively and expediently, Lily is a devout practitioner of the beliefs and disciplines that she has learned from her father. In the early and middle sections of the novel, Mo presents numerous scenes in which Lily comes across as someone who harbours deep dislike and criticism of English people and their culture.

Mo also registers her resentment towards British society through her dislike of the English customers, who “lounged against the wall”, leaving the uneven line of grease smudges at the head height along the three walls (135) and her criticism of the young English boys and girls’ habits and life styles (136-137). Lily comes to the conclusion that “Really, there was no question how superior Chinese people were to the foreign devils” (137).

Nevertheless, as the narrative evolves, Lily now calls the English people as “foreign devil friends” (253) and changes her attitudes toward her customers at the counter. She becomes more and more flexible in practising her culture, and usually her clinging to Chinese cultural patterns is not destructive but reconciliatory and constructive. As she takes over more and more responsibilities of her family business, Lily feels increasingly compelled to adjust her practice of Chinese cultural traditions and to embark upon the road to reconciliation and adaptation by the end of the novel.

The Westernization of Mui

Mui, Chen’s sister-in-law, “had been brought up as a girl with the not so unreasonable end in view that she should become a woman: uncomplaining, compliant, dutiful, considerate, unselfish, within her limits truthful and honourable; and needless to say, utterly submissive to the slightest wishes of her superiors (...)” (10). After she comes to help the couple with their business and their new-born son, Man Kee, she delves into the pop culture of London by watching TV shows with her limited knowledge of English that she had acquired in her work place in Hong Kong. Unlike Chen and Lily, she did not dwell for long on her initial disorientation and her sense of displacement. She seems more eager in adapting to the English way of life and therefore her progress in cultural adaptation is faster than Lily’s and Chen’s. Victor Ramraj sees her as someone who “abandons tradition and readily assimilates into the new culture” (224). Her keen interest in the host culture enables her to learn more ideas about the business and life in London and become a very capable helper and problem solver for the Chen family, from establishing friendship with customers to arranging Lily’s driving lesson and Chen’s father’s trip to England, and dealing with visiting officials from the city.

Her addiction to TV also creates an illusionary world in her mind. Often, she tends to idealize the host society and its culture. In the eyes of many immigrants, Mui might have been committing what Homi K. Bhabha called an act of “mimicry” (87) and engaging in, to borrow David Parker’s words, an “uncritical self-assimilation into hegemonic British forms of culture” (29). Eventually, her overreaching adaptation also brings trouble to her. Her extramarital affair with one of the truck drivers is a case in point. She has to leave the house after she is pregnant just to avoid bringing “disgrace on family” (200). Lily finds Mui’s affair, illegitimate child, and single-parenthood shameful and disturbing, but Mui herself assesses her unexpected trouble with the values and practices she has learned from the British society and sees nothing wrong in the whole thing. For Mui, her transformation from being a subservient and displaced Chinese woman in a foreign country to being a single mother of an Anglo-Chinese child is quite “sweet”, and a few “sour” moments in the process haven’t put a dent in her spirit. At the end of the novel, she breaks out of her isolation and takes the control of her own destiny by marrying Chen’s friend Mr. Lo.

Having tasted both the “sour” and “sweet” of their displacement in the adopted country, the Chens learn through the interactions with their English customers that they can not shut themselves in the Chinese subculture forever, and that they have

to acculturate themselves by embracing the ways of life in England. But Chen, Lily, and Mui have their respective views of their displacement and uprootedness; they choose their own route to cultural adaptation; and they make strides at their own pace. Every time they encounter a problem, they have to negotiate some kind of middle way between the two cultures in order to make a decision that is good for their family. Chen is always the reluctant participant, who has no interest in changing unless he has to. He is content with the fact that his wife takes over most of the decision making duties from him as long as he remains the quasi leader of the household. Once Lily realizes that adaptation is essential to her family's well being, she becomes the most tenacious and resourceful among the three to carry her adaptation to a higher level. Mui is certainly the first and most willing among the three to discover her newly adopted culture and embrace its values without any reservation.

However, Mo does not package the story of the Chen family's adaptation to their new country in all sweetness. The mysterious disappearance and subsequent death of Chen gives the story an abrupt twist, and ends it with a "sour", if not entirely tragic, note. Such a gripping conclusion is made possible by Mo's description of the Triad, the Chinese Mafia-like organization in London, a thread that runs parallel to the narrative about the Chen family. Apart from its allegorical effect as a structural device creating multiplicity in plot development, Mo's more important purpose is to reiterate the intrusive and destructive influence of traditional evils upon Chen, whose stubborn allegiance to his cultural roots first leads him to the temptation of the Triad when he is in financial trouble, and ultimately to his death when the Triad needs a convenient scapegoat. In a large measure, Mo's narrative hints, Chen's family is perhaps threatened more by the Chinese, specifically the cultural evils that followed Chen over to London, than it is by the English.

Towards the end of *Sour Sweet*, Lily appears to have achieved, eventually, a bicultural identity in the British society, thereby moving on to what Michael Winkelman described as "the adaptation, resolution, or acculturation stage" (123). More accurately, she has gained the ability to negotiate the beliefs and practices from two cultures and practice them to her own advantage. Nevertheless, as Oscar Handlin suggests, "For every freedom won, a tradition lost" (12). The irony is that Lily's ability to define her bicultural identity by herself and for herself is at best a very costly "sour sweet" mix. The terrible "loss" that Lily has sustained is not just a few "old traditions"; her loss of Chen at the end of the novel is a tremendous sacrifice and constitutes a pre-condition for Lily to overcome her disadvantages as an immigrant and a woman in adapting into the British society. Only in Chen's absence can Lily be a single mother and herself, the two roles that are quintessentially un-Chinese.

Careful readers will notice that Mo's *Sour Sweet* addresses the issue of "Chineseness" predominantly. The issue of "Britishness" and how it affects the characters' wrestling with their "Chineseness" are not Mo's primary concern. What occurs in the novel is not adaption, but acculturation; it is always a one-way struggle by the minority. Since the publication of *Sour Sweet* in the early 1980s, a general consensus seems to have been reached among writers that a destructive cultural encounter in which the mainstream society dominates its ethnic minority is less desirable than an acceptance and difference on equal terms. The idea of

mutual cross-culturality, rather than through a forced synthesis or acculturation, has been lauded as the feasible means to cope with problems of assimilation. Mo has not returned to the same subject and milieu in more than twenty years. If he does, it would be interesting to see how he would take on both “Chineseness” and “Britishness” at the same time.

Endnote

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Introduction to British Bangladeshi Literature and its Visual Representations*

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British Bangladeshi communities across the UK have long suffered from a *lack of visibility*, despite the fact that, according to the 1991 census report, the Bangladeshis were identified as “the youngest and fastest growing” (Eade 1996, 150) among all the ethnic groups settled in Britain. Critic Jamil Ali, besides lamenting a remarkable lack of bibliographical resources, described these communities as “highly segregated” (Ali, 7), closely knit within the invisible boundaries of the ethnic niche. Sociology and anthropology professor John Eade coined the concept of the British Bangladeshi as “encapsulated” (Eade 1997, 94) communities, whose “Banglatowns” can be regarded as actual enclaves, in which the “official language” is Bengali (or the regional variety Sylheti) and where the asymmetrical relationship between the sexes, especially in the case of first and second generation immigrants, still anachronistically reflects the traditional, gender-related roles typical of the patriarchal society the women had left, back in the ’70s and in the ’80s, when they had started to join their husbands in the new land of settlement beyond the ocean. The complex and uncertain international equilibrium after 9/11 and 7/7 and the backlash of fear and suspect involving several Muslim communities across the world, among which the British Bangladeshi surely deserve to be mentioned, have further problematized the above outlined condition of *invisibility*, thus widening the already existing gap between the ethnic and the mainstream society, a gap which is now perceived as a boundary and a means of protection for both parties.

Stemming in the mid-80s from this rapidly sketched context, the not so numerous strands that compose the texture of British Bangladeshi literature can be grouped into three categories, as follows: oral histories of first generation settlers, recorded and transcribed by an editor; stories and poems (often first attempts) composed by non professional writers; and thirdly works by professional writers. The shared aim of British Bangladeshi literature seems to be twofold: on the one hand the writers’ efforts are focused on cherishing their cultural heritage, whose main traits and values have to be handed down to the newest generations, who have to be proudly aware of their cultural roots; on the other hand, the authors seem to set out to *bridge* the aforementioned gap, to unblock channels of communication with the wider community, to dismantle stereotypical perceptions (and, at the same time, to propose positive models to emulate), and to demonstrate that living in the present and contributing effectively to the progress and well-being of the British society is actually possible, without forgetting and losing one’s past.

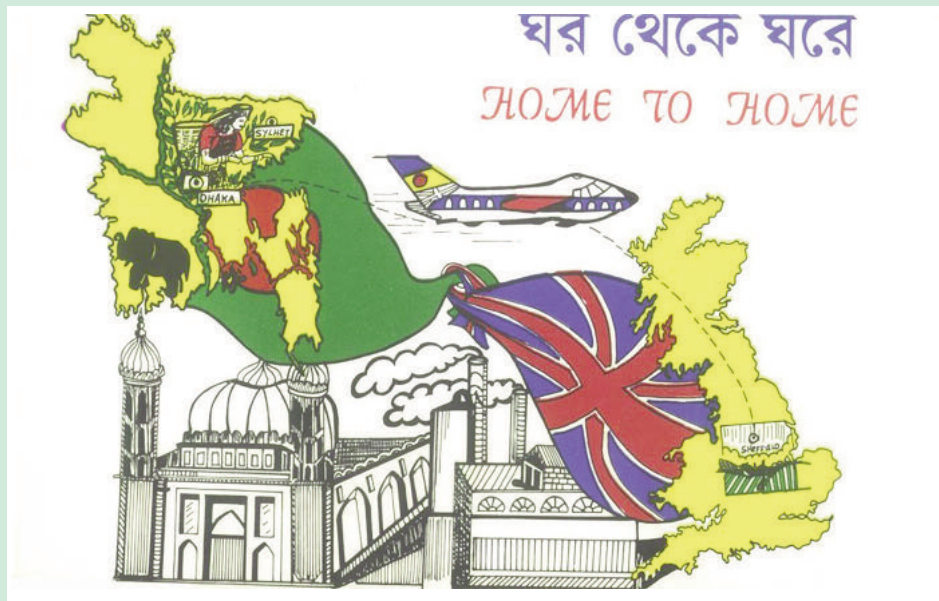
Since this year’s “Asia and the West” conference is centered on the relationship between literature and the visual arts, and we have to credit Prof. Unali with this concept, this paper will try to explore the themes of British Bangladeshi literature and to illustrate its development through the visual representations associated with it, namely book covers (which have been carefully chosen by the writers to challenge the *lack of visibility* of the communities) and posters. Special attention will be devoted also to the work of the multimedia artist Sanchita Islam, whose

pictures, drawings, films and short story volumes turn art into a powerful tool to portray a complex, multifaceted reality, to establish connections and to negotiate one's present.

One of the most interesting outcomes of the first category – oral histories – is certainly *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers, Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain*, compiled and edited in 1987 by Caroline Adams and published by the “Arts Project” of Tower Hamlets, the London area which, due to its proximity to the docks, has historically hosted the highest number of immigrants from Bangladesh. The book includes ten very similar accounts of travel from Bangladesh to Britain, of the difficulties the immigrants (all men) had to face in order to get used to the new context, of the initial nostalgia they experienced followed by a general sense of satisfaction for being able to succeed in providing their family, both in England and “back home”, with the necessary means for a comfortable living. The stories are preceded by an introductory chapter written by Adams in which, in order to contextualize the narratives, she outlined the history of Bengali, first, and then Bangladeshi immigration to the UK, starting from the eighteenth century. As the artist in charge to design the book cover, Caroline Adams chose a famous rickshaw painter from Dhaka, Ahmed Hossain, possibly to strengthen that connection with the motherland she felt the urge to prompt her potential readers not to lose. The same concern towards the loss of one's cultural roots was expressed in the “Preface”, where she remarked she was “anxious to catch the stories before it was too late” (Adams, xv), besides feeling the need to justify herself for attempting to do, “as a white person” what “a Bangladeshi person would have done (...) better” (Adams, xv). The idea of an advisable continuity between past and present is expressed through the two shaking hands, the different but co-existing dress codes, and through the rural village connected to a modern city by the sea, which is crossed both by steamers and rowing-boats. A very similar cover, drawn by young British Bangladeshi artist Jyoti Prabha Mukherjee, has been chosen for *Home to Home, Reminiscences of Bangladeshi Women in Sheffield*, a 1995 bilingual anthology, edited by British Bengali writer Debjani Chatterjee and British Bangladeshi poet Safuran Ara, featuring fourteen “oral histories” (whose single storytellers are *collectively* quoted as a list of names just after the introductory remarks) which follow the same pattern: each narrator tells of her leaving *home* in Sylhet in order to join her husband, in a new *home* in Sheffield, where the couple starts a family, after overcoming initial difficulties.

Also in this case the cover can be divided into two parts which portray well the opposition/continuity between one land and the other, symbolized by their maps, a palace (or a mosque) juxtaposed with a factory, and the two flags joined in a knot, which replace the shaking hands of the previous cover. The plane, in the middle, seems to hint at the possibility of travelling much faster from one *home* to the other than the first immigrants used to, crossing the ocean by boat, thus annihilating geographical and mental distances and promoting the idea of a *transnational*, multi-stranded identity. The contribution that such a volume – and the British Bangladeshis – can give to the wider community is highlighted in the *Introduction* where, differently from Caroline Adam's text, which aimed at preserving the past (a purpose which is present, in any event, in this volume, signified for instance by the dual language), it is remarked that the anthology is addressed to “the next generation, whatever their ethnic origin or language” (Ara,

Chatterjee, 9), thus focusing the readers' attention on a future of sharing and integration.



Home to Home: book cover. Reproduced with the kind permission of Debjani Chatterjee.

One of the most interesting visual arts projects connected with the second category – works by non professional writers – is certainly the production of posters. As artist and social worker Stephanie Fawbert pointed out in her publication entitled *Art for All* (the result of a series of creative workshops with the members of the Bangladeshi community in Sheffield), “art gives increased visibility and status for participants [since] other people can see what they have done” (Fawbert, 8), thus challenging, with the stress placed on *visibility*, the very concept of “encapsulated”, secluded communities. Some interesting posters have been produced by the “Bengali Women’s Support Group”, a solidarity association founded in Sheffield in 1985 and described in its “Declaration of Intent” as “an anti-sexist, anti-racist, non-party political group” (Chatterjee, 7) which involves first, second and third generation Bengali and Bangladeshi immigrants coming from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds. In 1993 the “Bengali Women’s Support Group” produced a bilingual poster entitled “Two Great Women of Bengal”, featuring as constructive models to emulate, Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (1880-1932), two female figures from across the artificially drawn boundary between Bengal and Bangladesh who fought, in different ways, for the rights of women and for their active participation in public life in the context of a patriarchal society. Quoting some words from the poster, “true freedom could not exist as long as women are not free”. In 2001 the group produced also a set of six bilingual posters with some notes and support activities on Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), the national poet of Bangladesh, whose work is described as “a legacy for all humanity”, not just for the ethnic community. The pictures, the drawings and the texts in the posters are centered on Nazrul Islam’s efforts against poverty and towards the emancipation of women, universal peace, and inter-religious dialogue, thus upsetting every stereotypical

perception regarding the utter centrality of men and the subjugated role of women in Bangladesh.

Many volumes with very interesting covers belong to this second category; among these, the 1996 anthology of recollections, poems and short stories, entitled *Voyages from Bangladeshi Writers in Sunderland*, edited by Bangladesh-born author Shamim Azad, certainly stands out. Some of the contributors, all non professional writers, originally composed their pieces in English, while some others preferred to write in Bengali. The works were then translated into the other language, employing a technique that could be described as a “transcreation”, intended to “keep the flavours of the ideas intact” (Azad, 3), as Azad points out in the *Preface*, rather than providing the reader with a literal rendering in the other language, which would have implied the choice of a culture from which to observe, and the existence of an “original” and “a mirror copy” of it. The layout of the book has a striking visual impact: it resembles an upturned mirror with its two first covers: one, introducing the texts in Bengali, the other one, presenting their parallel version in English, without prioritizing or establishing a hierarchical relationship between the two halves. On the covers, designed by British Bangladeshi artist Fakruzzaman, a river is portrayed with two paper boats sailing on it. While the paper boats might be a hint at the poem entitled “Paper Boats” by Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (whose words are sung in the national Bangladeshi anthem, *Amar Sonar Bangla*), and therefore a reference to the culture where the immigrants came from (whose importance is then highlighted), in the image of the river one could read the concepts of fluidity, of connection, of sharing, of creating bonds between cultures which, instead of being perceived as apart, should be regarded, together, as a stereoscopic mirror which allows the British Bangladeshi identity to fully look at itself.

The third category – works by professional writers – has an interesting expression in *Rainbow Hands* (2003) by Rabina Khan, a novel set in Tower Hamlets, which was written, as the author herself remarked, “to show how people of different backgrounds can come together to challenge racism and bridge gaps between themselves” (Khan, iii). The story, centered on the initially unlikely but then strongly developed friendship between a cockney lady and a British Bangladeshi family, is divided into two parts and its conclusion (the second volume) has just been published. Also in this case the cover, drawn by Abdul Azim, a friend of the writer’s and a talented artist, contributes to effectively and visually convey the same message the readers will grasp from the text. The dualism between Bangladesh and UK that, despite the intentions, was still clear in the first two covers (in which, a vertical, separating line could have been drawn in the middle), and that was somehow problematized by the mirror structure in Azad’s book, is eventually recomposed in the cover chosen by Rabina Khan. It features two hands, side by side, on which through the *mendhi*, the traditional henna decoration, one can see the Union Jack, thus reaching a symbolic fusion between the two cultures in one individual.

Another bright and colorful hand, beautifully decorated with *mendhi* against a shabby and grey background, is the subject of the picture with which it is possible to introduce Sanchita Islam, the young multimedia artist of Bangladeshi origin, born in Manchester in 1974, whose work best epitomizes the discourse regarding the connection between British Bangladeshi literature and the visual arts which has



Photo by Sanchita Islam, reproduced with her kind permission.

been so far developed. As Sanchita remarked in a personal correspondence, “as a visual artist I never wanted to create books with text only. I believe that the drawings, photos and films complement the written word and the result becomes a total art form. Nowadays an artist must be able to write, to edit, to make films, to take photos, to draw, to paint” (August 28th, 2005). Sanchita leads “Pigmentexplosion” an association which organizes live events in the Brick Lane area. She has shown her eleven films in international festivals in London, Paris, Kuala Lumpur, New York, and Dahka, the same cities where she exhibited her paintings and drawings. The concept which is central in so many of her works is that of “connection”, openly expressed in her 2004 film entitled *Connecting Faith*, which aimed at providing the viewer with an authentic, undistorted portrait of Islam across the continents since, as she remarked, after “9/11 Muslims have been shown as pariahs and potential terrorists” (*The Daily Star*, 04/05/2004). Looking again at the picture, the initial feelings of uneasiness is overcome once one realizes that the net, which apparently surrounds the figure of a young British Bangladeshi, on the margin, is actually broken, thus signifying the end of a situation of confinement, of mutual seclusion between the ethnic and the mainstream society which can be, finally, *connected*. Only one of Sanchita Islam’s three books will be mentioned here: *From Briarwood to Barishal to Brick Lane*, her 2002 anthology to which other writers of the Bangladeshi diaspora living in Briarwood (New York Banglatown), in Barishal (a district in Bangladesh) and London Brick Lane contributed, by replying with a prose piece or a poem to the question “where is home?”. This question, implying the dilemma of the immigrant, almost caught between cultures, is solved by elaborating a new concept of “home” that, following the words of critic Avtar Brah, overwhelms the boundaries of the homeland, “the mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” (Brah, 192) and cannot be simply translated into the “lived experience of a locality” (Brah, 180). By openly adopting a transnational perspective and employing the idea of “connection” which pervades her art, by

making the experiences of immigrants across the world correspond, by catching glimpses of one city in the description of another, Sanchita seems to find a solution to the dilemma by turning the idea of “home” into a “homing desire” (Brah, 180) thus uncovering the extraordinary potential of the phenomenon of globalization: promoting a project of peace and international communication.

Endnote

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2005: “New Asian American Writers and News from UK, Italy and Asia: Literature and the Visual Arts”.

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The Indian Garden

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A real garden is the theme of *The Assam Garden* (1985), a film by Mary McMurray. Helen, an Anglo-Indian lady now retired (Deborah Kerr), has recreated in England, along with her (now defunct) husband, the sort of garden which she used to have in Assam, a hill state in the North East of India, where the climate is mild and tea is grown. Because of its unusual nature, the garden excites the curiosity of an Indian lady, an immigrant who lives in the neighbourhood. This recognition will lead to an encounter between the two women and a friendship with many an interesting conversation – but these are beyond the scope of this paper.

My impression of this charming film is that Deborah Kerr's garden – though evidently Indian enough to catch the attention of an Indian – looked in fact very English and well-kept, with its rounded or long hedges of different shades of green, its agreeable asymmetry, tasteful mixture of tufts of flowers of different colours, a pond, and winding paths in a perfect simulation of a "natural" landscape. Equally English is the obsessive care that its owner Helen-Deborah Kerr personally devotes to it, in view of the impending local competition for the best garden in the district. Throughout the story she is weeding, pruning, raking dead leaves, planting and transplanting, throwing away weeds, manuring, and carting dirt in her wheelbarrow. Her efforts are justly rewarded: in the end she wins the first prize, only a few hours after being evicted from her house and forced to abandon this corner of paradise, which will probably disappear, along with her memories and a piece of her country's cultural history.

Helen's garden, in its exotic perfection, does not look, at least to a non-botanical eye, too different from the sort of garden one normally associates with the English landscape, but it is an idealization or perhaps a "translation" of an Indian garden into English, and there can be no doubt that gardens in India, private ones belonging to the servants of the Empire, were quite different. If we are to judge from literary accounts, what the colonizers enjoyed was precisely the basic unrestrained "diversity" of a garden in India, its unruliness and wildness, its refusal to be constrained within approved aesthetic boundaries, along with its strong colours and perfumes. The garden represented the quintessence of India, with its mystery, its luscious vegetation, and animals of every species, known, unknown and often dangerous. Sometimes there is a fatal enemy lurking in this earthly paradise, a man-eater, as in *The Anaconda*, a curious story by Matthew Gregory Lewis, set in Ceylon in the early part of the 19th century, in which a python threatens the life of an English couple, causing in the end the death of one of them. Or there is, as in Rumer Godden's *The River*, a poisonous cobra. Beyond the bougainvillea clumps, and the jacaranda trees or the rose turrets, beyond the hibiscus standards with their pink and scarlet flowers, with the scent of the cork tree flowers, near the pipal tree, and amidst the bamboos, a white boy, the protagonist's younger brother, lies dead, bitten by a snake, "spread starfish wise as if he had flung or tried to fling his body drawn up from his arms and legs in a small heap"¹.

In old age Rumer Godden recalled a happy tropical adolescence in her father's

plantation in Bengal in *Two Under the Indian Sun*, a joint autobiography, written with her sister Jon. Like other Anglo-Indian children (one is intensely reminded of Rudyard Kipling's own unhappy exile in the "house of desolation"), she and her sister, having reached their school age, were sent back to England to get a proper education. The long stay with their grandmother and two sad spinster aunts, in a desolate London apartment, thousands of miles and an ocean away from their parents, the two girls saw as a cruel punishment. Most painful of all, and very much like the two little Kiplings, they felt that it was a condemnation of their happy childhood, their home, and the pleasant climate of Narayanguj, a command to "forget". Thus on their return to Bengal, after five long years in cold London, the sight of their old garden was incredibly gratifying. "Until then", Godden writes, "we had not realized how homesick we had been:

[we had missed] the feeling of the sun baked Indian dust between the toes of our sandaled feet (...) and the smells (...) the honey smell of the fuzz buzz flowers of thorn trees in the sun (...) of coconut oil on shining black Indian hair (...) and of mustard cooking oil (...) ².

Now those cherished smells were under their nose again:

Here was a new world of scent and colour, warm in the sunlight (...)

(...) we saw roses and sweet peas, and flowers we had forgotten, hibiscus and oleanders. Magenta bougainvilleas climbed up to the top of tall trees. A wide gravelled drive made a half circle round an enormous tree whose feathery green reached as high as the roof parapet; in December it burst into a tent of white blossom and had round its foot a bed of amaryllis lilies with red-streaked trumpets. Lawns spread away on either side, lawns of unbelievable magnitude after the strip of London garden we had grown used to. On the left was a glimpse of a tennis court with screens of morning glory ³.

Half hidden by the climbing plants the almost forgotten plantation house appears, and their memory goes back to another phase of their life, and another separation from India:

(...) a great rectangular stucco-house (...) was hidden by plumbago and a hedge of poinsettia (...) afterwards in England we saw poinsettias being sold singly for their scarlet at Christmas. "Three shilling and sixpence each", said Nancy ⁴.

The Bengal garden was certainly not as manageable as the strip of garden they had grown used to in London, but it was far more amusing. All sorts of activities took place on its grounds:

the dobhi (washerman) and his wife and five or six of their sons spread washing on the grass to bleach; (...) the gate would open to let in the mattress man and his assistant carrying big bundles of fresh cotton and the strange looking wood and bamboo instruments of their trade. Tall and solemn (...) they would stalk to their own spot (...) sit themselves on the ground and wait for our mattresses and pillows to be brought to them (...) we would watch our mattresses being emptied of its stuffing, see the cotton being beaten and aired and tossed high in the sunshine (...) tufts of cotton came (...) to us on the breeze, alighting tantalizing on our table ⁵.

Certainly, only fifty years before, other Anglo-Indians who had stayed for a very long period in the subcontinent, had refused to have anything to do with a

garden near their homes for fear of mosquitoes and other dangerous visitors. John Lockwood Kipling, Rudyard's father, had turned the space around his cottage in Lahore into a sort of desert, to prevent intrusions of unwelcome animal and vegetal life. His biographer writes:

Their bungalow stood in a dusty compound devoid of shrubs and plants: this was because the Kiplings believed that shrubberies attracted insects and insects were the source of disease, a theory held by them long before the discoveries of Manson and Ross. In consequence the bungalow was dubbed by their neighbours Bikanir House, after the great Indian desert⁶.

Old Lockwood was indeed right, even if the real nature of malaria had not been discovered in the 1870s. He had two small children, and too many of his friends, young and old, were dying daily of malaria and other tropical diseases. In his day though, there were those, unlike him, who relished the intrusion of all kinds of unexpected "aliens" in their gardens, and in fact had appreciated their gardens precisely because of those presences. From unplanned occurrences and strange visitors they derived an emotion similar to that which their grandfathers, in undertaking their Grand Tour around continental Europe, had experienced at the sight of the peaks of the Alps and the Pyrenees, or the sublime seascapes of Italy and France, and the lakes, cities, castles, churches and convents of Catholic countries. India, with its intensely blue skies, Hindu temples, rivers and the snowy peaks of the Himalayas, the ruins of ancient forts and solitary mosques, the people with their bizarre and colourful costumes, their different traditions and cultures, art and handicrafts, the forests, elephants and tigers, came to embody a far more exotic picturesque. India presented another possibility for an emotional cult of beauty and mystery, halfway between romantic extravagance and the Victorian desire for imperial possessions. The English had responded to that impulse since the 18th century, when the English watercolorists Thomas and William Daniell, had travelled through the sub-continent recording in their aquatints its most charming landscapes; and in fact, in order to work faster, had used a *camera obscura*, a popular tool among the sightseeing British at home and abroad, which rearranged the disposition of elements in a view, and, by somehow deforming the picture, offered a ready-made perspective effect⁷.

If travellers in the days of the India Company had no time to relish the landscape at their leisure, in the 19th century the representatives of the Empire had enough time to contemplate it throughout the years and the change of seasons. In the autobiographical *In My Indian Garden* (1878) Philip Robinson, a post-romantic Anglo-Indian and brother of Kay Robinson, Kipling's chief editor at the *Civil and Military Gazette*, recounts his delight in the luxuriant landscape of northern India, or at least of the portion of it which was contained by his private garden. From the contemplation of its life and vitality he derived an immense pleasure, and sometimes a sort of religious awe, a connection with an idea of Creation itself. A myriad of activities go on incessantly within his garden walls. To him the most trivial events in the hard lives of humble creatures become the object of endless fascination. Contrary to what one might expect, only a few, if very intense, lines of his book are devoted to a description of trees and flowers, invariably and deliciously exotic:

The mysterious broad-leaved plantains with their strange spikes of fruit – there the dark mango. In a grove together (...) the spare-leaved peepul, that sacred yet

treacherous tree that drags down the humble shrine which it was placed to sanctify; the shapely tamarind, with its clouds of foliage; the graceful neem; the patulous teak, with its great leathern leaves, and the bamboos the tree-cat loves. Below them grow a wealth of roses, the lavender blossomed durantas, the cactus grotesque in growth, the spiky aloes, the poyntzettia with its stars of scarlet, the spiky aloes, the sick-scented jessamine and the quaint coral-trees; while all over shoots up the palm. The citron, lime, and orange trees are beautiful alike when they load the air with the perfume of their waxen flowers, or when they are snowing their sweet petals about them, or when heavy-fruited they trail their burdened branches to rest their yellow treasures on the ground⁸.

A large part of Philip Robinson's volume is devoted to a description of the many kinds of intruders "in transit" as it were, over or through his garden. Grouped in chapters under such headings as "The Birds", "Of Hens", "Corvus Splendens", "Green Parrots", "The Mynas", "The Seven Sisters", "The Mongoose", "The Grey Squirrel", "The Ants", "The Pariah Dog and the Cat", "The Pea-boy", "The Frogs", "The Jackals", they are the subject-matter of the first part of the book. Strange little visitors flow, or creep, or plunge into the space over his garden – from the oval beetles which dive into his drink, to the round beetles that drop into his soup, to moths and white ants, forming heaps of furry materials in the corners of the room, and many sorts of birds, both wild and domestic. Hens, above all, seem to exert a special fascination on the author of *In My Indian Garden*, from the dark bungalow hen, which presents "the muscles of a vulture and the eggs of a pigeon", to the common hens of all ages and temperaments in his kitchen yard, squatting over newly-planted flowers, or perpetually running away from the cook. There are kites, patiently flying in circles in the sky above, crows who sit patiently on the roof, expecting their prey, swarms of noisy green parrots hiding amongst the leafy branches of the mango tree and eating the still unripe fruit, and the birds called seven sisters, walking up and down in groups of seven "engaged in their empty babble". From his veranda he observes "the fruitless controversy of finches", or "the bickering of amatory sparrows", the "turmoil of kites", and the "democrat communism of crows". He admires the "republican" myna bird, "sober in mind as in apparel",

(...) the mongoose and the palm squirrel – who comes directly into the dining room and eats the fruit on your sideboard or into a vinery and incontinently borrow[s] your grapes⁹.

He is fascinated by ants:

(...) the most prominent members of Indian garden life and their enormous consumption of seeds (...) they have a head office- in most verandas [and] branch establishments in the bathrooms and attend to their endless tasks with energy and determination¹⁰.

The mystique of the Indian landscape is at its highest in the part of his book where Philip Robinson describes a catastrophic flood in the monsoon season, and its effects on the land. Screaming dogs, helpless, half-drowned sheep, rats, calves, and all sorts of pitiful creatures, are carried away incessantly by the waters, or float on the flooded grounds – while the crows watch silently, unusually quiet. A boat moves slowly, in a supernatural silence, amongst the top of the trees emerging from the waters, and the highest portions of minarets and domes, from

submerged mosques and Buddhist temples. Robinson is exalted at the strange horror of the desolate scene, and thrilled at the uncanny beauty of the submerged landscape. Nothing in this description could be farther removed from the idea of an English Victorian garden, of the sort that had been left back home – that supreme organization of men, plants and technology, which provided through a highly specialized pruning of roots and branches, ripe grapes for the table of the English in the cold months, and a large variety of potatoes and apples. Yet those very Englishmen, who in their native country had developed gardening as one of the fine arts, in India relished the wildness and randomness of the local flora, if only in their back yard. It seemed inevitable, in fact desirable, that a garden would slip out of control in the subcontinent – that was meant to happen, it was expected, and even enjoyed.

If the English in India revelled in the exotic and the picturesque, it is not so with the Indians. A couple of literary examples that come to the mind, from Indian novelists writing in English, show a totally different treatment of the theme of gardens and their inhabitants. In Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), in the old garden in Delhi where two sisters, Tara and Bim, meet after living apart for many years, the flowers are wilting and the ground is parched. The only inhabitant that is left in the family's dilapidated colonial mansion, Bim, an elderly intellectual spinster, appears as forlorn as the house itself. The grounds around the house look empty and exceedingly quiet, as does the whole district. After Independence, the departure of the British has deprived Delhi of its wealthiest inhabitants, while the old Moslem families who had the largest villas and gardens, have fled to Pakistan for fear of murder and expropriation – like the sisters' beloved neighbours who departed in a hurry one stormy night to reach Pakistan, now separated from India on the basis of culture and religion.

After much travelling and living abroad, the younger sister Tara is back in the old and quiet family house, only to find the climate unbearably hot, the rooms run down, a once well-kept garden dried up. But the old sights are still there, as well as familiar and almost forgotten sounds:

The koels began to call before daylight. Their voices rang out from the dark trees like an arrangement of bells, calling and echoing each others' calls, mocking and enticing each other over higher and shriller calls. More and more joined in as the sun rose and when Tara could no longer bear the querulous demand in their voices, she got up and went out onto the veranda to find the blank white glare of the summer sun thrusting in between the round pillars and the purple bougainvillea (...) ¹¹.

But nothing is really as it used to be:

A line of trees fringed the garden – fig and silver oak, mulberry and eucalyptus. Here there was still shade, it seemed to Tara, the only bit of cultivation left, everything else, even the papaya and lemon trees, seemed abandoned to dust and neglect, to struggle as they could against the heat and sun of summer.

(...)

The rose walk had been maintained almost as it was. Or was it? It seemed to Tara that there had been far more roses in it when she was a child – luscious shaggy pink ones, small white crisp ones tinged with green silky yellow ones that smelt of tea – and not just these small negligible crimson heads that lolled weakly on their thin stems ¹².

(...) Tara laughed (...) "Bim, the old rose walk is still here".

“Of course”, said Bim, “Only the roses grow smaller and sicker every year”, and she bent to shake a long spindly branch from which a fully blossomed rose dangled. It came apart instantly, revealing a small naked centre and a few pathetic stamens clinging to the bald head while the petals fell in a bunch to the chocolate earth below¹³.

Tara realizes all of a sudden how enormous changes have occurred in old Delhi, with the end of the colonial days, the Partition of India, the assassination of Gandhi and perhaps the end of his influence. The sub-continent is torn by an internal war between its two largest cultural groups, the vestiges of its ancient Islamic power are crumbling to dust, the old aristocracy and the partially anglicized upper bourgeoisie have lost prestige and power, their ancient houses are in need of repair, the garden themselves are dusty, wilted and deserted. The shrunken roses and the parched garden, along with their owner Bim, “grey and heavy now”, are a symbol, or a symptom of what her India has become, a place that, wisely, she (like the author of the novel) has left, in order to live abroad.

Unlike Anita Desai, R.K. Narayan never left his India. With the exception of one or two journeys in England and the United States, he has stayed there throughout the great changes of the last century, and has never ceased to describe in his fiction the confrontation between the immemorial customs of his country and its gradual westernization. In *Annamalai*, a short story of the 1970s, he offers, again an aspect of his favourite theme through the unusual perspective of an impossible relationship between a garden owner and his gardener.

Against the background of the democratic India of the 1960s, long after the English have gone, after the caste system has been (at least formally) abolished and modernity has arrived, southern India seems in fact to have changed very little. Next to the narrator, an elderly middle-class citizen, living by his profession – “reading and writing” – in his newly-bought suburban cottage, another India survives, extremely close but enormously different, the archaic India of far-away rural villages, untouched by modernity, stuck to old superstitions and mentalities. A symptom of this contrast is in the relationship of the narrator, very likely Narayan himself, and the protagonist of the story *Annamalai*, his self-appointed gardener, a bizarre character, capricious and totally incompetent, coming from nowhere (or rather from a remote village to which he has no intention to return) to care for the writer’s modest extent of grass and flowers. A garden and a master in a small town, in the lovely district of Mysore, are more appealing to him – as the reader will realize – than the responsibilities connected with his large family back in the village, with its incessant requests for money, the business partners, and the crazy neighbours he has left behind, with their quarrelsomeness habits and their obtuseness.

The master’s and the servant’s views about the world, and particularly about the garden, could not be more different – in their encounter more than a garden is at question: modern, humanistic India, and an ancient tribal culture collide, despite every effort to reach a mutual understanding. The result of this collision, that is, the management of the garden, is not a success, even if, for the reader at least, it is very funny. Narayan, or rather his fictional ego, has no authority over the small strip of land representing, with the cottage, the high point of his career, and some prosperity reached at last. He would like to contemplate from his window an orderly expanse of flowerbeds and green shrubs, an agreeable sight to inspire him

in his work and to pacify his spirit in his rest, but Annamalai has a different opinion. To begin with, he is superstitious, and has misgivings about letting passers-by learn his master's name – certain ill-meaning fellows might take advantage of it, and cast the evil eye on the garden:

He told me point blank when I went down to the garden: "Take away that name board from that gate, if you will forgive my saying so".

"Why?"

"All sorts of people read your name aloud while passing down the road. It is no good. Often urchins and tots, just learning to spell, shout your name and run off when I try to catch them. The other day, some women also read your name, and laughed to themselves".

(...) "Where should I hang that board now that I have it?"

He just said "Why not inside the house, among the pictures on the wall?"¹⁴

To Annamalai a name tag is just another picture, a set of mysterious figures that to his mind appear as a magic formula.

As to the plants themselves, and questions related to them, Annamalai always has peculiar explanations. And, as with everything else, in dealing with them he is touchy and "personal":

If he found a sprouting seed or any sign of life in the seedling he watered it twice a day, but if it showed no response to his living touch he looked outraged. "This should have come up so well, but it is the evil eye that scorches our plants (...) I know what to do now". He dipped his finger in a solution of white lime, and drew grotesque and strange emblems on a broken mud pot, and mounted it up prominently on a stick, so that those who entered our gate should first see the grotesque painting rather than the plants. He explained: "When people say: ah, how good this garden looks ! they speak with envy and then it burns up the plants; but when they see the picture there, they will be filled with revulsion, and our flowers will flourish"¹⁵.

Annamalai is not concerned with such trifles as botanical terms, but he is overly proud of his success when he can obtain some sprig from a neighbour's orchard to show to his master:

He returned clutching a drooping sapling (looking more like a shot-down bird) in his hand, held it aloft under my window (...)

"What is it" I asked dutifully, and his answer I knew even before he uttered it:

"Flower plant" (...) He made his own additions to the garden each day, planting wherever he fancied and soon I found that I could have no say in the matter (...) Our plants grew anyhow and anywhere and generally prospered although the only attention that Annamalai gave them was an ungrudging supply of water out of a hundred-foot-hose-pipe, which he turned on every leaf of every plant until it was doused and drowned. He also flung at their roots from time to time every kind of garbage and litter and called it manuring.

In a little while the writer's small plot of land is smothered by massive vegetation:

We had many rose plants (...) which had developed into leafy menacing entanglements, clawing passers-by; canna grew to gigantic heights, jasmine into wild

undergrowth with the blooms maliciously out of reach (...) Dahlias pushed themselves above ground after every monsoon, presented their blooms, and wilted and disappeared, but regenerated themselves again in the next season. No one could guess who planted them originally (...) though Annamalai took credit for it unreservedly¹⁶.

Occasionally – goes on Narayan – I protested when Tacoma hedges bordering the compound developed into green ramparts shutting off the view in every direction. Annamalai (...) would (...) look long and critically at the objects of my protest:

“Don’t think of them now, I will deal with them”.

“When?” I asked.

“As soon as we have the rains”, he would say (...)

When the rains did come, eventually, it would be no use reminding of his promise to trim the hedges, for he would definitely declare: “When the rain stops of course, for if a plant is trimmed in the rain, it rots (...)”¹⁷.

Suddenly, however, and despite his theories about gardening,

(...) he would arm himself one day with a scythe, and hack blindly at whatever came within his reach, not only the hedge I wanted trimmed, but also a lot of others I preferred to keep. When I protested against these depredations, he just said “The more we cut the better it will grow sir”. At the end of this activity all the plants having lost their outlines, look battered, and stood up like lean ghosts, with the ground littered green all over¹⁸.

The narrator is thus powerless against his gardener, a son of the jungle (a farmer by caste, or even an *adivasi*, a tribal man, though the author is not specific) who knows only two ways of dealing with trees – letting them grow as they please, or cutting them down altogether. One cannot blame him: his entire experience of gardening comes from being a peasant in a far-away region, left alone in a forest for years to gather elephant excrements, a rare fertilizer, and to load them on a truck which appeared from time to time to relieve his isolation.

For several reasons a garden in post-Independence India, looks different from the colonizers’ exotic heaven, where animals and plants concurred in forming an appropriate background to the inspired Anglo-Indians, and where humbly smiling *malis* (gardeners by caste) sat in picturesque corners, wearing their colourful turbans – they did not particularly evoke to the colonizer’s mind the crude reality of their poverty. In those days, as Edwin Arnold wrote in the preface to Philip Robinson’s book, “nothing could be vulgar in India”. But in recent years, rather than an earthly paradise, a garden may appear, as in Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day*, as a sort of desolate limbo, or, as in Narayan’s *Annamalai*, as a domestic hell, or a daily battleground between an owner who has no authority and an impostor of a gardener who, far from resembling the *mali* of so many old novels, uses the job as a basis for his personal deals.

The changed relationship between castes, or former castes, in post-colonial India is subverting the old habits of an ancient hierarchy, though it would seem also to offer ample matter for the novel of manners. Both narratives might be seen as metaphors of contemporary India. If Desai’s garden evokes the happy days in which various fundamentalisms had not risen to power, and the Islamic and the Hindu, regardless of differences, lived side by side in a civilized and cultivated

society, Narayan's garden might be seen as an outright satire of the recent social revolution, written by an old-fashioned (Brahmin) gentleman who seems to have some doubts about democracy. Although there is no question about their taking "sides", still the two authors would seem to remind themselves, and us, that independence and modernization have not spared their country some disappointments.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2005: “New Asian American Writers and News from UK, Italy and Asia: Literature and the Visual Arts”.

¹ R. Godden, *The River*, Pan Books, 1991 (c. 1946), p. 79.

² J. and R. Godden, *Two Under the Indian Sun*, A. Knopf, New York, 1966, p. 20.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁶ A.R. Ankers, *The Pater; John Lockwood Kipling, His Life and Times*, Pond View Books, Oxford, 1988, p. 73.

⁷ Thomas et William Daniell, *Passages en Inde. Hier et aujourd'hui*, Monum, Editions du patrimoine, Paris, 2005, p. 21.

⁸ P. Robinson, *In My Indian Garden*, with a preface by E. Arnold, Samson, Low, Master and Rivington, London, 1878, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

¹¹ A. Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, Penguin Books, 1980, p. 1.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁴ R.K. Narayan, *Annamalai in A Horse and Two Goats*, Viking, New York, 1970, pp. 76-77.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

The Case of Colin Johnson/ Mudrooroo Nyoongah: The Discovery of Aboriginality and Its Denial*

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Colin Johnson, who in 1965 became the first aboriginal writer to publish a novel, has been considered for thirty years the main representative figure of aboriginal literature by both the indigenous and academic communities. He has published several novels, articles and critical works always identifying himself as an aborigine. He was also the first aboriginal to publish a critical work on indigenous literature *Writing from the Fringe*, in 1990. This paper considers how the discovery in 1996 of the author's non-aboriginal heritage has changed the attitude of the aboriginal community towards Johnson. The way in which the construction of his aboriginal personality can to a certain extent be seen as a choice by the author himself or as a condition attributed to him by Australian society will also be analyzed. Furthermore I will seek to relate issues surrounding Mudrooroo's aboriginal identity to certain facets of the postcolonial discourse.

The publication of Colin Johnson's first novel *Wild Cat Falling*, in 1965, constitutes a turning point in aboriginal history and Australian society, that would culminate in the referendum recognizing aborigines as Australian citizens. The publication was possible with the patronage of Mary Durack¹, Australian novelist and poet who helped Johnson when he had been released from prison in 1957, stimulated his interest in writing and wrote a foreword to his novel. She is the first intellectual to refer to Johnson as an aboriginal and she stresses also his belonging to the Bibbulmun people of Western Australia². This statement, which would prompt many discussions in 1996, had been unquestioned at the time of publishing and repeated many times by the author himself for the following thirty years, up until 1995³. The author's identification as an aborigine increases over time and can be traced in the development of his literary career: as he states "Indigenous literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the invaders of our land"⁴.

The publication of *Wild Cat Falling* was seen as positive by the aboriginal community, highlighted by the magazine *Dawn* naming him as an aboriginal intellectual⁵. In this work an aboriginal character is described for the first time by an author belonging to the same culture. In the novel, a semi-autobiographical one, the protagonist is a young unnamed aboriginal who is released from Fremantle prison, where the author himself had spent one year. The character's sense of belonging nowhere, due to his not being a full aborigine, nor a full Australian is a fundamental question in Australian society where these people are considered as outsiders from both sides, a condition that had preoccupied the author himself as a young man. Referring to this situation he says: "they were caught in a no-man's land between black and white. To the whites they were considered black, and to the blacks they were considered quislings"⁶.

Johnson's novels always deal with aboriginal characters and their relations with white settlers. *Doctor Woreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), deals with early 19th century attempts by white Tasmanian settlers to eradicate the indigenous population. In this novel the protagonist sees the arrival of the *nums*, the English who were considered by the aboriginal community as

“spirits of the dead returning”⁷.

The author’s commitment to the cause of his people drove him in 1988 to change his name to a more indigenous one. He explains having been influenced by aboriginal poet Kath Walker, who had changed her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, because, as the author says “she explained me that her name Oodgeroo means *paperbark* and that as creative writer our totem⁸, or dreaming should be the paperbark tree”⁹. Thus Johnson has changed his name to Mudrooroo Narogin, being first the name of the paperbark¹⁰ tree in his people’s language and Narogin his place of birth. Later the author would take as his last name Nyoongah, the name of his people¹¹.

The changing of his name further signifies his deepening commitment to the aboriginal cause which found its outlet in his idea of writing that was concerned with the experiences and aspirations of indigenous people. He states that “the Indigenous writers who arose in the sixties were the products of assimilation revolting against assimilation”¹². 1988 is considered by Mudrooroo as the year when, “creative writing was replaced in importance by the ‘life story’”¹³. On different occasions, he criticizes ‘life stories’ literature using his intellectual “stature” to judge what could be considered aboriginal and what couldn’t. In particular he attacks Sally Morgan, an aboriginal writer who discovered as an adult her indigenous heritage, writing in *My Place* (1987) about the story of her relatives in an attempt to find her roots. Johnson doesn’t consider Morgan’s work as an aboriginal one because according to him her identification with aborigines is not a sufficient condition to make her an aborigine. This statement was later used against the author himself. Johnson and Morgan’s situations were completely opposite. He had always “known” that he was an aborigine and found out that he wasn’t, while she discovered it when she was an adult. The common point was that they both wanted to be recognised as aboriginal.

Mudrooroo’s reaction to Sally Morgan’s work can justify other aborigines’ reaction to his lack of aboriginal ancestry. However, as it has been asserted by some critics¹⁴, Mudrooroo’s position is different, because the author was identified as indigenous in a moment when to be an aborigine wasn’t easy and has been discriminated against for this reason. According to the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, three criteria have to be satisfied to be considered an aborigine: “Being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and being accepted as such by the community in which you live, or formally lived”¹⁵. The validity of these criteria has been questioned by prominent aboriginal activist Michael Dodson, who sees it as unjust that indigenous people should have to authenticate their aboriginality:

I cannot stand here, even as an aboriginal person and say what aboriginality is. To do so would be a violation of the right to self-determination and the right of peoples to establish their own identity. It would also be to fall into the trap of allowing aboriginality to be another fixed category. And more than enough “fixing” has already occurred¹⁶.

In 1995 Mudrooroo refers to this institute (IATSIS) as an “almost completely white organization (...) devoted to the Native, and often the study is concerned not with the Native but with the structure of the Master text”¹⁷. Mudrooroo’s statement almost perfectly mirrors Edward Said’s definition of *Orientalism*¹⁸ as Western

culture's attempts to describe and categorize Eastern or colonial cultures. Particularly important to Said's analysis were the structures developed by Western culture in relation to the study of the so called "orient", of which the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is a perfect example.

In spite of being reunited with his biological family and having declared that he was no longer sure of his heritage, in 1992 Mudrooroo hadn't changed his way of life and kept writing and identifying himself as an aboriginal. In 1996 Victoria Laurie published "Identity Crisis"¹⁹, where she exposed the research made by Mudrooroo's sister, Betty Polglaze, proving that he does not have aboriginal heritage: he is of African-American origin on his father's side and of Irish origin on his mother's one. The reaction of the aboriginal and academic communities to the discovery of his heritage created a division between his defenders and detractors. The strongest reaction has been advanced by the activist Robert Eggington, co-ordinator of the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation, who condemned Mudrooroo and has called for his books to be removed from all bookshops and libraries²⁰. Following this reaction, Nyoongah Elders asked Mudrooroo to prove his descent from their family. Mudrooroo didn't answer the invitation and the family rejected his claim of belonging to the Nyoongah family.

The author's initial lack of a public statement has aroused many hypotheses and speculations. Many have tried to defend the author and some seem convinced that the author could have been sincere. We know that his father had died before he was born and that he stayed with his mother until he was nine years old and then was taken into an institution, the Clontarf Boys²¹. Mudrooroo doesn't seem to have seen his mother for a long time, but as Maureen Clark points out it is unlikely he could have forgotten her. However first notices of Johnson's uncertain origin can be found in the 1955 official records of the Clontarf Boys' institution, where it is explained that "because of his dark (or coloured) appearance, Johnson could have been of Indian, Negro or part aboriginal descent"²².

The controversy over Mudrooroo's case emerges amongst a sequence of Australian writers whose claims to be Aboriginal have proved to be a fraud; among them, aboriginal writer B. Wongar who proved to be Streten Bozic, a Serbian immigrant, a case involving the female writer Wanda Koolmatrie who was in fact a male, Leon Carmen. Furthermore, the fact that Elizabeth Durack, sister of Mary, has for a while been painting pretending to be the aboriginal male artist Eddie Burrup, has been used as a way of condemning Mudrooroo, but the situation can't be compared even if suspicions have arisen that Mudrooroo had taken an aboriginal identity so that he could become the first indigenous writer in Australia²³.

Some critics have associated Mudrooroo's case with other artists that have assumed an aboriginal identity. These artists have been labelled as impostors and condemned by the aboriginal community. Van Den Berg, a Nyoongah commentator, has accused Mudrooroo of being an impostor and has complained that aborigines' identities are being stolen²⁴. It could however be argued that Mudrooroo's situation is different. The author hasn't used his aboriginal identity only for literary purposes, but he has lived as an indigenous person, and he hasn't created a pseudonym, he has changed his English name. Furthermore, the time in which he was considered an aborigine was the 1960s, a very hard period for

indigenous people who didn't have political rights and were not yet recognized as Australian citizens.

Finally in 1997, Mudrooroo published an article, "Tell them you're Indian"²⁵, where he explains his reasons. He has identified as an aborigine because everyone had always considered him as such. The same identity was the one that was attributed to him by Mary Durak when writing the foreword (introduction) to his novel and by everyone for the colour of his skin. The importance attributed by Mary Durack to this element is stressed in her words: "he showed little obvious trace of native blood"²⁶. Mudrooroo also adds that: "The question of blood is what else but a clinging on to Victorian classification of race (...)"²⁷ and criticizes aborigines for using the same methods of discrimination as other Australians. He also says that in a multicultural Australia, a fixed identity can't exist. The author stresses his commitment to the aboriginal cause saying that "whatever my identity is, it rests on my history of over fifty years and that is that"²⁸.

It is interesting to notice that "tell them you're Indian", is a sentence taken from Sally Morgan's novel. When Sally as a child asks her mother where they are from because her schoolmates want to know it, her mum's answer is "tell them you're Indian"²⁹. The use of this sentence could be considered as an assertion of the author's identification with the indigenous in years when many aborigines were trying to "pass for others" in order not to be discriminated against. Mudrooroo, who is accused of consciously appropriating an identity that didn't belong to him, has defended that identity for his entire life. He had been attributed an identity and he has accepted it. In one of his latest critical works Mudrooroo constantly uses the words "for us aboriginal people"³⁰ and indeed the title of the book, *Us Mob*, signifies that he identifies as an aboriginal.

Mudrooroo's identification with indigenous Australians should be considered as a fundamental element when questioning his honesty and belief of being an Aborigine. In 1983 Jack Davis, when asked whether Archie Weller³¹ and Faith Bandler³² could be considered real aborigines, replies that they have lived, identified and written as aborigines. He further adds that "when the Commonwealth had to have a term for aborigines back in 1967 (...) their definition was that anyone is an aboriginal if they like to define themselves as being one"³³. This same statement could be applied to Mudrooroo and even if his reasons for identifying as an aborigine can be questioned, the validity of his critical works and novels is undeniable.

Tired with all these debates, in 2001 Mudrooroo left Australia and returned to India where he had lived in the past. He now lives in Nepal and "when questioned about his dubious genealogy, he replies with a smile, 'In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*'³⁴, it says that the antecedents of a hero are always in doubt"³⁵.

I would like to conclude this paper with Mudrooroo's assertion:

Identity is a fragile thing and it can be taken away just as it can be given³⁶.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2005: "New Asian American Writers and News from UK, Italy and Asia: Literature and the Visual Arts".

¹ Clark, *Mudrooroo: A Likely Story, Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia*, 2003, p. 5.

² See Mudrooroo, *Wild Cat Falling*, 1965, p. 133.

³ Mudrooroo, *Us Mob*, 1995, p. 11

⁴ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, 1997, p. 2.

⁵ "Smoke Signals", *Dawn*, March 1965, p. 12. Online source: <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/dawn/docs/v14/s03/14.pdf>, 15 June 2005.

⁶ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1997, p. 15.

⁷ Mudrooroo, *Doctor Woreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, 1983, p. 11.

⁸ According to Mudrooroo "Each of us has or should have a totem or special symbol representing our spiritual attachment to our own Ancestral Spirit. This is in accord with our belief that each tribal group is descended from Ancestors of the Dreamtime", See *Us Mob*, 1995, p. 201.

⁹ Mudrooroo, "Paperbark", 1988, p. 36.

¹⁰ The Paperbark tree is a *melaleuca*, a tree in the eucalyptus family with paper-like bark used by Aboriginal people for painting.

¹¹ He has since changed his name to Mudrooroo.

¹² Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, 1997, p. 14.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹⁴ See Millet Patsy, "Identity Parade", 1996, p. 75; Foley Gary, "Muddy Waters: Archie, Mudrooroo & Aboriginality", 1997.

¹⁵ "Confirmation of Aboriginality or Torres Strait Islander Descent" (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989). The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is the world's premier institution for information and research about the cultures and lifestyles of aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. See http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/library/family_history_tracing/confirmation_of_aboriginality, 16 June 2005.

¹⁶ Dodson, Michael, "The End in the Beginning: Re(de)fining Aboriginality", 1994, p. 13.

¹⁷ Mudrooroo, *Us Mob*, 1995, p. 9.

¹⁸ Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, 1978.

¹⁹ Laurie, Victoria, *The Australian Magazine*, 20-21 July 1996, pp. 28-32.

²⁰ Clark, *Mudrooroo: A Likely Story, Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia*, 2003, p. 27.

²¹ "Christian Brothers' Orphanage where the author spent seven years of his childhood between 1947 and 1955". See Clark, 2003, p. 17.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 39.

²³ Clark, "Unmasking Mudrooroo", 2001, p. 56.

²⁴ Van Den Berg, "Intellectual Property Rights For Aboriginal People", 1998.

- ²⁵ Mudrooroo, "Tell them you're Indian", 1997.
- ²⁶ Durack Mary, "Foreword", *Wild Cat Falling*, 1965, p. 135.
- ²⁷ Mudrooroo, "Tell them you're Indian", 1997, p. 260.
- ²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 264.
- ²⁹ Morgan, Sally, *My Place*, 1987, p. 43.
- ³⁰ Mudrooroo, *Us Mob*, p. 200.
- ³¹ Archie Weller wrote *The Day of the Dog*, 1980.
- ³² Faith Bandler is an Australian civil rights activist of South Sea Island heritage. She had been very active in the campaign for the 1967 referendum. Her book *Wacvie* (1977) deals with the minority group of the South Pacific. See Davis Jack, "Aboriginal Writing: A Personal View", p. 14.
- ³³ Davis, 1985, p. 17.
- ³⁴ Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 1949.
- ³⁵ See Mudrooroo's official website, April 2003, <http://www.mudrooroo.com/4574.html>, 10 May 2005.
- ³⁶ Mudrooroo, "Tell them you're Indian", 1997, p. 263.

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A Visit to a Brama Temple in India*

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This paper is the result of one of the meetings we had with the other students of the Master in “Literature and Informatics”. The starting point of the discussion was Lina Unali’s book *Generale Andalus*¹ and everyone was invited to say something about memories of the past in their families and the way of keeping them alive, the debt we have to pay to the people that lived before us, as they influence our lives. We also talked about the worshipping of ancestors especially in Eastern cultures.

And this is my personal contribute, what I experienced during a visit to Northern India.

When I heard that the second stop of our tour to Rajasthan was in Pushkar, I confess that I thought it was only a rest in a strategic place to spend the night during the long couch run from Dehli to the heart of the region, the towns of Jaipur, Jodpur, Jaisalmrer being our final goal.

We arrived there at night after 11 hours on a coach that made me understand what travelling on Indian roads meant: a continuous overtaking in a perennial deafening horn sound, constantly invited by the lorries in front of us with a colourful painted sign on their back to: “HORN PLEASE”; and your sikh driver that accepts this invitation any time, even when on your right (ON YOUR RIGHT... yes, the same frightening sensation you have in GB when you drive or sit in the front seat, multiplied by thousand) even when, I was saying, another truck is coming in the opposite direction only a few metres in front of you.

For a dozen of times I could not refrain from screaming at the sight of the opposite vehicle approaching dangerously, so I decided to dive into my *Lonely Planet* guide book, hoping that it would not, as usual, terrorize me as well with the dangers of being robbed by local people.

Besides being nowadays well known by tourists for its spectacular Camel Fair, Pushkar is really a unique place in India, mentioned even in the Tirtha-Yatra, a section of the great Indian epic work *Mahabharata*.

Tirtha-Yatra are the sacred wades, the worship places always on the borders of a lake or a river as the starting point of the grand tour, the pilgrimage of the subcontinent that continues clockwise, touching all the sacred cities of India. Its importance dates back to the first millennium B.C. and went on for centuries (the Chinese monk Fa-Hsien in the 5th century and other travellers, the first to describe India, speak of this place) until it lost its importance and other tirthas like Mathura or Varanasi attracted more pilgrims.

And I was reading:

Pushkar is a very important pilgrimage centre, the only place in India to have a temple consecrated to Brahma and devout Hindus should visit it at least once in their lifetime

when on the same page a box entitled “P. Passports” attracted my attention:

You can recognize travellers who’ve been to the ghats in P. by the red ribbons called

P. Passports tied around their wrists. Getting one can be an expensive procedure if you allow yourself being bullied (...) (be careful, I said to myself, here comes the suspicious and dangerous part) (...) into a more expensive donation than you wanted to give... Some travellers put on a red ribbon prior to visiting the lake to avoid being approached by a priest altogether².

Should I wear the ribbon the next day before my visit? Or should I have been more trustful in the honesty of Hindu brahmins?

What hit me the next morning during the visit was not the temple itself, but the beauty of the lake around which Pushkar lays.

The temple is not so different from the other holy places in India: white steps leading to a high platform, green and blue, a central cell surmounted by a red spire, a statue of the God.

Unlike the other temples where Brahma is always present, but not as the main icon, here he is worshipped disjointedly from the other two divinities of the Hindu Trinity, the Trimurti, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer.

Brahma is the Creator, the dreamer of the Universe, reality itself being his dream and he is generated by Brahman, the eternal, uncreated and infinite One. He is usually depicted with four bearded faces facing the four directions and four hands, holding different objects: the book of the Vedas, a rosary, a water-pot, a sceptre, a spoon, and is standing on a lotus flower that rises from Vishnu's navel, symbolizing the interdependence of the gods. He is generally shown as having four arms, holding *aksamala* (rosary), *kusaa* grass, ladle, spoon, *kamandala* (a water pot), and a leafy manuscript respectively. Symbolically, the rosary indicates his creative nature. The *kusaa* grass, the ladle and the spoon indicate his familiarity with the Vedic rituals. The *kamandala* denotes his meditative and spiritual qualities. Brahma is known as *Kanja* or water born and *Hiranyagarbha* or the universal germ, because at the beginning of creation, he was generated out of the golden egg laid by Brahman that emerged out of the primal waters. Having manifested himself, he created Vac (meaning speech, sound) also called Saraswathi, that became his wife. Many schools in India start classes with a mass prayer to this goddess representing learning and knowledge.

As the emanation of a desire, a thought, the only active role that Brahma plays is during the Creation of the Universe, the rest of the time he is in meditation and is therefore regarded as an aloof, distant figure by Hindu devotees that direct their veneration to more sympathetic divinities.

I think the same happens in Christianity: churches are always dedicated to Christ, Saints or the Holy Mother, never to God the Creator himself, because human beings feel them nearer to their lives. When the great act of Creation is through the relationship between man and the Creator ends and we are left alone.

But maybe this is a logical explanation coming from my corrupted Western mind.

According to one of the many Hindu legends the decreasing importance of the cult of Brahma was caused by different incidents that caused him to fall in disgrace.

Indians always create a story, or thousands of stories, for every single place,

event, divinity: according to one of these the sacred lake of Pushkar sprang up at the spot where Brahma dropped a lotus flower from the sky and P. takes its name from this incident – *pushp* means flower and *kar* hand. He wanted to perform a *yagna*, a sacrifice, at the lake in a full-moon night, a ceremony that required the presence of his consort, Saraswathi, but she was late and he quickly married a convenient milkmaid, Gayatri. When Saraswathi arrived and discovered her seated beside B., she got furious and vowed that her husband would be forgotten by the people of the earth.

Actually in Pushkar you can see the two temples dedicated to Savitri, as Brahma's wife is also called, and Gayatri standing on the top of two opposite hills facing the lake.

After the visit to the temples I was approaching the *gahts*, the steps descending to the water, and our guide was explaining that part of Gandhi's ashes were dispersed here when...

Here comes the Brahmin with his offer to perform the *puja* and the long bargaining started.

In fact, even if advised by *The Lonely Planet* authors TO BARGAIN HARD!!, I was unable to go on for more than few minutes. So we agreed for 500 rupees for a *puja*, a holy ceremony performed in memory of my beloved ones, and I must confess that I felt defrauded because I knew that our driver's salary was less than that: I thought that all I was going to have in return would have been some incomprehensible sentences in Sanskrit and a string around my wrist (the famous Pushkar passport).

But it was more than that.

The place was really magic and suggestive. If you look at the photos of the lake it really reminds you of a lotus flower, or a navel, and in where else than here could Hindus worship the generator, the creator of Life?

I was pronouncing loudly the names of the people in my family I had lost, as the Brahmin had asked me to do, and I was surprised to hear my voice speaking them up for the first time, after their death. I was saying their names as he was throwing colourful petals of exotic flowers into the waters, while handing me the half of a coconut full of water to pour into the lake.

The rosy waters in the morning light, the colourful petals floating, and I felt the knots that were entangling my soul and prevented a part of me from living peacefully, completely unbinding: painful memories, regrets, miseries kept inside, never spoken, were melting away.

I was letting all the sorrows still strangling me, fall with the water I was pouring into the lake: my father's sudden death, my brother's extremely painful agony, all my grandparents I had not loved because dead long before I was born. I was reconciling with my past, with all those who were no longer with me, that I had tried to hold back, unable to let them go.

Suggestion? Spell of the place? And what is suggestion but our mind convincing us that what we perceive is what we feel inside ourselves, that there is a correspondence between our senses and our soul? What is reality but our reality, what we consider right and true in that particular moment?

I had to travel miles and miles to discover that the pain inside forbade me to walk lightly along my path. When we are so far away from our daily reality everything suddenly appears clearer, more meaningful and we can see that in the dark side of our soul everything is illuminated, at last.

I am citing here Safran Foer's first novel because I found some similarities with his search of the past of his family in a foreign, far away country and mine, and he is ending his novel with this sentence "Everything is illuminated by the light of the past"³.

Another connection I discovered later links my destiny to this place in India: as I said before Pushkar is a *tathra*, a wade, by the water, like all sacred places, and the name of my family is connected to water as well. Vat means exactly wade in the Ladin language of Friuli.

If it is true that names have meaning, as Mahasveta Devi states in one of her "Breast Stories" "*Choli ke picche*"⁴, that names keep inside them and evoke something that is related to our way of approaching the world, nature, people, then I must be grateful to her country because I found the meaning of my name there.

Endnotes

* This paper was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2005: “New Asian American Writers and News from UK, Italy and Asia: Literature and the Visual Arts”.

¹ Lina Unali, *Generale Andalus*, Sun Moon Lake, Roma, 2004.

² Monique Choy/ Sarina Singh, *Rajasthan*, Lonely Planet Publications Pty, 2002.

³ Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*, Houghton Mifflin Co., N.Y., 2002.

⁴ Mahasweta Devi, *Breast Stories*, Seagull Books, 1997.

An Interview to Alessandro Unali*

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L. Unali: Is there any evidence of a particular pride of European telecommunications when compared with those of other Continents, such as Asia for instance?

A. Unali: It may have been so in the past. Nowadays one looks at Asia, and I think correctly, as to a huge opportunity. The world of telecommunications is undoubtedly one of the fastest, both in terms of technological evolution and in terms of market, and for this reason it must inevitably behave pragmatically. A delay of a few weeks later between you and your competitors could mean a complete failure for your business.

L. Unali: What kind of information can you obtain from where you are now about what is happening in China in the field of telecommunications?

A. Unali: China is moving fast in the field of telecommunications, as almost in every other field. There is a fast growing trend in favour of the use of cell-phones, and telecommunications in general, and it will remain such for many years to come. We should keep in mind the high number of inhabitants and the conditions of technological backwardness, which are still present in vast areas of the country.

For this reason, certain Chinese firms, almost unknown to the majority of Western people, are actually turning into world giants which beyond satisfying the internal demand, are ready to “invade” the West with cheap, but technologically ultra-modern, products. Moreover, joint ventures are becoming increasingly popular.

The latest news on the subject is that Nokia, the great manager of Finnish mobile telecommunications has declared an investment of more than 100 million dollars to cooperate with the Chinese China Putian to research and develop new technology.

L. Unali: Which is the most extraordinary piece of information you can give us in relation to the world of communications in Asia, in particular as far as Japan is concerned?

A. Unali: The most interesting piece of information coming from Japan is that Japanese credit cards have formed an alliance in order to promote the development of wallet phones, that is to say, cell-phones that can be used as credit cards for all practical purposes. The advantages would be plenty, first of all that they could solve the problem of fraud, because any purchase would always be associated with a telephone number.

Vodafone K.K. is preparing a new fast service for 3G networks (UMTS) that will allow data transfers up to the speed of 14 megabits per second. Consider that today the most developed commercial offer for family internet does not exceed 10 megabits per second.

This would be a further stimulus to develop the 3G services, which in Japan are recording high percentages of growth.

L. Unali: What do you know about telecommunications in Vietnam, Laos and

Cambodia?

A. Unali: The situation in these Countries is very different from the Chinese one and certainly less developed.

In Vietnam Alcatel (giant manager of French telecommunications) won a contract with Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications Corporation to develop the infrastructures for fixed and mobile telecommunication services. According to an already signed agreement, in the first semester of 2005, the number of fixed telephones should have reached five new provinces and about two million Vietnamese.

In Laos ZTE Corporation (the greatest provider in Chinese telecommunications) has signed an agreement to provide the Country with a UMTS network that will cover the biggest cities by means of a connection through Thailand.

L. Unali: Is the world of telecommunications influenced, in your opinion, by the migratory process and by the large movements of people from one land to the other?

A. Unali: I would definitely say so. As far as telecommunications are concerned, the most evident result consists in the decrease in prices. This is due, beside the general liberalization of the market, to the need for huge migratory masses to communicate.

Fifteen years ago calling the US would cost seven times more than it does today. In the past and in a “less globalised” world those phone calls would appear as less urgent.

I think, on the other hand, that other considerations should be made concerning mobile telecommunications. Operators of non-global dimensions, such as Vodafone, are looking for alliances that would be capable of giving answers to the increasing demand due to the people’s mobility.

This does not only mean to be always reachable, but it also means to make use of the services you generally use, regardless of the place in which you are.

L. Unali: Can you say that the world of telecommunications is the privileged place for a future international union?

A. Unali: I definitely can; its speed and need for integration are incompatible with limitations of any kind. “To think global” is the only way to understand this world, whether you want to see it from a technological point of view or from the point of view of the customer.

L. Unali: How do you think Asia considers Europe in relation to the subject we are dealing with?

A. Unali: Asia has certainly considered Europe and the West as important targets, even if there are significant differences between the various Countries.

Undoubtedly the centre of gravity of this world is inevitably moving eastwards and only the future will tell us if that is occurring in the right way or not.

L. Unali: How do you overcome linguistic differences between Asia and the West?

A. Unali: As for other fields in the past, linguistic problems have been overcome

by means of the English language, of which telecommunications and informatics are the slaves par excellence. Its use in the field of telecommunications is so well-established and taken for granted that I would call it a non problem, considering in particular Chinese pragmatism, which has overcome in a few years and earlier than the linguistic one, that huge cultural gap that separates China from the West and in such a way that China is ready today to invade our markets with goods of all kinds.

Endnote

* This interview was read at the AW.dir Conference, II University of Rome, 2005: “New Asian American Writers and News from UK, Italy and Asia: Literature and the Visual Arts”.



“Chicago River”, photo by Elisabetta Marino, reproduced from Lina Unali’s volume entitled *Materia Cinese – Chinese Matter* (Sun Moon Lake, 2003).

Contributors

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Serena Fusco majored in English and Chinese Literature and obtained her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Naples Orientale in 2004. She taught English at the University of Naples Orientale and is currently a Research Fellow at the same University. She has published on Chinese American, Filipino American, Korean American, and Chinese diasporic literature, as well as on East/West comparative literature. Her interests also include feminist and queer theory, biopolitics, detective fiction, the politics of visibility, the inherent transnationalism of modernity, and diaspora studies. She recently spent a postdoctoral research period in the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She is currently working on a book on Chinese American women's literature, the Chinese diaspora, and cultural translation.

Heather Gardner is a lecturer in English literature at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. She has published a book on Shakespeare and one on Shadwell and has written many essays on English and American novelists, on Byron, the Brontë, T.S. Eliot and Beckett. She has been recently specializing in British and American Asian Literature.

Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard was born in Poland and lives in France. She studied in Poland, Portugal, France and the USA and earned her Ph.D. from the University of Tours, France, in 2001. Her early research focused on Native American novelists such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko and James Welch. Then she broadened its scope to compare the writings of women belonging to different ethnic groups: Asian American, Black American and Native American. Thus, in her Ph.D. dissertation, she focused on three contemporary women novelists: Louise Erdrich, Amy Tan and Gloria Naylor. Her subsequent research deals with the issues of acculturation, immigration and identity perception from a comparative point of view. Although the writers she has been working on are usually American, she has also presented a paper juxtaposing Chinese American and North African French immigration fiction. She is a member of a few research associations, such as MESEA, CAAR and EAAS.

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Alessandro Unali is an electronics engineer. Since 1999 he has been working at Vodafone Italia where he holds an Application Manager position within the Technologies Department.

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