

“The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting:”

Contemporary Fictions and the Rewriting of histories

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Abstract

This thesis argues that a prominent concern among contemporary writers of fiction is the recuperation of lost or occluded histories. Increasingly, contemporary writers, especially postcolonial writers, are using the medium of fiction to explore those areas of political and cultural history that have been written over or unwritten by the dominant narrative of “official” History. The act of excavating these past histories is simultaneously both traumatic and liberating – which is not to suggest that liberation itself is without pain and trauma. The retelling of traumatic pasts can lead, as is portrayed in *The God of Small Things* (1997), to further trauma and pain.

Postcolonial writers (and much of the world today can be construed as postcolonial in one way or another) are seeking to bring to the fore stories of the past which break down the rigid binaries upon which colonialism built its various empires, literal and ideological. Such writing has in a sense been enabled by the collapse, in postcolonial and postmodernist discourse, of the Grand Narrative of History, and its fragmentation into a plurality of competing discourses and histories.

The associated collapse of the boundary between history and fiction is recognized in the useful generic marker “historiographic metafiction,” coined by Linda Hutcheon. The texts examined in this study are all variants of this emerging contemporary genre. What they also have in common is a concern with the consequences of exile or diaspora. This study thus explores some of the representations of how the exilic experience impinges on the development of identity in the postcolonial world. The identities of “displaced” people must undergo constant change in order to adjust to the new spaces into which they move, both literal and metaphorical, and yet critical to this adjustment is the cultural continuity provided by psychologically satisfying stories about the past.

The study shows that what the chosen texts share at bottom is their mutual need to retell the lost pasts of their characters, the trauma that such retelling evokes and the new histories to which they give birth. These texts generate new histories which subvert, enrich, and pre-empt formal closure for the narratives of history which determine the identities of nations.

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Introduction

But unshed tears can turn you rancid. So
can memory. So can biting your tongue.

(Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*)

Historiographic Metafiction

This study explores an important aspect of contemporary fiction, namely, how the writing and meaning of fiction is influenced by the interplay between fiction and history. It argues, in concert with some notable literary theorists and historians of the present day, that history cannot be construed as a collection of facts about actual events. Instead, it is more appropriately interpreted as the “story” developed from an *interpretation* of the events. It is by now a commonplace that the narratives which constitute “History,” with a capital “H,” are interpretations of events from the vantage point of those who have the power and influence to write History. The corollary of this, of course, is that these Histories will include events deemed by their writers to be important to themselves, to the culture and development of the group to which they regard themselves as belonging, at the expense of events deemed less important. All narratives, as Foucault (1972) has shown us, are in one way or another discourses of power. As Hayden White (1989, 4) puts it:

Narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of story.... What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? In the enigma of this wish, this desire, we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general, an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity.

Narrative, as Frederic Jameson (1989) has formulated it, is a socially symbolic act of the political unconscious. We choose our memories to suit the story we wish to remember about ourselves, just as societies and nations select their memories and

create their Histories as a way of creating and defining a group identity. To grant authority to his selective narrative the narrator of History must assume, as White (1989, 6) suggests, a conflation of “the true” and “the real,” a conflation achievable only via the narrativization of events. By unveiling the discursive nature of Histories, writers like Foucault, White and Jameson (descendants of Nietzsche) have shown the ideological imperative behind the conflation of “the true” with “the real.”

In his seminal work *The Post-Modern Condition* (1979), Jean-Francois Lyotard showed that in the postmodern era Grand Narratives or “metanarratives” of “Truth” had collapsed, partly because people had become aware of their provisional and discursive nature. What Lyotard termed an “incredulity towards metanarrativity” became the catchphrase of the postmodernist movement. As he put it: “The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation” (quoted in Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 359).

There is, however, a danger implicit in the unveiling practices of postmodernism. But by exposing the fragility and discursivity of all historical “truth” and the metanarratives that authorize it, postmodern thought has also opened a proverbial Pandora’s Box. We find ourselves floundering in the labyrinth of Jean Baudrillard’s “simulacrum,” or forever confined within the “prison-house of language” (Jameson). While this debate is not one that the present study seeks to engage in any detail, it is important to mention, since it has a bearing on the central argument to follow. If all narratives, and therefore histories too, are no more than ideologically inflected “language games” (Wittgenstein), then what “truth,” or what moral value even, can they possibly hold?

Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said have been prominent in showing that while it is appropriate to acknowledge Foucault's and Lyotard's emphasis on discursive power, such an acknowledgement does not mean jettisoning a concern for the "true" and the "real," especially in socio-political terms. One can, as he puts it in an interview with Ania Loomba (quoted in Goldberg and Quayson 2002, 9), find a very useful and productive tension between the theories of political hegemony proposed by Gramsci and Foucault's analysis of discursive power, even if it does mean that "we all need to become stunt riders."

The creative tension between these two positions in fact constitutes the foundation of the present argument. It demonstrates that the very slipperiness of discourse is itself a means by which hegemonic Histories can be undermined, the tenuousness of their narrative construction exposed as just one more form of power-seeking. Within that slipperiness there exists, therefore, a "space" for the emergence of alternative "histories," those occluded by the Grand Narrative of the hegemonic discourse of a particular nation or group. Thus unvoiced "*petit recits*" (Lyotard) or "small histories" can gain a foothold and insinuate themselves in the discursive cracks and fissures of History. In his description of the role of subaltern historians Bhabha (1993, 106) says:

...they have been able to release into this discourse, into the sphere of their concerns, forms of historical contingency, small events, *petit recits*, a number of what I would call enunciatory sites. So there is a very complex re-writing of what the history of a colonised nation would be, what the history of a transformative, anticolonial moment would be.

This thesis argues that the location of this "voice" with its "small stories" is to be found in cultural productions outside of the Western mainstream, and particularly in fictional narratives. For while hegemonic History may use the techniques of

narrative form as a primary tool, its discursive conventions mean that it uses them in a limited way, allowing room for other, more subtle, narratives to enter the discursive field and undermine its dominance. As Jameson shows in *The Political Unconscious* (1989), nationalist narratives are by their very nature allegorical, fixing their symbolism to ensure narrowly defined and pre-determined meanings. Colonialist discourse, Bhabha argues (1983), is pre-eminently dependant on such allegorical fixity. The texts explored in this thesis all originate in colonialist contexts, and all seek to undermine the fixity of colonial discourse by offering instead their own “small stories.” They instead take the reader into the very complex experience of life under colonial rule. In this way they can serve both liberating and therapeutic functions. They reject the emplotment of colonialist Histories as oppressive, and they reject the continuity effected by colonialist narrative as specious. The very form that many of these novels take enacts temporal, emotional and political discontinuity.

In this context Lindenberger maintains:

[t]he new history ... has little in common with the old – and for an interesting historical reason: its practitioners were nurtured in the theoretical climate of the 1970s, a time during which the individual literary work came to lose its organic unity, when literature as an organized body of knowledge abandoned the boundaries that had hitherto enclosed it, to an extent even abandoned its claim to knowledge; *sometimes no more than just fiction*. It is no wonder that the scholarship we now pursue cannot take the form or speak the language of the older literary history. (quoted in Hutcheon 1988, 91; italics mine)

Influenced strongly by the work of Hayden White, Lindenberger has shown that the “new history” cannot but focus on the similarities between fiction and history, especially the notion that *both* have thoroughly porous boundaries. White (1987) has pointed out that history can claim neither “innocence” nor objectivity. He argues that

history as a discourse has lost its “truth value” since it imposes a false teleology, and thus creates a coherence not necessarily present in reality. Once History could inscribe itself as a largely monological metanarrative and assume that if a writer used the right language, the text would be effectively transparent and the past thus available to the reader, this is no longer a valid position. In this context it is worth paying attention to Robert Young’s suggestion that “histories can be told in many forms” (1990, 1) without one being reducible to another. But, as he suggests, “[t]o write about histories of the tricontinental countries ... is to write about lapses in history itself, [o]f spaces blanked out by that ruthless whiteness.”

It is in works of fiction that much of the occluded history of marginalized communities has been recorded. Previously untold stories are told from the “inside,” as it were, from the experience of those involved in events, rather than from the “objective” perspective assumed by the historian. And even when these narratives wear their political or ideological credentials on their sleeves, they nevertheless offer another version of the history, making possible a more holistic interpretation of events.

To say this is not to conflate history and fiction, or to suggest that the traditional discourse of History is to be wholly jettisoned. What I am suggesting is that fictions of a certain type can offer an alternative to the metanarrative of History. The alternative idea of “histories,” then, opens up a space for exploration, particularly for those groups who have suffered colonization or other forms of exploitation. The breaching of the once hermetic boundaries of historical discourse has led to a great deal of intertextual “work” or trans-genre intertextuality. In this context the term “historiographic metafiction” is very useful.

Coined by Linda Hutcheon in 1988, the term describes fiction that engages with history in a subversive way. By using literary devices such as parody, allegory and symbolism, works of fiction undermine the metanarrative of History. The texts seem to insist that there is no way of finally distinguishing the events of history from their telling, despite the fact that many scholars, such as Murray Krieger (quoted in Hutcheon, 1988, 93), have attempted to do just this. He suggests that history is “the unimpeded sequence of raw empirical realities.” But to this Gottschalk responds:

[t]he process of critically examining and analysing the records and survivals of the past is ... *historical method*. The imaginative reconstruction of that process is called *historiography*. (quoted in Hutcheon 93; italics in original)

It is the empiricist assumption that there are clearly definable “raw ... realities” that historiographic metafiction challenges through imaginative reconstruction. As Hutcheon (1988, 93) puts it:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refutes the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems.

Historiographic metafiction is a particularly useful label in the context of postcolonial literatures, which often respond to Eurocentric forms of knowledge based on ethnocentric cultural assumptions. Historiographic metafiction, by interrogating the value and meaning of the discourses it encounters, interrogates ethnocentric assumptions. Perhaps Arif Dirlik (1996, 294) is not being entirely facetious when he maintains that oppositional histories, theories and attendant fictions emerged in Eurocentric academic discourses only when the third world intellectual entered first

world universities. Bringing with them their own uncertainties concerning location and agency, they nevertheless had important questions to ask of the overarching and totalizing History to which they were subject. They began examining the place and value of their own histories in the Eurocentric picture. As Young (1990, 3) puts it:

[h]istory [was] contrasted with non-European accounts in which history is conceived ... in terms of networks of discrete, multitudinous histories that are uncontainable within any single Western schema.

The “histories” of the Other circulate mostly *after* the traumatic process of excavation, retrieval and what Toni Morrison (1987) terms “rememory.” For this reason the fictions dealt with in this thesis are “historiographic” in that they rewrite forgotten pasts. “Rememory” needs to be distinguished from “memory”: the latter refers the act of remembering, while rememory is the act of re-remembering, having to deal with memories that one has attempted to suppress, either as an individual or as a group, having to dig up and confront pasts long buried. It combines the pain and trauma of such memory with its excavation.

Such excavation of the *petit recits* in fictional writing also creates new knowledges, subverting the traditional Western hegemony over historical accounts. A corollary of this subversion is that through the insertion of small stories into History, the horizon of the remembered past broadens and begins to admit many more previously disregarded histories. But this broadening, with which the present study is concerned, also serves to remind us of how many stories remain untold. For every story “exposed,” countless others are doomed to remain buried or have been lost entirely.

A further, obvious question to emerge from this excavation of lost pasts is that of the extent to which to such excavation can have a healing effect. Can the fictions

explored in this study offer a therapeutic response to the traumas they uncover? Kiren Desai entitles her recent Booker Prize-winning text *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Her novel raises important questions for subaltern histories and “subjects:” is the inheritance of the subaltern always loss? And if so, is there any way in which the “rememory” of this loss can lead to regeneration? The present study attempts to explore this sense of loss on both personal and socio-cultural levels: the depredations of colonization, the loss of one’s own homeland, and the loss implicit in diaspora – a cultural, emotional, familial and economic dislocation with which most of the writers in this study struggle to come to terms.

Desai’s novel provides a painful example of this dislocation, when the lead character, after many fraught years of exile in America, returns to India with a modest “inheritance,” only to have it taken from him by Gurkha soldiers. The prodigal son returns ... to nothing: he might as well have stayed in the US. The novel provides one perspective on Kadiatu Kanneh’s (1998) suggestion that whereas in the past a diasporic group might look back to its homeland with longing and take from it a sense of identity, and intend to return there one day, this is no longer the case. Those in the diaspora often choose not to return “home” for economic or political reasons. When the exiles do return it is often only for short visits, and they are often repulsed by what they have left behind.

One of the most important undertakings of this study is to explore the nexus of trauma, exile, and traces of lost histories in their re-writing, in the phenomenon that Derrida (1981) calls “*pharmakon*” (an ancient Greek word for “medicine” used in Plato’s “Pharmacy”). In Derrida’s usage, the term means the therapeutic consequences of both retelling and rewriting. Derrida does not assume (nor do I) that retelling the past can bring about a complete healing. The consequences of past

trauma can resonate through generations. But this continuity also suggests that an oral tradition of telling small stories may be a way for communities to heal themselves, over time. However, since many modern communities have no access to the oral narratives of their own pasts, it is the written word that must perform this role. Benedict Anderson (1990) reminds us that although colonialism was hugely destructive, it was also responsible for the rise of print capitalism amongst the colonized, thus creating a space for “writing back” to the empire (see Irlam 1998).

Even as I write this I am quite aware of the debate around the commodification of the postcolonial text and its so-called exoticizing function. My view is that, in the first instance, exposure of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized cannot merely be written off as the “commodification of the exotic.” *The God of Small Things* is indisputably more concerned with exposing the lapses in communal histories than about exoticizing the indigene. Secondly, as Roy shows in her novel, the real issues in contemporary Indian postcolonial experience are the effects of globalization and the ramifications of a destructive caste system. These issues are far too serious to be simply written off as “exoticizing the Other.”

Postcolonial critics like Arif Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmed (see Tickell 2003, 74) link the debate around postcolonial literatures and their commodification to a larger debate in which postcolonial critics and theorists have been accused of complicity with what Dirlik terms “capitalist hegemony.” He further argues that postcolonial theorists and writers are implicated in

postcolonialism’s diversion of attention from the contemporary problems of social, political and cultural domination and ... its obfuscation of its own relationship to what is but a condition of its own emergence, that is, to global capitalism. (quoted in Tickell 2003, 73-74)

While I heed Dirlik's caution, I feel that – with regard to the texts under discussion in this study – fear of the effects of global capitalism should be less of a concern than the primary focus of the texts: the recuperation of lost histories and the effort to find healing through the written word. In this sense the struggle of nations need not be a struggle of memory against forgetting, but one in which the histories of the downtrodden are reinscribed alongside Western hegemonic History so as to reframe the world system to include the marginalised. By highlighting the plight of the downtrodden, the postcolonial text is highlighting the effects of the West's dominance. Historiographic metafiction therefore necessarily has a political agenda.

While Dirlik argues that postcolonial texts divert attention from political and social conditions in the ex-colony, my argument is the very opposite, that the texts examined in this study concern themselves directly with social and political issues, precisely by excavating lost histories in order to restore a sense of communal, political and social cohesion.

Space and the “New Histories”

This thesis has recourse to the idea of “narrative space.” While it may appear self-explanatory in the sense that the “third world text” has sought physical and intellectual space alongside the “first world text,” the term requires further explanation. Homi Bhabha, in his interview with David Attwell (1993, 102), suggests that

for ideologies to be effective, whether they [are] state ideologies or more pastoral or civil ideologies, the subject has to be interpellated or

hailed as a form of unicity, and it seemed to me that what was manifestly apparent ... was the kind of splitting, or lack, or lag, that the metropolitan accounts of ideology were always suggesting had to be covered up in order for the subject to function, that in the colonial space, you always had that lack or lag, that non-representable, incommensurable instance, as very much a part of the ideological or hegemonic.

In this way Bhabha's work may be seen to be a revisionist re-writing of the ideological critique. It is through this revisionism that he can maintain that the age-old lack that has been "conferred" upon the subject has led to "not a covering up of the *lack*, but an enactment of the lack in the construction of the subject" (1993, 102).

This "enactment of the lack" is such that it

did *not only* produce in the colonial subject ... a sense of inferiority or dependence but [more importantly] it was also a lag or lack which opened up a space in which the colonial subject could, in a way, replay, repeat, iterate and interrogate the ideologies to which he or she was being subjected. (1993, 102)

By "space" Bhabha means here the experience and confines of ideological interpellation to which the colonized is subject. It is thus "space" in a variety of senses: geographical (since colonialism confines geographically), ideological, psychological, economic, and even physical, involves the colonizing process creates a "lack" that the subject feels in his or her own body. But perhaps the most important point that Bhabha makes about "space" is that "the very process of what was often read as inferiorization, hierarchy, that the lack which the colonial subject had to the metropolis, could be turned into a *space of subversion, liberation and agency*" (1993, 102; my italics).

While Bhabha insists that a negative can be turned into a positive, it must be emphasised that this "turning" is not something easily achieved. The textual commentary in this study testifies to the fraught quality of the "space of subversion,

liberation and agency.” For these aspects of “space” can be both emotionally and physically traumatic. For example, the adult Tambu in *Nervous Conditions* (1987) startles the reader when she opens her account with the words: “I was not sorry when my brother died” (1). This is a traumatizing discovery for the young Tambu to make and a difficult sentence for the older Tambu to write. Yet, despite this difficulty, the fact that the sentence conveys is ultimately responsible for her “liberation and reincarnation” as a nine-year old, and her realization as an adult that she has been brainwashed in the mission school, even though it is the mission school which has given her the tools with which to write the sentence. And she begins “unobtrusively and extremely fitfully... [a] process of expansion” (208).

This “process of expansion” is Dangarembga’s way of describing the relationship between “space,” narrative and what may be termed “new histories.” For the reclaiming of the past from a new perspective – the colonized taking back his/her intellectual and historical territory – is both a return and an expansion: a revisiting of the past and a narrative expansion which refutes the limits placed on the past by the colonizer. In this sense it reclaims “space” in all of the senses defined above, but more importantly, it reclaims the space of narrative, the power of telling which is the defining moment of liberation and agency. This marks a shift in “narrative space” from that dominated by the white (often male) Eurocentric consciousness, to the narratives of the colonized and the narratives of women.

Tambu’s personal experience of reclaiming a space for her voice rehearses the emergence of “smaller” narratives in the collapse of metanarrativity. It is also representative of the experience of countless women, including the present writer, whose first exposure to literature was through Eurocentric university curricula, and who have had to excavate a “space” for themselves by exploring the narratives of the

forgotten or “disremembered,” to use Morrison’s term. Often, these narratives are to be found in the moments of “slippage” Bhabha refers to in his interview with Attwell (1993), narratives which do not fit into the mainstream (which is often Realist in structure and style), but rather appear fragmented, lacking linearity or closure. In a literary world where Realism is no longer trusted, and even the narrative of History is met with suspicion, a space is opened for narratives which do not conform to the formal patterns valued by Eurocentrism, enabling “othered” voices from various cultures and historical experiences to be heard.

Tambu’s voice is one such example. Another is that of Ramatoulaye, in Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* (1980), who writes her “cahier” (a mixture of diary and letter) from within the confines of her widow’s hut, where she must stay for a time, but also from the cultural space of the dependant woman forced to “mourn” a husband who has betrayed her. Her writing uses the very space of confinement as a space of liberation, from which she “writes back” to the patriarchal Islamic society which dominates her. Her story is one of rupture, psychological trauma, geographical removal and economic deprivation. But she is able to use the very forces of patriarchal control to create “slippages” from which to write her own story and redefine her identity in her own terms.

An important aspect of the “slippage” Bhabha speaks of is the reconfiguration of the act of memory. For it is what has been “disremembered” that demands recuperation, and such recuperation generates slippage within the metanarrative of History. But the resultant reconfiguration revolves around the now problematic notion of “home space.” What can the “recuperator” of lost histories do if the “home” being recuperated is so horrendous that it is “unspeakable”? Home, in this instance, becomes both a space desired and abhorred, leaving the seeker/writer in a state of

limbo. From this perspective, Bhabha's "slippage" between imposed History and recuperated histories may be the only "space" in which the writer can operate. Home is not a fixed and comfortable space in which to "dwell," and the stories it evokes are not necessarily stories "to be told," as Morrison puts it at the end of *Beloved*, a text seminal to this thesis.

Beloved describes a "home" which is literally haunted and angry with past memories, a home whose past returns in a physical form that must be expunged from the community before peace can return. Beloved, the character, is a literal (though also imaginative) embodiment of the lost past which refuses to be finally forgotten. It haunts the present like the trauma of all unresolved pain, but by assuming physical form creates a space that conflates historical, physical, geographical and narrative dimensions. If it is unspeakable, or "not a story to pass on," it is also not one from which the inhabitants of 124 can escape. While Beloved represents the history of slavery, the story and agony of the Middle Passage, with its rapes and deaths, she also represents the "story" being written, and so is not to be escaped or forgotten. The narrative of the text continues the history by making it present. In this sense the text is a response to the dominance of ideologies which have reiterated the suffering of some communities, and in the process allowed the suffering of countless others to be forgotten. Morrison's dedication to the "sixty million and more" lost slaves alludes to the "six million" Jews exterminated in the Holocaust. The latter story is now a dominant motif in western History, while the story of the slaves has been largely forgotten. Similar arguments may be offered with regard to the genocides of Apartheid, of Stalinist Russia, Pol Pot's Cambodia, Rwanda, present-day Iraq and Darfur, to name but a few. To tell the lost stories of these genocides would be to

conflate history, geography, narrative and the “slippage” disallowed by the “official” versions of History offered by the media and entrenched in the popular imagination.

This conflation of narrative with geography suggests that an aspect of this study’s focus on “space” is indeed geographical space. Geographical space not only provides an important “finial” of cultural identity, but is also the crucial to the project of the “new historians.” External landscape is a strong determinant of the internal landscape. In her essay “Identity: Skin Blood Heart,” Minnie Bruce Pratt explores the geographical spaces of the cities she has occupied as a white, protestant, lesbian female. Her exploration leads her to a series of mappings of the inner city of Washington DC in which she plots “the dividing lines of racial and communal identification” (quoted in Kanneh 1998, 121).

Pratt sees the idea of “home” in terms of “imagined dimensions, meanings, limits” (121). Her work is significant because she sets out initially to explore the ways in which residents occupy both geographical and cultural space together. However, her mapping of streets, buildings, landmarks and distances throws up a different story. Her findings indicate that there is no “free space” and that a concerted effort has to be made in order to transgress “visual/spatial fixing of the Other.” As Kanneh puts it, “[Pratt’s] panorama of ... point of view does not reveal the spread of free space,” but instead “exposes divisions, concealments, hidden narratives of identity and heritage – overlapping, coinciding and contradicting” (Kanneh 1998, 121). Essentially Pratt surges shockingly from the confines of a cushioned existence into a space that is conflictual, with “denied histories, boundaries imagined and forgotten,” yet still maintaining class and race barriers (Kanneh 1998, 121). She maps the clashes of histories that our daily lives encompass, and the traumas inherent in such collisions. More importantly, her mapping, by exposing hidden histories,

demands a revisiting of the idea of “home,” in order to explore some of the ways in which it is a place of dis-ease. She recalls in her essay how the calling of “her” name by a black woman, marked by a lilt reminiscent of her childhood (now lost to her), brought back her sense of cultural and historical loss. She says:

I knew enough of her history and mine to know how much separated us: the chasm of murders, rapes, lynchings, the years of daily humiliations done by my people to hers. I went and stood in the hallway and cried, thinking how she said my name like home, and how divided our lives were. (Kanneh 1998, 121)

The significance of Pratt’s work for the present study is the way in which she maps the heterogeneous geographical spaces as complex and multilayered. It is through this complex mapping that, instead of the neat “picket-fenced” existence she has assumed, Pratt now sees the complex dimensions of both individual and communal histories and the heterogeneous spaces they occupy, which are “multi-layered, multi-dimensional ... overlapping circles” (Kanneh 1998, 122). Significantly, it is the “overlapping circles” defining livelihoods that must bring the most trauma, because divisions can no longer be concealed.

Kanneh (121-125) calls the space opened up by Pratt a kind of “free-fall” which could lead to a disavowal of History. This notion harks back to Edouard Glissant’s (1989, 161-2) idea of “vertigo” which is not so much the fear of falling as it is the desire to fall, into the abyss of loss. As he puts it:

For history is not only absence for us. It is vertigo. The time that was never ours we must now possess. We do not see it stretch into our past and calmly take us into tomorrow, but it explodes in us as a compact mass, pushing through a dimension of emptiness where we must with difficulty and pain put it all back together.

Pratt rescues herself from this danger by refusing the weightlessness of the free-fall that vertigo entails, and concentrating on the ideological containments from which she has to break free if she is to move on.

In a sense, Pratt's work encapsulates the task that Smilla sets herself in Høeg's novel, in which the relationships among space, colonialism and identity form the primary theme. *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1994) explores the effects of the cross-cultural "free fall" Glissant describes. It combines attention to geographic, historical and cultural space to demonstrate the sense of loss and alienation that develops within the colonized culture. Smilla, the product of an Inuit hunter mother and Danish physician father, cannot be "at home" fully in either place, but is less so in the cultural hegemonic space of Copenhagen than she is in the vast, open snowscape of her childhood Greenland. Her dis-ease at the loss of that limited "home" space results in a cultural and ideational "free-fall" which is, in a macabre way, mirrored by the "fall" of the young child Isaiah from the top of the building where he attempts to hide from his pursuers. His fall into "empty space" jolts Smilla from her "fall" and leads her back to a rediscovery of an innate ability to "read snow," to find in vast, empty spaces meanings which are unique to her own Inuit culture and which thus provide a cultural and historical identity that the Danish colonizing mission has not been able to eradicate fully.

Smilla embodies Glissant's notion of "métissage," a wandering across cultures, which opens up possibilities of various kinds for the reinvention of the self. Open space has its own "language," Smilla knows, if one can read it properly and with care. In the same way, "métissage" involves a horizontal wandering across cultures rather than the vertiginous fall which results from the refusal to adapt to new cultural experience. Smilla's return "home" to her "mother-space" is only possible

after her exilic sojourn in Denmark, for it is only after exile that the wanderer from the diaspora can “read” the geographical and cultural world of the past and compare it to the present, and experience the blending of cultures, histories and geographies as creative rather than totally destructive.

In this way, the frozen relationship between colonizer and colonized (and Smilla finds liberation and renewal in the quite literally frozen world of snow) can be changed significantly. But it is only in this “in-between” space, where neither colonizer nor colonized has full control of their environment, physical or otherwise, that genuine subversion and thus transformation can take place. Bhabha (1993, 104) refers to this space as “interstitial.” Other critics use different terms to refer to what is essentially the same idea. Gayatri Spivak uses the word “catachrestic” (Bhabha in Attwell 1993, 104), Edward Said “contrapuntal,” and Michel Foucault speaks of the “counter-narrative.” In each case the idea of “slippage” is intrinsic. Like Smilla’s snow, unreadable to an outsider but eminently readable to her, the slippage between cultures provides the basis on which to build a relationship that transcends simple antagonism and overriding hierarchy. Similarly, this same “slippage” disallows overarching History from finally silencing the “small stories” of those who have succumbed to vertigo.

Hybridity

Inasmuch as the novels under discussion here all demonstrate that there is a certain usefulness in the “interstitial space” of hybrid experience, in wandering across cultures, they also demonstrate the difficulties inherent in hybrid experience. Instead

of subversion, liberation and agency, the space of the hybrid can also be one of “fragmentation, paralysis and ‘nervous conditions’” (Gaylard 2006, 198).

As Gaylard rightly points out, such dis-ease with hybridity is not the sole province of Africans suffering in the aftermath of colonialism. After India was given independence from British rule in 1947, Indians continued to struggle against colonialism through its legacy of plundered resources and plundered identities. In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie represents the fragmentation of the social body by literalizing the fragmentation of Salim Sinai's mind and body.

“Look at me, I'm tearing myself apart and can't even agree with myself... talking, arguing like a mad fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes, memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain; none of it makes sense anymore.”
(Rushdie 422)

Arundhati Roy shows that the social fragmentations are not only the result of cultural hybridity, but also of historical “lag” (Bhabha in Attwell 1993), to use Bhabha's term. *The God of Small Things* explores the consequences of colonialism within the contexts of three historical moments: 1947, 1969 and 1992. Each of these “moments,” like Pratt's “multi-layered, multi-dimensional ... overlapping circles” (1998, 122), looks backwards and forwards simultaneously. Not only are Estha and Rahel half-bred Hindus (and Rahel fresh from exile in America), but their uncle Chacko, adopting his Oxford-educated accent, maintains:

We are a family of Anglophiles pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints have been washed away. (52)

Chacko maintains that in order to understand history the people of a particular culture have to

“go inside [history] and listen to what they’re saying. And look at the books and pictures on the walls. And smell the smells... [b]ut we can’t go inside because we’ve been locked out ... our minds have been invaded by a war... a war that has made us adore our conquerors and hate ourselves.” (53)

The self-hatred wrought by the colonizer’s theft of dreams and histories has led to the hybrid state: a fitful state of anguish, which often results in erratic behaviour, haplessness, lack of direction, overindulgence (such as Chacko’s sexual exploits and his over-eating), or one in which the body is ravaged, as in the “nervous conditions” suffered by characters in Dangarembga’s novel. Under the cultural control of the master, the colonized become what V.S. Naipaul first called “mimic men.” They “mimic” the master because this is the only way in which they can survive under his rule. But the hybrid culture that develops out of this mimicry, is, ironically, the first step towards “using the tools of the master to overcome him,” and is the beginning of the rewriting of lost histories. Bhabha suggests that mimicry of the master is an essential precursor to the “slippage” necessary to overcome the master-narrative. As he puts it in “Of Mimicry and Man:” “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognized Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (1994, 86).

The texts under discussion here all seek to use the colonial “slippage” as a way of entering histories from which they have been locked out. The opening of doors to lost histories not only gives us an idea of what has been buried or locked away, but also *adds* to the complement of histories. In addition, the “new narratives” reveal the skewed relationship between the margin and the centre and alter the History previously written, as Gaylard (2006, 193) points out:

exhumation [of buried histories] alters history, not only supplementing conventional history, but altering it in the process, a process that is often painful because it challenges cherished certainties. This ... also counters the reification and concretization of history, for history is seen to be in flux and constantly open to interpretation and creative intervention.

One might think that literary texts themselves can have little impact on economies or political forces, but literature remains an important marker of culture, which mediates the political as well as the aesthetic.

Literature is able to present the narrative of History in what might also be termed a “hybrid” form. The very mimicry that the colonial subject adopts as a survival strategy, is, in the literary text, used to “write back” to the dominant discourse, developing hybrid histories which do not permit the eradication of the colonized narrator or agent and his/her suffering and pain. These “hybrid” histories, as much literary and “imaginative” as empirical, also put to bed the Enlightenment idea of history as a science. The blend of “fact” and “telling” with imaginative re-telling shows history to be a hybrid not only of events and their interpretation, but also of the emotions, pains and points-of-view that accompany the retelling of the events. To offer a “true account” one must enter the realm of symbol, metaphor and narrative interrogation of the “facts” and the perceptions leading to the writing of those “facts.” As Jamal Mahjoub writes:

My history is not given, but has to be taken, reclaimed piece by solitary piece snatched from among the pillars of centuries, the shelves of ivory scholarship. My flimsy words set against those lumbering tomes bound in leather and written in blood.... I was born between duelling histories: *the history that forged the empire and the counter-history that defied it*. (quoted in Gaylard 2006, 194; my italics)

In this sense the hybrid histories explored in this study are postmodernist, that is, texts which question the validity of any metadiscourse. They point instead to the fluid nature of both language and experience, and indicate that no final “closure” is possible in the recounting of histories. They also establish the credibility of the “flimsy words...written in blood,” and resonate at a “grass-roots” level, rather than “among the pillars ... of ivory scholarship.”

The idea of writing in blood alerts us to another element of the hybridity of the writing under discussion. The postcolonial text may be seen as one which asserts its authority as a first-hand account of the bitter experiences of colonial oppression. In doing so it aims to reduce the gap between experience and narrative, or between history and experience. When Mahjoub speaks of writing “in blood” he is not simply using a metaphor, but is suggesting that the experience and pain of writing the story of colonialism from the point of view of the subject, is one which engenders a reliving of the pain of the story being told. The gap between narrative and experience is lessened, if not entirely eradicated, so that we may speak of a “narrative hybridity” in which a story is the re-living of an experience, and as such, a way of attempting to heal the wounds of the past. The narrative can only be a means of healing if it is seen to share, directly, in the pain and anguish depicted. In this sense the line between the physical and the literary, the word and the body, is blurred, and the text becomes a (re)enactment of the historical event and its interpretation, rather than a meta-text standing outside the events of which it speaks.

Morrison’s text insists on the close relationship between text and reality, word and experience. *Beloved* the character is, in a very real sense, *Beloved* the text, an embodiment of the sufferings of the “sixty million and more.” The lost body of *Beloved* can only return in the narrative, and only the narrative (and the stories of the

community) can finally expunge that no longer wanted body from the community.

Stories become an important way in which to heed and heal the past.

Gina B. Nahai's novel, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, demonstrates yet a further way in which the text and the physicality of colonial experience are intricately linked. Nahai, like Morrison, adopts the hybrid narratological method of magical realism as the only "valid" way of telling the untellable. In the process histories are re-written from the point-of-view of those who experience the events, but not in any Realist or "scientific" sense. Neither meaning nor events, the novel suggests, can be adequately framed by Realism, since Realism is the mode of representation long commandeered by the Western hegemony. Magical realism is therefore an appropriate technique not only for the (re)telling of the past, but also for a more eclectic account of the hybrid nature of human experience and memory. Nor is narrative healing a teleological process. Healing is never complete. Stories, individual or communal, are constantly changing and "meaning", so that the process of healing, as of remembering, is in a perpetual state of flux.

While Nahai deals with the cross-cultural wanderings of which Glissant speaks, she is able to suggest that the reconstruction of identities lost during these wanderings is possible only in a "space" where the magical and real meet. The space of recuperation of identities is both an imaginary one, in which the individual must heal himself/herself from the inside, but also one that cannot be entirely imaginary, since the individual can only be healed by encountering the space of "slippage" referred to by Bhabha, above. This slippage not only uses the space between the Master's narrative and the ambiguous, mimicking colonial subject's experience in order to "write back," but also adopts the mercurial space between the magical and the real as the most creative space from which to "write back." As is the case in

Beloved, Nahai's protagonist Roxanna must carry her own and the community's forgetfulness upon her body. This is seen in her expanding physically with the toxicity that her forgetfulness evokes. The magical and the real conjoin, as do the body and memory. The increasing girth of Roxanna's body is not only a symbol of her forgetting, but is also a symbol of her desire "not to remember" or "not to turn around" because of the fear of what she may encounter. Her flight is linked to irresponsibility. In Magic Realism generally the idea of flight away from gravity is often associated to irresponsibility (see for example Kundera, Marquez, Allende and Cisneros, among others). Responsibility, through the act of narrating lost stories, and "turning around" to confront lost histories, establishes the long-lost link between mother and daughter, and also between Roxanna and Miriam the Moon. In this instance, Miriam's appellation "the Moon" signals the glow in the dark, the glow that allows the lost to be found and then finally spoken.

Narrative and Trauma

The idea of "writing in blood" alerts us to the trauma inherent in the process of writing with "flimsy words." Ironically, it is the very "flimsy words" that make apparent the trauma of the writing process. While I do not wish to dwell on trauma theory (as the new discipline has become known in literary criticism) in any great detail, it is useful for the present argument to outline its origins as an aspect of literary analysis. For a long time trauma, or rather what later became known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), was regarded by the medical profession as a temporary experience suffered mostly by soldiers, such as those in WWI. In the mid-

eighties, however, trauma became formally recognized as an illness by the American Psychiatric Association (APA).

This acknowledgement by the APA has a rocky history in itself, and it is useful here to outline the shift in perception of the illness, from its being seen as “degenerative madness and hysteria” to being recognized as a treatable “Disorder.” Awareness of the Disorder increased after WWI, when soldiers returning from the front continued to relive their ordeals through nightmares and hallucinations, leading sometimes to complete nervous breakdown. The poet Siegfried Sassoon was one of the more famous such cases. He was institutionalized in Scotland, and his poem “Repression of a War Experience” focuses on the effects of repressed memories:

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
You'd never think there was a bloody war on! ...
O yes, you would ... why, you can hear the guns.
Hark! Thud, thud, thud, – quite soft ... they never cease –
Those whispering guns – O Christ, I want to go out
And screech at them to stop – I'm going crazy;
I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

Freud, in his 1896 lecture *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, construed hysteria and its consequences as an almost exclusively female affliction, whose provenance he identified as “sexual incident.” He returned to the issue of hysteria and its consequences only after exposure to the trauma suffered by World War I soldiers, who continued to have intrusive memories of the war for years afterwards. Neither Freud nor other doctors could treat the male patients in the same way they had treated female patients. The problem that faced the psychological and medical fraternity changed from that of repressed memories needing to be brought into consciousness to its opposite, the irrepressibility of some memories, and the fact that most of these

memories had nothing to do with sexuality. Men's experience of "hysteria" forced a change in the attitude to women, and a questioning of Freud's reductionist sexuality.

In terms of his response to the recurring and intrusive memories of soldiers, Freud, in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), understands trauma and hysteria in biological terms, having no other metaphor to hand. He suggests, in an essay that Lockhurst (quoted in Waugh 2006, 500) calls "difficult and labyrinthine," that a traumatic event is something that "*smashes* through the protective membrane of a single cell creature, producing a breach in its skin and flooding the inside with unassimilable foreign material" (ibid., italics mine). Lockhurst cites Freud's further question: Was the "compulsion to re-live this traumatic moment of breach, a way of trying to master the event retroactively, as if *afterwards* [the victim] could somehow build the protective barriers to defend themselves *before* it had happened?" (ibid., italics in original). This is obviously impossible. It seems that the individual is doomed to repeat the experience until a means of repairing the wound has been found. If this is so, what is the nature of this repair?

What is significant here is the trajectory that the notions of wound and psyche have since taken. Freud's metaphor of the breached cell, which combines the physical and the psychological, allows us nowadays to speak of a "psychic wound" without feeling that two distinct categories of existence are being confused. Psychic trauma causes physical trauma and vice-versa.

Contemporary trauma theory takes this interrelationship between the mental and the physical one step further, and shows how psychic trauma and its physical expression is often to be sited at the junction between the individual and society. It is the individual's social isolation that often results in trauma (a notion evident in the texts studied in this work). Hence it is only through the healing of the community at

large that the individual can find healing (also an important aspect of the texts under discussion here). This focus on the social means that trauma theory as a discipline has become important in a variety of fields, including cultural studies, sociology, psychology (where “narrative therapy” is a new discipline), philosophy and literature.

In literary studies, trauma theory has become prominent mostly because of the work of the New Historicists, whose focus has been on the silenced, omitted and distorted histories of traumatized groups. The loss of histories was revealed to be directly linked to social and individual trauma, so that the recovery of lost histories became an obvious way of beginning to treat the trauma.

The trauma of loss, the retrieval of the past and its possible healing, affect not only individuals but whole communities and societies. For societies, forgetting the past can be fatal. In this context, Deborah Horvitz (2000, 2) cites Judith Herman, who has done extensive work on trauma victims, as saying “in the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the process of active forgetting.” The fiction that this thesis has chosen as its focus has made a conscious attempt to stop the “active process of forgetting.” This applies particularly to women (for even the Hoëg novel has a woman as its primary narrator and focalizer), whose stories, within patriarchal and racist societies, have been denied the importance that they deserve.

On the subject of trauma research among women, Herman reminds us:

[t]o hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers and family. For the larger society the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered. (quoted in Horvitz 2000, 12)

This raises the question of those individuals (including fictional characters) who are ostracized by the community, because their traumas set them apart. It is very difficult for those thus isolated to create relationships capable of “rescuing” them. Moreover, traumatic events are often caused in the first instance by political movements, and it can take years, even generations, to work through the traumatic results of political change. As a South African of colour, born on the wrong side of the colour-line, I can testify to the lingering destructive consequences of Separate Development, forced removals and racial oppression. Revolutionary movements, even if they are successful, cannot erase individual pain and trauma.

Thus Herman seems to overlook the question of the extent to which individual victims are unable to create social relations because of their trauma. Witness Morrison’s Sethe – unable as she is to form relations with her community, with Paul D, or even with Denver, her daughter. The experience of the traumatized is often of a society which offers little or no support. Psychologist Elizabeth Waite speaks of

An injury to the mind or body that requires structural repair A main effect of trauma is disorganization, a physical and/or mental disorganization that may be circumscribed or widespread [which] *causes fragmentation of self, shattering of social relationships, erosion of social support.* (quoted in Horvitz 2000, 5; italics in original).

A concern with trauma, memory, history and the recovery of lost histories is evident in many contemporary novels. As nations become more and more part of the global village there seems to be a paradoxical concern to recover lost personal histories occluded during and after colonisation. The “recovery” of history through fictional accounts can show how “wrong footed” formal History can leave us (Roy 1997). More significant, perhaps, is the way in which, by deconstructing History and allowing for grappling with the contingencies of histories, contemporary writing of the type I have chosen for discussion assists the “strengthening of the imagined

community” and the creation of both “communal” and “personal” archives. The novels seem to suggest that through the recovery of lost personal archives, a communal history can be (at least partly) restored, so that the present can be rehabilitated by recovery of the past. The archive continues into the present and the future. As Nahai would have us believe, we can turn around and attend to the past and present simultaneously, while paving the way to a more coherent future.

During the process of selecting primary texts for this study I was attracted by narratives which echoed my own personal experience of lost and recovered histories. My own historical “footprint” has become, at least partially, lost in the racially confined History of Apartheid South Africa, since “people of colour” were not regarded as makers of history. The “footprint” metaphor, incidentally, became something of a “ribbon” (like that picked from the water by *Beloved*’s Stamp Paid) on which to hang my ideas. Putting together those ideas to writing this thesis has undoubtedly made me more aware of South Africa’s lost histories, and convinced me of the potential of fiction to assist in their recovery and rehabilitation.

The writing of this thesis has thus been for me a personal kind of narrative therapy. I perceive the texts in a light shaded by my own trauma and myriad silencings. To offer the readings that I do is a way of rendering the traumatic events depicted as “real” and yet as distant enough to be objectively explored, so as to show the various ways in which the texts create an intersection between histories, traumas and their fictional recreation. The “footprint” metaphor, used throughout, is an appropriate one in that it describes not only the literal footprints that have been lost or occluded by History, but also how fictional narratives can become an important means through which what has been lost can be “found” again. In this way – like

Smilla reading the snow – each narrative comes to function as a guide to the rediscovery of the points at which a society became (figuratively and morally) “lost.”

Reading Texts/Reading Theory

The theoretical framework outlined in this Introduction orientates and guides my analysis of the fictional texts. Yet my method has been to allow the text always to “speak for itself.” This may sometimes result in what appears to be a “rehashing of the plot” of the narratives under discussion, but is justified by my view that, since the novels concerned offer politically and ethically valuable, even necessary, rewritings of the histories they recount or restore, the reader has a responsibility to interpret them in a way as faithful as possible to the inferred authorial intention. My discourse therefore avoids, as much as possible, theoretical “pyrotechnics,” and seeks to manifest careful listening and responsible interpretation. To stand “outside” the text in some kind of theoretical “metaspace” would be to collaborate in the occlusion of the history that it excavates and be indifferent to the accompanying trauma. The end result of this method of reading is, I hope, an openness to and respect for specificity and the “difference” of each text – what Derek Attridge (2004) would call its “singularity.”

The chasm between theory and history (however theorized) is poignantly, and somewhat humorously, shown in Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* (2005, 394) when a professor of aesthetics and his wife are quarrelling. She says: “it’s like after 9/11 when you sent that ridiculous e-mail round to everybody about Baudry, Bodra....” He responds: “Baudrillard. He’s a philosopher. His name is Baudrillard.” His wife’s rejoinder is perhaps a lesson for those who insist on “talking theory” in what may be

termed a “metaspace of absence:” “This is *real*. This life. We’re really here....

Suffering is *real*. When you hurt people it’s *real*.”

Chapter One

Beloved

My grandmother...cries about the many tongues that lie in the mouth, withered without strength to speak the memory of their forgetting. Such tongues do not bleed. They have abandoned the things of life.

(Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue*)

Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone, studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more alive, more pulsating than the baby-blood that soaked her fingers like oil.

(Toni Morrison, *Beloved*)

Telling Forgotten Histories

Any attempt to explore the intersection of trauma, memory, history and the gaps created in "official" History by its bias towards the patriarchal, cannot ignore the substantial impact that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has made in this area. *Beloved* (first published in 1987) sought to bring to the fore hitherto forgotten stories, particularly, though not exclusively, those of African-American women slaves. In so doing it broke new ground in the excavation of lost "histories," whose recuperation would have a seminal effect on the re-writing of History.

In the epigraph from Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*, the narrator's grandmother cries about tongues that lie "withered" in the mouth because they cannot "speak the memory of their forgetting." Most important, perhaps, is her observation that such withered tongues "have abandoned the things of life." It is these lost

tongues and their memories that Morrison seeks – by telling their small stories – to restore to women, so they will not abandon the things of life.

Morrison's work narrativizes the theoretical postulates of scholars like Hayden White, showing that there are various possible *versions* of history, many of which have been occluded. In order to achieve her aim of inscribing recovered histories, she coins the word "rememory," used as both noun and verb. The word has gained general currency in the critique of patriarchal historiography, and through its use by female writers seeking to recuperate and re-write their own histories.

Rememory is particularly important in a therapeutic sense. In a world that is so commodified that Baudrillard has gone so far as to argue that we now interact only with simulacra, rememory "writes back" to our own painful histories, and provides the tools with which to excavate and confront them. In a manner not unlike some forms of psychotherapy, rememory unearths repressed memories in order to find ways of dealing with the pain they cause. *Beloved* is instructive in terms of how destructive "holding the past at bay" (43) can be.

While *Beloved* speaks an unspeakable past, it does not seek to eclipse either the present or the future, instead allowing its characters a "clearing space" (as Baby Suggs calls it) for healing. In this space the past (no matter how unspeakable) can animate the present and prevent it from remaining a space of "empty memory." And in the same way, the "pastpresent" can feed the future. In this regard it is important to note that time in the text is not linear, but rather cyclical or elliptical, sometimes allowing events to recur, but from new perspectives. In an interview with Margaret Reynolds (2003, 11-12), Morrison says of her story-telling methods:

I want to scour the official history for the alternative history that *exists*, sometimes parallel to it, more often underneath it. It gleams through the official story in curious ways – a shot here, a facet there, and it's

the kind of thing you want to pursue, and when you cannot find all the data, you have to imagine it.... I don't want the story, the alternative or ... the repressed story, told in a manner that duplicates the official narrative.

It is hard to conceive of a life more controlled, more marginalized, than that of the black female slave. Morrison's project in *Beloved* is not just to eulogize the "sixty million and more" of the novel's dedication, but also to re-imagine what the life of a female slave was like: how she was treated as a *property* more valuable than the male slave since, as Paul D cynically observes, a female slave could work by day, please the master by night and still reproduce new slaves to enrich him. Just one example of this in the narrative is Stamp Paid's wife Vashti, who is forced to offer the master of the house her body, despite the knowledge of the mistress of the house and Stamp Paid himself. The "marker" she is given on these occasions, a black ribbon with a cameo attached, is reminiscent of the "chokecherry tree" with which Sethe's back is marked. Such "markers" can be reinterpreted, reinvented, as Sethe's whipped back is made into a version of the Tree of Life. But the reinvention can never be fully complete, nor can it fully forget its origin. For the marker stands for that which is absent, like the mark beneath Sethe's mother's breast, the only sign she still has as a (re-)memory of her lost mother, and the re-memory of the marker, as with the entire text of *Beloved* itself, must keep the past in mind at the same time that it seeks to palliate its anguish.

Beloved stages the recuperation of painful, disabling experiences, retelling them so that the collective and individual stories are not officially "disappeared." While the novel cautions that "this is not a story to pass on," it has of course itself passed it on through publication. This makes paradoxical sense since Morrison is intent on not "disremembering" stories occluded by History. "Disremember" is a

word coined to describe the effect that the dominant historical discourse has on elements of the past.

Similarly, Morrison's "rememory" is different from remembering, partly because of the weight of the pain it conjures up. "Re-memory" is an active process of bringing back and confronting the past. "Rememory" is used in both the text and increasingly in feminist discourse as a noun to evoke the individual or collective memory of those whose stories have been deliberately "disremembered." It gives "body", as it were, to the lost.

But as a verb the word is used to suggest that time is not experienced in a linear fashion. Sethe and Beloved use the phrases "you rememory me" (215) and "I rememory that" (201) to show the coexistence of times, and the interfusion of experiences beyond that of the individual. "Re-memory" becomes a kind of collective memory, as Beloved shows in respect of the Middle Passage. It can be interpreted as another name for "pastpresentfuture," implying a confrontation with a past that, no matter how painful, cannot but feed the present. "Rememory" means that Sethe no longer has to beat the bread dough in an attempt to hold the past at bay, nor does Paul D have to keep his unspeakable memories in a tin chest in his heart, or have to hide in shame after his incestuous relationship with Beloved. The ability to allow the past and present to "inform" each other makes it possible for Denver, a kind of Morrison figure, to go out into the wider world, into the "world of letters." It is this "world of letters" which places "rememory" before the reader in the form of the novel *Beloved*, and makes the past ever-present in the reader's experience. This defies the limitations of a linear, teleological history with closure, and in so doing makes the novel liberating.

Beloved deconstructs both official History and its own precursors, the “slave narratives” of writers such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Both Douglass and Jacobs begin their narratives with “I was born...”. What follows are linear narratives of the incidents that identify them as the victims of slavery. In this way these narratives carefully followed the model of mainstream narrative of the time, which was equally attentive to linearity and temporality. Thus while slave narratives are important indices of slave experience, they tend to mimic the “white” writing of their time, smoothing the surface of the story in a process may be described as pushing all the contradictions possibly inherent in a text to the margins, in order to achieve a sealed unit. Furthermore, the slave narratives have come to be read as representations of what one may call a cumulative or typical “glob” of experience, so that the stories and sufferings of individual slaves signify little. These features function in concert to mask the real trauma of individuals in the time of slavery.

In contrast, rather than the stock phrase “I was born ...,” *Beloved* begins: “124 was spiteful” (we learn later “124” is a reference to 124 Bluestone Road). These opening words indicate that the narrative is not likely to be linear one. The characters’ experiences are presented as diverse but also shared, so that stories are repeated in different lives, from different points of view. The technique can be compared to that of nested narratives, and it functions to minimize authorial or readerly distance from the experiences narrated.

The house on Bluestone Road is occupied by Sethe, whose past literally haunts her in the form of the ghost of the “crawling already?” baby she murdered to prevent her from being taken back into slavery. In a sense, then, the dead child is a ghost of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, in which Northern states agreed to return runaway slaves to the South, as a compromise preventing (if only for a decade) the

outbreak of civil war. *Beloved* rewrites “actual” history in that it is loosely based on two incidents of which Morrison claims to have some knowledge. In re-imagining these incidents, the text summons up the past and challenges existing, official history. The two events¹ are the widely known Margaret Garner story, in which Garner was reported to have slain her child rather than have herself and her children returned and lost to slavery. The second, perhaps lesser-known story, is the tale of a young girl who is shot by her boyfriend. When asked to identify him she says “later, later” and dies without doing so, allowing him a chance to escape. These events may well be seen as points of departure for Morrison’s rememorying of history, but her text marries the “facts” with imaginative reconstruction that takes the stories far beyond their bare details.

The novel re-imagines the Garner incident from the point of view of the slave woman herself. Earlier narratives about Garner, as Levi Coffin (Rushdy in Bloom 1999, 121) pointed out, “attracted more attention, and aroused deeper interest and sympathy than any other [slave woman].” This is not only because the story is shocking and heart-rending, but also doubtless because Garner’s blackness rendered her actions outlandish or “exotic” in the white mind of the time. This is akin to what Trueblood in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* suggests is the reason for white interest in his story of incest with his daughter, and how any unusual act by a black man gets sympathy from white people:

The white folks took up for me. And the white folks took to coming here to see us and talk to us.... and wrote it all down in a book....That’s what I don’t understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasing me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any colored man, no matter how good a niggah he was. (Ellison 60)

¹ Both incidents are mentioned in Morrison’s “Black Book” (1974), which she kept while still an editor at Random House. The “Black Book” consists mostly of articles that dealt with the lives of black Americans and their marginalization in America.

The story of Margaret Garner may have fallen prey to a similar exoticizing when it first became known. The outrageous act of the “other,” no matter what its real cause, can be used to validate the system marginalising him/her.

Garner nevertheless disappeared (and died) without trace. Some reports indicate that she jumped off a ship with her child and drowned, while others maintained that she was returned to her slave owner and worked under him for the rest of her life. The fact that Garner’s details should literally have disappeared means that *Beloved* must engage with a history which is both real and imagined, blurring the line between the actual event and the rememored event. It is only through Morrison’s re-imagining of the story that Garner’s actions have become heroic and tragic. We will never know the “true” Garner, but we now have this rememory of her. Moreover, the notion of “pastpresentfuture” means that subsequent generations of African Americans are as much part of the history those who took part in the events, making Morrison (and by extension the reader) participants in the story.

This explains, to some extent, the reader’s (often unwilling) attraction to the lyricism of *Beloved*. For despite the gravity and pain of what is being told, it is presented in a way so beautiful and moving as to make it difficult for the reader not to be caught up in the story. Sethe is haunted, not only by Beloved, but by the ghost of memories whose pain is told lyrically, by the “moss teeth” of schoolmaster’s nephews who drink from her breasts and steal what belongs to her baby daughter. Similarly, she remembers not the pain of “Sweet Home,” but the irony of its name, and the beauty of the sycamore trees, rather than the bodies of lynched men hanging from them. The suppressed memories sometimes surface and she must fight to keep them at bay, but the lyricism of the “rememory” of the Christ-like bodies hanging from the trees presents the distant past as immediately present:

There was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes... it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty face too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (6)

The displacement Sethe's subconscious enacts here as a survival strategy not only replaces horror with beauty, but also grants the reader access to the profoundly disturbing effects of past trauma. The trauma splits the mind, and the reader experiences that split in the contrast between the lyricism and the horror.

This, in fact, may be the predominant meaning of the character Beloved herself, since she embodies the split between the “beauty” that the traumatized mind creates as suture for the past, and the actual horror of the past event. Initially, Beloved's beauty and her unquenchable appetite for stories of the past force Sethe to “forgive her memory” and allow those stories to flow, rememorying the past and her part in it. But ultimately the split between the trauma and its displacement in the figure of a returned ghost has sway, and real healing can only take place when the figure of displacement is removed and the trauma can be finally acknowledged and “forgotten.” Beloved's presence in the novel is uncanny, discomfiting, but necessary: as Morrison says:

Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. (274)

Morrison's oeuvre can be seen as working towards making that claim. In an article entitled “Rediscovering Black History,” written upon the publication of *The*

Black Book (1974), Morrison speaks of the “complicated psychic power one had to have to resist devaluation” (quoted in Bloom 1999, 102). The reference is not restricted to the devaluation inherent in slavery, but applies to African American life generally. Similarly, the novel reaches beyond the boundary of its being “merely” literature to become a reflection upon the political, economic and social forces that have marginalized African Americans in the past. *Beloved* offers therapeutic healing for the “sixty million and more” to whom the text is dedicated.

History and Community

The novel also brings to fruition an obscure but lengthy search for a girl that history lost. In her Afterword to the reprint of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison comments that Pecola Breedlove (literally, breeding through incestuous “love”), whose story was disregarded and ignored by her own community no less than it was by the community of readers and publishing houses, had, with the novel’s publication, finally gained her space in the literary world and the world at large. She was, therefore, no longer to be the conspiratorial victim of the “quiet as it’s kept” (3) injunction. Instead, the insidious power of cultural hegemony is exposed through Pecola’s (final) succumbing to a world in which she imagines she has “the Bluest Eye” and is therefore loveable. Her alter-ego, however, is dangerously astute in the final section of the text and asks questions that Pecola steers away from. At the conclusion of her interview with Gloria Naylor regarding the creative and historical act that results in the creation of *Beloved*, Morrison comments:

Little by little [I brought] her back into living life. So that now she comes running when called – walks freely around the house, sits down in a chair, looks at me.... I have seen, named and claimed her and oh! What company she keeps. (quoted in Rushdy 1999, 139)

124 Bluestone Road (the “3” in the sequence is deliberately omitted just as Sethe’s third child has been “omitted” from the narrative) is filled with the spite and venom of the “crawling already?” baby, because it contains the sad, repressed memories of *Beloved*. By literalizing the spirit of the dead child the text is reinserting into history not only *this* story but the stories of various ghosts in various guises, mostly of slave women and the atrocities they suffered. This is not to say that the text essentializes suffering as the fate of women – that of Paul D, Halle and Stamp Paid are made evident too. But the predominant task of the novel, fulfilled seamlessly, is to reveal the anguish of the maligned black slave woman. As Baby Suggs puts it: “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to the rafters with some dead nigger’s grief” (5).

The presentation of the memory of the baby’s ghost may be perceived as magical realist – that is *Beloved*, through its embodiment of the baby’s ghost, provokes a collision between the world of “realism” and that which is strictly outside the realm of what is considered “real” or “normal”. However, one could also point out that in some African and Indian religions the spirits of the dead linger, particularly if death has been traumatic. Unlike the sanitized account of death in Christianity, African religion often assumes the dead still to be with their loved ones. By invoking this idea Morrison is widening the category of “history” to include not only Western linear versions of history, but also African ones, where the linear is overshadowed by the circular, and the idea of death is not seen as an end, but rather a change in the nature and structure of the community. But Morrison’s depiction of *Beloved* shows

that this change may not always be benign, for the liberation of the dead from the constraints under which they laboured in life (especially during slavery) may grant the them access, finally, to speech and action of a kind not previously allowed (or imagined).

Certainly, *Beloved* does not behave like a loved one! The memory she unleashes upon the house is angry and menacing enough to chase away both her brothers. She is a baby ghost borne across the Middle Passage to occupy her rightful place in both history and Sethe's home space. She is born of water, rising out of the river, and the text suggests that the river is also a metaphorical river of the past, continuous with Sethe's uncontrollable urination when she first sets eyes on *Beloved*, like a mother whose waters have broken. She is about to give birth, not to *Beloved*, but to her own rememory. Before her "becoming," *Beloved* is the baby's ghost of whom all the house's occupants are aware: her finger prints spoil the perfectly iced cake, or she asserts her presence by littering the house with the crumbs of soda crackers. Both Sethe and Denver wage a seemingly futile "war against the outrageous behaviour of the [ghost]; against turned over slop jars, smacks on the behind and gusts of sour air" (4). As Denver remarks, "for a baby, she throws a powerful spell" (4). Her antics turn people away: where once the whole neighbourhood congregated, now no-one goes near, and where once there was laughter and jovial story-telling, now there is pain and hurt, and the stories have fallen silent, repressed.

Perhaps this is where *Beloved* comes into its own as a work of both fiction and historical social commentary. It raises the question of the capacity of language to express extreme suffering. *Beloved*, when she is the "crawling already?" baby and slain by Sethe, leaves not only Sethe but also the entire community. She leaves the mother who slew her, and the community who saw the four horsemen coming, and

knew their significance but said nothing. And she takes with her the community's ability to express their horror, shame and anger, so that her pain cannot really be spoken, and the community can no longer voice its own regrets and must suffer an unspeakable pain.

Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998) deals with the sense of futility brought about by language's failure adequately to convey horror. Of her reporting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Krog claims that both she and her colleagues were left "physically exhausted and mentally frayed, because of language" (Noyes, 2002, 270). In a sense, the TRC in South Africa began and ended in "the indefinable wail that burst from Nomonde Calata's lips," as Noyes puts it (her husband's murder had just been described; *ibid.*).

If we accept Dominick La Capra's proposition that no source of history is free from ideological contamination, then we may have the means to begin to develop a language adequate to pain and the unspeakable.² For by allowing ourselves to experience "contamination" and the "unspeakable" we may be able to encounter a subjecthood in process, rather than assume one already essentialistically determined or overdetermined. By allowing an encounter (much like Victor Frankl after Auschwitz) with the "unspeakable," we are able to discover some of the reasons for the contamination of the historical sources.

That *Beloved* uses that very "contamination" as a starting point in the rewriting of history is obvious. It uses "contaminated" sources to disrupt any notion

² When the TRC sat in its various venues in South Africa its focus was to excavate some of the pain to which victims were subjected under Apartheid. It relied for its "success" on perpetrators of crimes being "honest", which already compromised its work. A further problem it encountered was class, educational and language differences between people. Translation of the literal words did not always reflect the underlying "meaning" or pain of the experience, so that discourse itself became a hindrance to the process of excavation. I experienced this at first hand at the University of Transkei, where I witnessed a severe discrepancy between the mother-tongue narrative from the victim and its "flat" English translation. Nomonde Calata's "wail" was thus more expressive than any words.

of a single or essentialist meaning, either of “America” or slavery, or even of “community.” By the same token, however, it is the fact of contamination that validates the coining of the terms “rememory” and “disremember.”

In his discussion of the child’s “fort-da” game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (quoted in Rivkin and Ryan, 432), Freud showed that traumatized people often have little desire to remember the actual event of trauma, and for this reason deliberately “disremember.” In the “fort-da” game the child replaces the lost mother with an object, which it can throw away or haul back at will. This is a displacement of its feelings of loss occasioned by the mother’s absence (temporary but inexplicable to the child). Similar psychological mechanisms can be seen at work in the ways people cope with the trauma of memory. One way in which communities have dealt with remembering past traumas, and a way Morrison herself adopts, is the “mythical method.”

Morrison’s evocations of the traumatic past attain a mythic dimension because what cannot be “disremembered” must be given a new framing if it is not to be forgotten. As with all myth, the original event or trauma is retold in a manner that re-inscribes a cultural significance that is not necessarily or essentially part of the historical event. By mythologizing its past, the “imagined community” (to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase) gives shape and form to its origins, and therefore imparts a sense of meaning to its future. But a community which has no past because it has been removed must, for the sake of its present and future, create a past from the few remnants that it has – a red ribbon found in the river, a chokecherry tree inscribed on a slave woman’s back, a rusted tin. And it must turn those remnants into stories which breathe life into them by mythologizing them.

Since no community can retain its coherence, or heal its wounds, without regularly repeating its mythical origins, the created past must constantly be “re-memoried,” and it is for this reason, as some commentators have suggested,³ that *Beloved* enacts the return of the dead, as if it were a mythical dying and rising, or a Nietzschean eternal return. The return may be a haunting one, but without the ghost of the past present, without the crossing of the river (be it Lethe, Styx, or Ohio), and without the guide (whether Charon or Stamp Paid), there can be no communal healing. And healing will come through the location of the lost community of slaves in a historical/mythical context which gives it a “face” in the human community and in global history.

History, Narrative and Mythology

One of the striking features of *Beloved* is Morrison’s deliberate use of a variety of mythical strands, both from the West Africa and from the classical Western tradition, to rewrite the experiences of slaves, and to the lost and forgotten a “home.” *Beloved* is not only the dying and rising god of classical mythology and Christianity, and the cycle of the seasons (winter [slavery] and summer [freedom]), but may also be a version of the African trickster figure, the African “all-consuming devil child” (Krumholz 1999, 87). She may also be the “ogbanje” child that features in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which returns to its mother again and again, a symbol of barrenness and hopelessness. It is only when it ceases returning that fertility will be restored. And *Beloved* is also the embodiment of the lost slave in exile in Egypt or in

³ See particularly the works of Stephanie Demetrakopoulos “Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Woman’s Individualism in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (in Bloom ed., 1999, 69-78) and Linda Krumholz, “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, (quoted in Bloom, ed., 1999, 79-96)

Babylon, a common motif in African-American Christian culture – a version of the Christ who must die in order for true freedom from slavery to come about. By transposing Egypt/Babylon onto the American South, and Israel onto the North, the African-American community had adopted the Chiliastic typology of the New Testament, but had literalized it as actual geography. This in itself is a way of making a pastpresentfuture of a single symbolic event. Beloved re-enacts this when she emerges from the waters of the past, of oppression, the “Deep South” of hell and the underworld, and causes Sethe to void water “endlessly,” as if in an endless return to birth and baptism. Like the escaped slaves, the place she comes from is both real and imaginary.

The 1850 Compromise had forced even escaped and “freed” slaves to reconsider the location of “Israel” in the North, so that “freedom” was perforce once again reconfigured as less a place found on a map than as one found in mythology and spiritual existence. Beloved embodies this move from physical to spiritual, and shows that, in fact, real “freedom” is not to be attained by changing physical places, but only through emotional and spiritual change. Change happens in the “imagination” of the community: Morrison recreates the “imagined community” through Beloved by re-mythologizing the lost past, and does so by appropriating various historical myths to show that no single group ever has sole or final authority in matters of history and truth. The dominant myth within the slave community is not, however, of African origin, or even derived from Christianity, but from the area in between: the Middle Passage.

Black American slaves are neither insiders nor outsiders. Severed from their cultural roots and having lost their home language, their “home” (Africa) is deliberately figured as an absence. Thus the Middle Passage offers the most authentic

and recent exclusively slave experience. The crossing of the Atlantic is both a death and a birth, refigured in the crossing of the Ohio River. The description of the crossing, presented in *Beloved*'s child-like stream-of-consciousness narrative, mythologizes an imagined communal experience both in and outside time. Pastpresentfuture repeats eternally in the "mine, mine, mine" spoken as much by Sethe, Denver and the entire community as it is by *Beloved*.

The dominance of the Middle Passage in the story means that representation of getting to the North by crossing the Ohio is dominated by markers which are reminders of the horrors of the Middle Passage – Ela throwing her baby overboard, or the fear and nervousness of the slaves who attempt escape. These create a build-up of tension, culminating in what Stamp Paid finds in the river, symbol of all the lost who never reached the other side. The contrapuntal "smoothness" in the recounting of this devastating discovery is all the more shocking for its linguistic restraint. It is a restraint suggesting that the discovery is not as unusual as might be expected. Stamp Paid takes the ribbon and leaves behind the scalp. Like the memory of the Middle Passage, the (blood) red ribbon is made a keepsake, not only in the pocket of the finder, but also in the mind of the reading community; and small and apparently insignificant as it is, it remains "not a story to pass on," but also a story no-one can forget, no matter how hard they try.

The measured narration and the focus on apparently insignificant items (sycamore trees, butter, roosters with names, bright quilt pieces) deliberately elicit a form of amnesia for the larger historical "strokes" that "paint" (or mark the backs of) the lives of slaves. Instead, the memory is of "small things," objects which serve to symbolize memories too painful to bear. Churned butter replaces a pregnant (raped and milkless) wife and her children, the scars on a woman's back become the

genealogical “tree of life” telling a community’s story, the ribbon keeps the child’s memory as no memory, no clearly identifiable child, and yet all children, and all Beloveds who once were children.

Morrison’s narrative of amnesia rewrites national History by subverting its metanarrative, working against its dominant (and domineering) strokes. It mythologizes the “small things” and so restores the importance of simple and largely forgotten human experience. Morrison’s technique here is in many respects a reworking of Bhabha’s suggestion about national(istic) time: that the nation’s narrative “illustrates the tension between narrative representation and poetic amnesia in the national longing for a unified cultural past” (1994, 152). National narratives seek unity and coherence by resorting to amnesia, in this instance by forgetting the human cost of slavery. But Morrison shows that true “forgetting,” a therapeutic amnesia, can only take place after the “rememory” of what has been deliberately forgotten. So she takes the community and the reader back, as a psychotherapist might do, “regressing” them to a stage where long-repressed memories are recalled, and so finally both remembered and “forgotten.” This does not mean a “smoothing over” of the pain of the past but a way towards its healing.

The Structure of Narrating Memory

Morrison does not use only myth and lyrical language to recreate the past in *Beloved*. The structure of the story is itself a means of working through the struggles of memory against forgetting, and of finding a way to “rememory” creatively. Single, epiphanic moments, mythical in their import, resurface regularly throughout the text, make the past ever-present, but also reinscribe the past with new meaning with each

resurfacing. For instance, Sethe's memory of the boys of Sweet Home stealing her milk rises whenever she kneads dough: memory returns like a bread, kneaded, baked and consumed anew each day.

Cathy Caruth's readings of Freud (quoted in Barnett 1999, 195) are important in this regard. She uses Freud's observation that neurotics are occupied mostly with *not* thinking about their traumatic pasts, to show how *Beloved* attempts to deal with the trauma of the past by "beating back the past" until the text and its characters can no longer continue to beat it back: the past is "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits," often in the form of hallucinations and nightmares. Analeptic and proleptic sequences mimic the erratic nature of memory, as does the "stream of consciousness" section where the three voices of the women combine into one so that the text becomes the memory of a community.

Through the narrative disruption of chronology, the novel "holds itself at bay," not allowing anything to be put down to rest. Its structure therefore mimics what Caruth identifies as one of the primary ways in which traumatized patients deal with their trauma. Recollection of trauma shows an "oscillation between *a crisis of death* and a correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (quoted in Barnett 1999, 195). Sethe is as traumatized by her survival as she is by her experiences as a slave woman. Memory is a double-edged sword: how much of its trauma a community has forgotten is also a measure of how much it continues to remember.

Any writing about trauma, whether in a novel or in the "national imaginary," will therefore, as Bhabha points out, be a dialectic between temporalities (past and present) never fully resolved into homogeneity, though homogeneity is what it seeks. "It is from the instability of cultural signification," Bhabha says, "that the national

culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities – modern, colonial, postcolonial, ‘native’ – that cannot be a knowledge that is stabilized in its enunciation” (1994, 152). Morrison’s “mythical method” enacts the dialectic between these temporalities, but more importantly, perhaps, her use of prolepsis and analepsis shows that it is not possible to “smooth” the national narrative into a linear, homogenous unity.

The various levels of memory held by the characters may be described as web-like as well as layered. To excavate one layer is to discover a further “web” of connections which lead to more unexcavated memories. Sethe has “disremembered” what Beloved remembers, “where your diamonds?”(212). This reminiscence takes Sethe back to Sweet Home when it was still “Sweet,” and to the gift of “diamonds” given by Mrs Garner on Sethe’s “wedding day.” But this single memory (representative of countless others) is traumatic and disremembered because it reminds her of others – of Halle’s loss, of shining moments no longer experienced, of the fact that the diamonds were not diamonds at all but cheaper crystal, and the shining moments only superficial; and finally, Beloved’s ambiguous phrasing exacerbates the loss: “where/wear” your diamonds – but Sethe cannot wear them for they are lost.

This excavation of the “web” (to mix several metaphors) enables the “surfacing” (like Beloved) of the “new narratives,” the *petit recits* of the forgotten. In the context of the plantation system, where isolation from wider society, and the insistence on keeping slaves from different groups together, ensured linguistic and cultural dislocation, Africa becomes little more than a figment of the imagination, and the only real objects that slaves have to hold on to are what they can touch and feel and keep – like pieces of quilt. *Beloved* “makes flesh” of the unspeakable and the

disremembered because it is only in this way that the marginalized and the forgotten stories can be retold. They are not simply “told,” however, they are relived and re-experienced because of the literal ghostly presence of Beloved. She embodies the dual nature of traumatic memory in that she evokes both a crisis of death and a crisis of life. Her fleshly appearance brings to life memories that contain both life and death – the death of some, enabling the “life” or freedom of others, and this turning out to be a “death-in-life.” Morrison’s excavation turns narrative into a physical encounter in order to demonstrate the physical nature of trauma and its rememory. Beloved takes on the qualities of both life and death, child-like beauty and innocence, but also an underworld demonism, since both aspects are intrinsic to trauma and its retelling.

This duality is figured in Beloved’s relationship with her mother, who is both a literal mother and a figure for all mothers of the lost and the forgotten. “Beloved could not take her eyes off SetheSethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (56). Beloved’s initial entrance into 124 is masked by her appearance as helpless and ill. But with each passing day she grows stronger both physically and sensually, with an insatiable appetite for food, touch and, eventually, sex. She allows a certain enantiodromia to enter the house; that is, she shows how a “natural” force that has been repressed becomes a demonic force, so that by the time it surfaces (as Beloved does from the water) it seeks victims before it is quelled. This becomes increasingly the characteristic that marks the relationship between Beloved and Sethe (or “Lethe” – the river of forgetfulness), into which Beloved seeks to embed herself once more. Her desire, almost homoerotic, is to know the unspeakable things that Sethe prefers to hold at bay.

Beloved’s eventual uroboric pregnancy is the result not of Paul D’s sexual encounter with her, but more particularly her encounter with her mother’s stories.

Her body sucks up Sethe's rememory, literalizing the words into a maternal body which represents the communal body, past, present, and future. Sethe, in seeking to forget – to be Lethe – quite literally re-members the lost body of the past, making it the mother and allowing herself to become the child, made infantile by the power of the story she has kept pregnant within herself for so long.

It seemed to Denver the thing was done: Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child... Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became... [s]he sat in the chair licking her lip like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took, swelled with it The older woman yielded ... without a murmur. (250)

The third part of the novel begins: "124 was quiet" – but the quiet is a disturbing quiet, recalling the beginning of the first part of the novel: "124 was spiteful."

Beneath the "quiet" lurks the spiteful violence of memory, rupture and pain. This rupture is figured in the eventual stand-off between Beloved and Sethe. Beloved refuses Sethe's request for forgiveness, sending Sethe into a deeper quagmire of guilt: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And *Beloved helped her out*" (252). The engorged Beloved becomes a metaphor for how the inability to forget can be as dangerous, even fatal, as "disremembering" can be.

The re-membling of the lost body of the past cannot be fully achieved in isolation. Sethe's refusal of forgiveness stems from being literally and figuratively "swallowed up" by her past and the guilt it evokes; her isolation leads to a depression which makes it difficult for her to *desire* healing. Only a community of members can finally re-member the broken body of the past, and this process is represented by the chorus of women who cast out the spirit of Beloved. For us, a "virtual community" of responsible readers of the novel, the challenge is to allow our new awareness of the

past to impact on our present and influence our future. In the words of Minnie Bruce Pratt (quoted in Kanneh 1998, 122) what we should learn to cultivate is “a way of looking at the world that is more accurate, complex, multi-layered, multi-dimensional ... to see a world of overlapping circles.”

Beloved is a useful guide in this regard, because it disrupts the narratives of both nationalism and History, suggesting that the United States conceals stories radically different from the one that it is accustomed to telling itself about itself. As Milan Kundera puts it in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984): “On the surface, the intelligible lie, beneath, the unintelligible truths.” Kanneh (1998, 117) goes so far as to argue that “the United States – though it is predicated on notions of Western hegemony, of economic, military and cultural imperialism – is as a *nation*, inherently *defined* by its own politically marginalized peoples.” The “official” image of the US (democracy, freedom, the City upon the Hill) is like a snapshot in which only white faces appear; the darker faces of the peoples marginalized by History are simply out of the frame. By the sheer power of its storytelling, *Beloved* explodes that image and “rememories” into agency a community whose absence from History is the very ground of America’s identity.

The “conclusion” *Beloved* offers reminds us of the extent to which rememory and forgetting are inextricably intertwined:

Down by the stream in the back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again. By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too.... (275)

If the footprints of *Beloved*, who stands for the “sixty million and more,” are allowed to disappear again, then all links with the past will be lost, and the process of

rememory will once again come into play, with its attendant pains and traumas. To ignore memory, as this thesis shows in various different ways, is to create toxicity. Hence, when the footprints of memories are found, *Beloved* tasks us to “rememory” them.

Chapter Two

Nervous Conditions

I learnt to write when I was six and at the same time also discovered the magic of my body as a writing surface.... We wrote deep into the skin and under skin where the words would not escape.... The words formed light, grey intermingling paths that meant something to our imagination and freed us and made us forget the missing laughter of our mothers.... It was possible when you had used a small piece of dry bark for your pen, to be bleeding in small dots. Such words could not depart or be forgotten.

(Yvonne Vera, *Writing Near the Bone*)

Keening. I remember keening that seemed to go on all through the night: shrill, sharp, shiny, needles of sound piercing cleanly and deeply to let the anguish in, not out.

(Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*)

Suppressed Fury

Michael Taussig (quoted in Bahri 1994, 1) maintains that the colonized or about-to-be colonized subject suffers from various forms of psycho-somatic disorder that result from the experience of colonization. It may be argued that in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) all the characters are afflicted by some or other form of "nervous condition", to which the preface draws the reader's attention, and that these conditions are predominantly caused by the fact of colonization. As epigraph to the novel Dangarembga reproduces, as a full sentence, a clause from a now famous sentence by Sartre; she also changes it slightly, so that it becomes important to return to the original. It comes from Sartre's introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of*

the Earth (2001, 17), and reads as follows: “The status of ‘native’ is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*” [italics in original]. Presumably using the same, standard English translation (Constance Farrington, 1968), Dangarembga has changed the word “status” to “condition” in her rendition – possibly an error, but more likely deliberate, to emphasise the psycho-somatic nature of some of the consequences of colonization. One such consequence is mentioned earlier by Sartre in his introduction: “If this suppressed fury [of the native] fails to find an outlet, it turns in a vacuum and devastates the oppressed creatures themselves. In order to free themselves, they even massacre each other” (2001, 16).

Dangarembga’s aim in her novel is, at least partly, to explore some of the implications of Sartre’s phrase “*with their consent*”. For it is from both the imposition of colonization and its (often confused and contradictory) reception that one must read its effects on the individual. Typically, the suppressed violence to which Sartre and Fanon refer does indeed fail to find an outlet, and its axis shifts from ‘vertical’ to ‘horizontal’. It is to this horizontal violence that *Nervous Conditions* bears testimony.

One aspect of this violence is the domination of men over women in the African family. The text suggests that a traditional African pattern of patriarchal domination has survived, in spite of Westernization. In fact Westernization appears to have reinforced it, through the institution of education.

The patriarch and supposed benefactor of the extended family is Babamukuru, whose authoritarian behaviour controls those around him. The ripples of horizontal violence are also seen in the characterization of Jeremiah. Colonialism has removed him from his traditional role as a farmer and head of a household and reduced him to

hapless indolence, largely dependent on Baba and therefore willing to do whatever he is asked to do, even “giving” his children up to “the Englishness”. Despite this, Jeremiah lords it over his wife Ma’Shingayi, impregnating her and bossing her around to the extent that she is relieved when he seeks sexual release from her sister Lucia. Although at patriarchal meetings he accuses Lucia of “walking with the night”, he has no qualms about sleeping with her. She is, as far as the narrator is concerned, used by Jeremiah to restore to himself some vestige of his manhood:

my father had proved his mettle by dispiriting my mother, [and] was excited by the thought of possessing a woman like Lucia, [it was] like possessing a thunder-storm to make it crackle and thunder and lightning at his command. (129)

But Tambu also knows that if she were to insult her father, he would not have the emotional strength to retaliate in any significant way – he is just too lazy to run after her!

Despite the fact of their oppression, therefore, colonized males are portrayed as having an outlet for *their* suppressed fury – the women. The women, however, have no outlet for their anger, with the result that their “suppressed” fury is often internalised and expressed in various forms of bodily disturbance or mutilation. In her article “Killing the Hysteric in the Colonized’s House” (1992, 27), Sue Thomas maintains that the novel may be seen to express several types of hysteria, from the banal – which expresses itself in the “bad nerves” of Baba, obliged to play the role of the “good, cultivated boy”, to the acute – which expresses itself in the anorexia and bulimia of Ma’Shingayi and Nyasha.

One might reconfigure Thomas’s title, however, as “Killing the Colonized in the Hysteric’s House”, since it is the colonized who is mentally and emotionally

“killed” by having to cross both literal and metaphorical “spaces” between the Homestead and the colonial Mission, to live double lives of filth and relative splendour. The mission house is presented in the novel as “spotlessly clean”, at a decisive remove from the rural squalour of the village, yet it is seen by the older narrating Tambu as emotionally superficial and sterile. Although the young Tambu is seduced by its surfaces at first, when she is later able to narrate from a more mature and detached perspective, she says (concluding her narrative):

[Q]uietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bring me to this time when I can set down this story The story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began. (204)

This statement by the narrator shows the “dis-ease” brought on by spending years at the mission, and leaves the reader in no doubt as to how damaging the meretricious surfaces of colonialism can prove to be. We have earlier seen how, when Tambu goes to Sacred Heart despite her mother’s protests about the malignancy of “the Englishness” (201), the colonizing mission furthers its own ends. To reinforce its hold over the native it chooses the most intelligent Africans and lures them into the world of the colonized so that they can become the “good munts” who accept the system and even work to entrench it. This is evident in Baba’s embracing the role of the “good kaffir” in the world of the European, while at the same time enjoying something like omnipotence as the benevolent and authoritarian uncle in the “native” world. He even gives up his ancestral practices and chooses to uphold Christian tradition. His insistence on Jeremiah and Ma’Shingayi’s white, Christian wedding to ease the misfortune experienced by the clan, goes against the clan’s own desires for a

traditional solution, and entrenches a new kind of patriarchy based not on ancestral claims but on colonialist ones.

Michael Taussig's remarks regarding "bad nerves" (or what several female writers have termed "hysteria") certainly hold true for the characters, particularly the female ones, in the novel. Taussig (quoted in Bahri 1994, 1) suggests that "things" in the "nervous system" can be read as signs and symptoms of "dis-ease". These signs are "not only biological and physical but also signs of social relations disguised as natural things, concealing their roots in human reciprocity". Bahri then extrapolates Taussig's work and applies it to the novel. That the social relations masked as natural things (akin to Althusser's notions of Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatus) have their most insidious impact directly on female bodies, is further borne out by Susan Bordo in "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity" (quoted. in Bahri 1994, 1). Her contention is that "the bodies of disordered women offer themselves as aggressively graphic text for the interpreter ... a text that insists, actually demands, it be read as a cultural statement".

While Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* deals extensively with the maligned "status" of the colonized "subject", it is obvious that the "subject" he speaks of is male. By using Fanon's position as a starting point, and yet focussing instead on the female subject, *Nervous Conditions* brings an additionally marginalized group to the fore. But this group is not treated as a uniform entity. The novel anticipates Chandra Mohanty's (1996) demand that we question the notion of a monolithic, homogenous "third world", and rather remind ourselves of the range of constituencies that it comprises, so that the wounds, rupture and cleavages caused by colonialism and patriarchy are exposed. Thus in *Nervous Conditions* the power of the patriarchy is shown to be upheld by the matriarchy, the senior members of the group of aunts and

grandmothers who collude with the patriarchal structure and in this way maintain their own positions of power within the structure.

Nervous Conditions even subverts the homogenizing category of “third world women” by chronicling the “small stories” of individual women, which are then (re)absorbed into the history of the body politic as alternate ways of seeing. The novel brings into focus what Stuart Hall (1996, 112) refers to as “hidden histories”, and in this way challenges the “debilitating generality of the object status [of women which] robs them of agency” (Mohanty, quoted in Creamer 1994, 360). Its representation of women is neither monolithic nor uniform, and does what Spivak suggests it is important for all literature of the margins to do: to show that the margin is “a wide expanse of . . . physical, psychological and intellectual space with its own dynamics and contradictions” (quoted in Nnaemeka 1994, 141).

What may be termed an “alternative history” is produced by Mbuya, Tambu’s grandmother, who, while working in the fields, tells Tambu the histories that the textbooks of the time do not chronicle. The narrator recalls listening avidly to “the episodes of my grandmother’s own portion of history strung together from beginning to end” (17-18). Mbuya is a repository of those stories dating from before “the wizards well-versed in trickery, came from the south and forced the people off the land” (18), but as this quotation indicates, she is also an oral historian of colonial dispossession. Her extended narrative makes it clear that once the whites from the south had tricked them, the people were left desolate “upon [the] grey sandy soil of the homestead, [that was] so stony and barren that the wizards could not use it” (18).

Upon hearing about the “wizards” who were missionaries, she had taken her son Baba to them so that he could be schooled in their wizardry and hence be prepared for a life of the kind that was to come. So Baba becomes “a good boy,

cultivable in the way the land is, to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator” (19). Tambu, the young girl, thinks that the story is romantic, but the conclusion that her grandmother draws from it – “endure and obey, for there is no other way” (19) – she will herself expose as erroneous. As she and the other female characters subsequently demonstrate, there is no need to have to endure or obey because it is possible to unshackle oneself from both patriarchy and colonialism. Ironically, Mbuya, holder of the “secret” to what will ultimately “assert itself” in Tambu’s mind and enable her to “put down this story” (204), is also responsible for the first leap into colonial acculturation in the family. While Mbuya believes that “she was being sagacious” (9), the “modernity” to which she exposes the Sigaukes sends violent fissures and discontinuities rippling through the family.

It is partly because of such rupture that, as the narrator concedes, the first sentence of the novel is implicitly violent:

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. (1)

In a very particular sense, Tambu is only able to set down her story as a consequence of her pursuit of self-interest. At the time, that interest lay exclusively in leaving the homestead, which for her stands for poverty, “the weight of womanhood”, and “dirt”, all of which she wants to challenge or evade. Significantly, the homestead is seen as “fallow”, a condition symbolically urging the colonized subject to leave for greener pastures. In this regard, Mbuya’s story, despite its brevity, is instructive. She tells Tambu how she gave her son to the “wizards” who were “well-versed in treachery and black magic” (18), in order that he (Babamukuru) could be “prepare[d]... for life

in their world” (19). It is this “sagacious” foresight which nevertheless resonates unhappily through the lives of her descendants and through the text of the novel.

The decisive challenge to that “wizardry” was of course the second Chimurenga war, the war of liberation whose first battle was fought on April 28th 1966. Charles Sugnet (1997) raises some very pertinent questions regarding *Nervous Conditions* and its relationship to the war. He points out that in Dangarembga’s feminist re-invention of the Fanonist narrative of liberation, although both Tambu and Nyasha are raised against the background of the Chimurenga, there is little direct reference to the war in the novel. He locates three instances when pertinent references appear to link the text to the Chimurenga. The first instance is contained in Tambudzai’s declaration that she, unlike Nyasha, is “not concerned that freedom fighters were referred to as terrorists” (155); a second reference occurs through Nyasha’s admission that “our government was not a good one” (101); and the third when Nyasha wishes to know exactly why UDI was declared and “what it meant” (93). But as he himself acknowledges, *Nervous Conditions* plots an almost “subterranean” relationship between the Chimurenga and the struggles of Tambu, who is warned by her mother that the ancestors do not wish her to “stomach” too much of the “Englishness”.

The scarcity of reference to the war leads to another important question: why is nationalism (or nation building) a process that apparently excludes women? Why do national struggles seem to efface the struggles of women? For example, while several women fought in the battles of the Chimurenga, very few of their stories have been chronicled. One of the few accounts is that of Marevasei Kachere, whose *War Memoir* (Daymond et al. 2003, 494) reveals the difficulties women experienced fighting alongside men, and how they suffered in the “keep” (camps) to which they

were relocated after their houses were burned to the ground by soldiers. She reveals information absent from the official historical records: for instance, that during the war of liberation female soldiers were often the “sexual tools” of their male counterparts. They suffered what she calls “additional hardships”, whose reality continues to remain unacknowledged long after independence. Kachere makes it clear that she would never suggest her own daughter follow her mother’s path (500). Clearly she herself has not yet fully recovered from the trauma of her experience in the camps. To exacerbate her situation, none of the monetary promises made to the soldiers after independence ever materialized, and she is obliged to eke out a living on a paltry pension. Not only were the women silenced, but it seems that they often choose to remain silent rather than make public some of their memories.

The fact of women’s continued marginalization is also taken up by Elleke Boehmer, who points out that

the unshackling of the African continent from colonial rule has precluded a corresponding full emancipation of women. In the iconographies of nation states there are few positive roles on offer for women that are not stereotypes and/or connected in some way to women’s biological capacity for mothering. (quoted in Rutherford 1992, 229)

I would like to argue that *Nervous Conditions* challenges those stereotypes and suggests roles for women different from the stereotypes; that the novel demonstrates the heterogeneity of women’s roles and some of the ways in which women are almost surreptitiously coerced into roles of submission. It succeeds in challenging the roles that African patriarchy and the effects of colonialism have created for women.

Although characters like Lucia sometimes appear to be complicit with the patriarchy, they can nevertheless be seen to be challenging its order by playing Baba

at his own game. Maiguru, on the other hand, is dislocated and disregarded by the larger family, despite her education and status. In fact, while her education has offered her social mobility, she is alienated and stands outside the “troubles” of the women. This is seen when she does not take the side of the women when the patriarchy maligns Lucia as “she who walks with the night”. Even though both she and Baba achieve Master’s degrees, she remains in the background on her return from England. Baba is heralded as the prince who has “digested English letters”, while Maiguru enters last with her two children, behind the phalanx of

[v]arious paternal aunts ... [b]ehind them danced female relatives of the lower strata. Maiguru entered last [d]ressed in flat brown shoes and a pleated polyester dress very much like the one Babamukuru bought my mother before he left. She did not look as though she had been to England. (37)

The narrator is herself extremely surprised when she hears that Maiguru also possesses a Master’s degree. In fact, Maiguru and Baba appear to have been chosen as the ideal young couple to be “cultivated” by the mission school system. Baba erodes Maiguru’s status by not recognizing her hard work and by taking her money and using it as if it were his own. Maiguru’s deep resentment is seen when she tells Tambu that she must hand her salary to her husband every month. Furthermore, she bemoans the way in which the family treated her when she went to study abroad. She was seen to be an unfit mother for her children, simply because she was studying. When she receives her degree, no-one in the family recognizes her status as one who has also “digested” the “English letters”.

Nationalism/Nationalisms

The novel's exploration of patriarchal domination within the nuclear family and the "small stories" of oppression which emerge from it, may be read as symbolical of the larger national story, thus raising the question of the extent to which gender "intervenes", as it were, in the national allegory. As Jameson (quoted in Osei-Nyame 1999, 58) maintains, it may be argued that in Third World literature, "the story of the private individual destiny is reproduced as the embattled situation of the so-called third world culture and society". Jameson's notion of the "national allegory" can be read as another way of expressing the idea central to the present argument: that nations, in order to develop identities, allegorize their histories, and so develop an official History, with fixed allegorical (often moralistic) meanings. Most "freedom struggles" are allegorized as tales of redemption from slavery, for example. Such allegorizing is obviously ideologically driven. And such Histories are usually developed from what Jameson calls the "embattled situation" of the country.

Gender, as Dangarembga's text shows, is seldom seen as an important component of the national allegory. But the novel suggests that it may be wise to consider the notion of the "embattled situation" more carefully. While conceding, with Anderson (1983) and Jameson, that colonialism has led to the rise of "print capitalism", so that in a literal sense Tambu is enabled by "the Englishness" to write against it, such a concession nevertheless raises the question of the extent to which the colonized subject herself becomes "embattled" by the very "freedom of expression" she has gained. The "national allegory" in this sense may be seen as neglectful of the gender "struggles within the struggle", and so, to women, may be just another imposed state. This means that the perceived "freedom" of letters (the "Englishness")

which colonially educated African women are granted, may become a “prison-house of language”, to use another Jamesonian (1989) phrase, in which the colonial woman finds herself as alienated as she was under patriarchy, but now with the added burden of acculturation to carry. Tambu, the adult narrator, maintains that

though the events of my brother’s passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia’s, about my mother’s and Maiguru’s entrapment; and about Nyasha’s rebellion – Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle’s daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful. (1)

Tambu says that *Nervous Conditions* is about her “escape”, but this is in fact questionable. It seems clear from the traumas depicted in the text by the adult Tambu that the past is not ever fully “escaped”. While a few may escape the status of subaltern in the community by being educated in “the Englishness”, the text suggests that they cannot, finally, escape the conflicts which result from their own “escape”. And it is this inner conflict that *Nervous Conditions* renders so eloquently, showing it to be both an aspect of the colonial past, but also, if we read Tambu as a post-colonial figure, of the future. Tambu has only “escaped” to become the good “African girl” who goes to Sacred Heart to sleep in a dormitory too small for the six “girls” who must sleep there. As the nun beatifically points out: “All the first-formers live on this corridor ... the Africans live in here” (198). When Baba queries the sleeping arrangements, the nun, oblivious of her racism, replies: “Ah yes ... we have more Africans here than usual this year and so we had to put them all in here” (199).

While the narrating Tambu is quite aware of the racism of the nun’s words, she is unable to escape the effect of her own colonial education, the perspective of an institution that informs the nun’s words, and so unable to avoid a certain

psychological dividedness within herself. She is only able to question in English the nun's racism because she has herself had a western education. In a sense, then, her own colonization is complete, for her ability to articulate her disgruntlement at colonial prejudice is made possible only *by* her colonial education, so that even the "space" of protest has been colonized – just as the school dormitory in which she is made to sleep is small and carefully controlled.

Baba is an active participant in this control, this allegory of manners which the colonizer imposes, and becomes a symbol in the text for all that Tambu tries to avoid. But the young Tambu emulates him, and is therefore misguided in the belief that she has escaped. She has not. She remains a victim of "the Englishness", something about which her mother has warned her. The young Tambu's "escape", furthermore, ignores her mother's suffering and maligned body. She is deaf to her mother's plea:

Tell me, my daughter, what will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English all the time. He-e, Mummy this, he-e, Mummy that. Like that cousin of yours. I have seen it happen – we saw it happen here in our home. (187)

Nor does she respond to Nyasha's letter of pain and insecurity. Although, as she tells us, she feels a pang of guilt, she allows the activities at Sacred Heart – the debates, the films, the romance novels – to take her away from the fly-ridden world of her mother and the angst-ridden "destructive" behaviour of Nyasha. Much later she will realise the loss that Sacred Heart has caused, and the extent to which her acculturation will continue to keep her isolated. So while she sees her ability to put down "this story" as a very significant aspect of her "growth", she herself continues the cycle of "entrapment".

Several critics (Sugnet 1998, Osei-Nyame 1999 and Basu 1998) wonder about the transition between the young, impressionable Tambu and the perceptive Tambu who sees things for what they are. Because of the perceptual gap between Tambu the coming-of-age focalizer and Tambu the adult, informed narrator, several clashes occur in terms of what the focalizer sees and what the older narrator knows, or claims to know. Sometimes these are handled with subtlety and ambiguity: for example, Tambu recalls her first impressions of the mission residence as follows:

Every corner of Babamukuru's house – every shiny surface, every soft contour and fold – whispered its own insistent message of comfort and ease and rest so tantalizingly, so seductively, that to pay any attention to it, to think about it at all, would have been my downfall. The only alternative was to ignore it. I remained aloof and unimpressed as possible.... I triumphed. I was not seduced. (70)

The “I”, the subject of the last sentence, appears at first to be the narrating self. But since the text makes it clear that Tambu is indeed “seduced” by the all the “shiny surfaces”, we realise that the consciousness invoked is still that of the young, experiencing self.

Reinforcing this is Tambu's behaviour on her return to the homestead, when she notices that the pit latrine which she remembers as “a healthy pink” is now squalid:

faeces and urine contaminated every surface, so that it was impossible to find a place to put your feet and you were tempted not to bother to weave your way to the holes. Glistening pale maggots burrowed fatly into the faeces; the walls had turned yellow. Large bottle-blue flies with nauseous orange heads buzzed irritatingly around my anus as I squatted. (125)

Tambu asks about the state of the toilet and why it is no longer cleaned, and her mother who is tired, world-weary and lying down because she is so weak when the family arrives, retorts: “clean it yourself if you want it clean” (125).

Even allowing that conditions may, objectively speaking, have deteriorated, the fact that the squalor, filth and dilapidation of the homestead are her first images of home bear testimony to the way in which the young Tambu has been both entrapped and seduced by the mission – almost without her knowledge, and when she believes she is at her most perceptive. The temporal and epistemological journey from the consciousness of the young focalizer to that of the adult narrator is described at the end of Tambu’s narrative as a “process of expansion”:

It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years, and would fill another volume (208)

Thus the significant aspects and stages of Tambu’s maturation are simply not included in her narrative, a fact which has made some critics (Sugnet in particular and Osei-Nyame more obliquely) suspicious both of the alleged “process” and of Dangarembga’s intentions more generally.

Two useful perspectives are those of Rachel Blau du Plessis, who speaks of “[a novel] that is written beyond the ending” (quoted in Uwakweh 1995, 78), and Bryce (1994, 620), who describes a narrative strategy of “retrieval, rediscovery and reinvention”. Since it is only as the mature narrator that Tambu can begin the first sentence of the novel, her narrative is a form of retrieval and reinvention of an earlier self, and so in itself becomes a site of conflict – of violence and violation, including violation of herself. The text, while perhaps cathartic, is also a form of violation through its own function as retriever of the past. In this sense it is written “beyond the

ending”, since the narrative’s “end” is not the story’s end, nor does it signify the end of the pain caused by the past.

What further compounds the challenge of how to “reconcile” the mature narrator with the child focalizer is the implicit invitation to read the narrative of events in linear terms. While the novel assumes what appears to be a linear structure, and does not overtly signal fragmentation (unlike Vera, 1998 and Marechera, 1978), it constantly pits the mature narrator against the child focalizer and then “loops” back at the end to the beginning of the story; “[this] is my own story.... This story is how it all began” (204). In many ways this narrative technique re-enacts the “splitting” which the colonial subject experiences during the process of acculturation.

Tambu the mature narrator assumes that by putting down what she calls “my story” she has managed to circumvent her “embattled” status, and achieved “[her] escape”. But this is not so. While I concede the validity of what Bhabha says with regard to the power of the “transnational intellectual” (Basu 1997, 7), that the margin is a powerful space from which to write because of its capacity to subvert “mainstream” ideological positions which occlude the histories of the colonized, I would also like to propose that this “margin” is fraught with all manner of difficulties and destructive acculturation. The text shifts, sometimes surreptitiously, between child focalizer and adult narrator, and the final words of the novel suggest that Tambu has come to a point where she is able to straddle the worlds of both colonized and colonizer. However, she is clear about the fact that “It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion” (208), and the focus on the idea of a process of expansion here suggests that perhaps such a process does not end, and continues beyond the narrative present of the text itself. This is not to suggest that we regard Tambu as the author, as well as a character. There is no internal evidence for this, and

it is not in the province of the present argument to debate the merits or demerits of the so-called intentional fallacy. But what I am suggesting is that the text does not claim that any final point of “escape” from history can be achieved, either at an individual level or at the level of national experience.

Nervous Conditions appears to confound any attempt to read it as national allegory, either past or future. Its schizophrenic splittings, its loopings back on itself, its refusal to indulge in straightforward teleology, deny any straightforward allegorizing or neat moralizing about the nation’s historical narrative – or about the individual’s. The text appears to reject both national allegory and conventional identity politics, exposing but not suturing the splits between past and present, focalizer and narrator, content to live with the ostensibly disabling fact that the “Englishness” of the coloniser is precisely the “Englishness” that enables Tambu to tell her story.

Body Politics

The effects of colonialism, it has been argued, may be somatic as well as political and geographical. Not only is colonialism about conquering the land, it is also about conquering the body of the colonized and then reconstructing him/her out of a myriad strands of (questionable) stories and stereotypes. *Nervous Conditions* explores not only the relationship between the male colonizer and colonized, but also the positions of women in the hierarchy of colonization. It posits an awareness of the need for a greater women’s “presence” in society, a presence which would inevitably destabilize the male hierarchies set up both before and during the colonial encounter.

Women's "small stories", their histories, the novel suggests, are not told in the official History, or even in the histories of their own households, which are male dominated. Instead, these stories are told "on the body" of the woman herself. For in the largely silent or repressed world of women like Maiguru, Nyasha and Ma'Shingayi, only the body is left as the "mouthpiece". They must obey their men, just as their men must obey the colonizer (even if they are only acting the part of the "good munt"). The silencing of women is effectively a secondary form of colonization that takes an inevitable toll on their bodies and minds, leaving them "hysterical".

This is explicitly articulated by only two characters in the text, both female, and both in moments of what may be termed "hysteria". Perhaps for both Ma'Shingayi and Nyasha the "screen" of hysteria allows them to say what really needs to be said to Baba, their apparent benefactor. Both are oppressed. Baba's conduct impinges physically upon their bodies, restricting and silencing them; and, significantly, as the young Tambu tells us, it kills their laughter. In an otherwise perceptively argued article, Charles Sugnet questions Sally McWilliams' arguments that anorexia and bulimia are "voluntary" acts that are linked to resistance, and disagrees with her when she argues that "young women's bodies 'talk' in that they are physical disturbances to the status quo of that society's cultural codes" (Sugnet 1998, 45). Sugnet does not believe, it seems, that anorexia and bulimia may be ways in which silenced women seek to take control of their own bodies when all other forms of resistance have been wrested from them, but sees them rather as "consciously controlled heroics" (1998, 45).

I would, contrary to Sugnet, go so far as to suggest that the notion of "bad nerves" is central to the way in which the novel deals with colonialism and its

consequences. Not only has colonialism left the worst land for the colonized, but it has also left men like Jeremiah and Takesure in a state of forced indolence. This results in their attempting to recapture past social structures through patriarchal control, while living in the shadows of dirt. Central to the novel is the way in which images of dirt and lack of hygiene are linked to the homestead, while the mission house is construed as clean and very hygienic – all its surfaces neat and shiny. This contrast is re-inscribed in the notions of personal hygiene and the silences around it. What at the homestead is seen as a “womanly thing” and talked about openly, menstruation, is seen at the mission as something about which to be secretive. One can argue that colonialism’s “Englishness” takes the women’s bodies away from them, as it does the men’s, making the former afraid and embarrassed, and the latter lazy and improvident. While Tambu is prepared by her grandmother for when her first period arrives, nothing prepares her for the confusion regarding how she should wash her soiled rags in Maiguru’s pristinely white sink:

I began to menstruate. I was very calm about it in the beginning. Conferences with older cousins and younger aunts, and the questions of older aunts and grandmothers had prepared me for the event.... The onset of my menses, then, should have been placid, but when it came to washing those rags in Maiguru’s white bathroom, to making a mess in the toilet bowl before I flushed it away, the business became nasty and nauseating. I became morose and moody about it. (97)

The loss of a “rural identity” is registered as much on the body of the colonized as in their relations with the land. Tambu quickly learns to insert a tampon with the minimum of discomfort, because she is embarrassed by her “rural” ways. This loss of a rural identity is linked closely to Mbuya’s story, her love of the land and the deep, dark places of Nyamarira. It is a loss at first easily managed in the context of the sumptuousness of Maiguru’s house and the surreptitious power that both the

house and the mission school exert. In this sense it is important that when Tambu is given the chance to go to the mission school she sees it in terms of re-incarnation into limitless horizons. As she says:

When I stepped into Baba's car I was a peasant.... At Babamukuru's I was expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived, on the homestead.... *I was going to be developed in the way Baba saw fit.* (59, italics mine)

The "development" that Baba and the mission have to offer is actually a form of loss linked to the body, a loss that Tambu can apparently only recognize in retrospect. The loss is first seen in Nhamo, who returns from the mission house with dramatic changes inscribed upon his body.

[Nhamo] had added several inches to his height and many to his width.... Vitamins had nourished his skin to a shiny smoothness, *several tones lighter in complexion* than it used to be. His hair... was shining with oil and smoothly combed... but there was a [more] terrible change. *He had forgotten how to speak Shona.* (52-3, italics mine)

This "loss of the tongue" allows him to have long conversations in English with his father, but none with his mother (because she has no English and his Shona is "halting"). This situation is a stark demonstration of how quietly the world of colonialism can "steal" subjects under the guise of education. As Tambu tells us, "[t]he more time Nhamo spent at Babamakuru's, the more aphasic he became and the more my father was convinced he was being educated" (53). Significantly, it is Tambu's mother, whom Tambu chooses to see as trapped, who points out the effects of this aphasia: "She thought someone on the mission was bewitching hr son and was

all for making an appointment with the medium” (53). She concedes that she wants him educated but poignantly adds that mostly “she wanted to talk to him” (53).

The “violent” ways in which Nhamo deals with his homestead family suggest that his psyche is undergoing sustained violation through the acculturation process, even though he is himself unable at the time to recognize this. He has learned to despise and recoil from the very life he has previously led. For example, we are told that he prefers to return to the homestead in Babamukuru’s car, hating to take the journey by bus – not only is it far too slow, but “[m]oreover, the women smelt of unhealthy reproductive odours, the children were inclined to relieve their upset bowels on the floor, and the men gave off strong aromas of productive labour” (1). Nhamo reacts by violating the protocols of home life, demanding that Netsai carry his luggage and selfishly consuming luxuries like tea and sugar that Maiguru had intended to be enjoyed by everyone.

Ma’Shingayi’s response to Nhamo’s death best expresses the loss of both tongue and body. What she has repressed for so long can finally be articulated through the screen of her “hysteria” and mourning:

Without warning [Ma’Shingayi] keened shrilly.... “First you took his tongue so that he could not speak to me and now you have taken everything.... You bewitched him and now he is dead. Pthu!” She spat at Maiguru’s feet. “And you too, Babamukuru! Pthu! I spit at you! You and your education have killed my son.” This time when she fell to the ground she did not pick herself up, but rolled there, tearing her hair and her clothes and grinding sand between her teeth. (54)

Those who claim that no reference is made in the novel to the political context and the violence of the Chimurenga do not seem to take into account such eruptions of violence on the part of the violated. To me these moments of helpless violence may be read as allegories of the larger Chimurenga conflict, in which *Nervous Conditions*

is nested. The novel may, in a sense, be read as a *mise-en-abyme* of the Chimurenga – it takes the form of the oppressed, victimized Ma’Shingayi “standing up” to the patriarchal control of Babamukuru. The consequence of Nhamo’s death is the violation that it visits upon her body:

Keening. I remember [my mother’s] keening that seemed to go on all through the night; shrill, sharp, shiny needles of sound piercing clearly and deeply to let the anguish in, not out. (54)

The “keening” and the “sharp needles of pain” which let the anguish into the body become the markers of Ma’Shingayi’s grief for the loss that she must suffer and the violence of “the Englishness” that took away first Nhamo’s tongue and then his life. Her wordless “keening” in a sense emulates the loss of Nhamo’s tongue, suggesting a pain so deep that only her body can “speak” it.

Ma’Shingayi has no real say over anything in her life, but she does have immediate control of her own body, and it is through using her body that she draws attention to herself. It may be argued that Ma’Shingayi is suffering from an hysteria that seeks to “localise” violence upon the body of the victim. This is an acute form of hysteria that becomes a marker of resistance. By contrast, Baba and his “bad nerves” and Maiguru’s “baby-talk” constitute what Sue Thomas (1992, 32) terms “banal” forms of hysteria.

By arguing that the more extreme forms of hysteria are suffered by the female characters, particularly Ma’Shingayi and Nyasha, I do not intend to assume the crude feminized etymology of the word “hysteria” as “wondering uterus”. Rather, I wish to suggest that hysteria can be read as a sign of revolt, upheaval and disruption. It is emphatically not to be read as a sign of defeat or helplessness or silence. My stance is taken here from the observations of both Kaja Silverman and Luce Irigaray (Walker

1998, 133), who maintain that when the silenced woman has no opportunity to speak, then her “hysteria” is what must “talk”. It is significant that the most acute forms of hysteria are experienced by the female characters: the male characters’ hysteria is “banal” in that it is milder than the females’ (though often passed on to female characters who “ingest” it, as it were). For example, the hapless Jeremiah “impoverishes” Ma’Shingayi even further by his indolence and his obsequiousness towards Baba. Similarly, Baba’s “bad nerves”, the result of his cultivation by “the wizards”, find an obvious outlet in his domineering treatment of Nyasha. Although he has raised her in England (hence her loss of her African mother tongue and her struggle to fit into African society), he still expects her to assume the role of the good African daughter. He compares her to Tambu, whose biddable complaisance renders her, in his eyes, the perfect African girl. When Nyasha lingers outside and innocently talks to a boy he is quick to call her a whore. When he slaps her she instinctively punches him in return, a reflection both of her anger with her father and her western upbringing. It is her sense of cultural and social dislocation which causes anguish to her psyche, manifests in anorexia and bulimia, and ultimately leads to her final (undiagnosed) breakdown.

As Bahri (1994, 4) maintains, while *Nervous Conditions* refuses to reduce “third world women” to mere caricatures as opposed to the “complexity” of the first world woman, it nevertheless shows that women suffer the impact of African minorization through their female status, class or education. Women are therefore subsumed by the “pervasive but complex phallogentric order” (Bahri 1994, 4). Tambu’s mother, who is very perceptive, says:

these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength. (16)

In this sense it is important that while the younger Tambu learns the lessons that Mbuya has to offer, she does not herself have to shoulder the “burden of womanhood” which demands that women “obey and endure” (19). After an insightful discussion with her mother, Tambu (still eight years old) marvels at how everything returns to “the question of femaleness” (116). In her naivety she thinks that Maiguru, who is black and a woman, is neither burdened nor poor. When she later goes to live with Maiguru she discovers the extent to which Maiguru, despite her education and hard work, also endures and suffers the weight of womanhood. Maiguru’s minorization is clearly seen through her baby-talk and her pandering to Baba’s whims and fancies. Her one outburst expresses all her resentment towards Baba for spending *her* money on *his* family; she leaves briefly and it is Baba who goes to fetch her back. When she returns she does not baby-talk as much as she used to. As Sue Thomas (1992, 29) comments, her rebellion is easily recuperable. However, I wish to suggest that the anguish experienced by Nyasha and Ma’Shingayi is far more serious and throws open the fissures that lie just beneath the superficially smooth and controlled surfaces of the Sigauke family.

The fissures lurk beneath the surface of family life, but are made visible in acts like Nyasha’s self-mutilation, a “punishment” for an anger and guilt she herself cannot fully grasp, as if her body must suffer so as to register a response to her sense of isolation and alienation. The psycho-somatic illness becomes dangerous because it cannot be properly recognized, identified or treated. Tambu says: “I could not help wondering what my cousin had seen that I had not” (96-7), as if she has no access to the lost object she seeks. Earlier we are told that Nyasha’s frenzied actions seem to

be the result of her constantly searching for something she cannot find (12). As Basu (1997, 12) suggests, Nyasha herself “insists that when you’ve seen different things you want to be sure you’re adjusting to the right thing”. But what is the right thing? Nyasha, indeed the novel itself, offers no answers concerning these lost objects, or what may be termed “narrative disjunctures”. So while Nyasha believes that her frenetic activity will keep her from getting trapped, it in fact serves to show the opposite. “Once you give in to *it*”, she says, “well, it just seems natural ... you’re trapped. *They control everything you do*” (12, my italics). The sheer “otherness” invoked in Nyasha’s use of pronouns with unspecified referents (“it”, “they”) indicates the alienation she feels from the life around her, people and practices generalized as a “thing” in whose clutches she is being smothered.

Basu (1997, 14) maintains that technologies of discipline are *implanted* on the body, and power “courses through its network of bodies, [so that] literacy as a technology provokes a violent reaction on the site of its implantation”. Ma’Shingayi is in this respect very clear about the nebulous antagonist whose identity Nyasha cannot articulate. According to her, it is “the Englishness”. She blames Nhamo’s death on it, and says to Tambu:

It’s the Englishness... It’ll kill them all if they aren’t careful.... That boy Chido can hardly speak a word of his own mother’s tongue.... About that one [Nyasha] we don’t even speak. It’s speaking for itself. (207)

It may be argued that the text sets up a carefully articulated topology, one that maps out both the geography of the land and its colonization, and how that colonization affects the “geography” of the body, particularly women’s bodies. In a sense the women’s bodies can be interpreted as symbols of the colonial appropriation of land.

It is the women who till the soil, and nurse the land, just as it is women who are meant to clean the latrines. Colonialist appropriation is figured on their bodies in the same way that it removes their power over the soil, and takes away their desire even to continue to live hygienically. Initially this may be said to apply only on the homestead, but when Tambu and Nyasha begin to understand the “oppression” of the secondary colonialism on the Mission, the same “indolence” and “hysteria” begin to show. In this instance it is the body that suffers most under the surveillance of “literacy as a technology”. Bahri (1994, 4) maintains that “by layering gender politics with the atrophying discourse of colonialism [*Nervous Conditions*] obliges us to recognize that the power structure is a contradictory amalgam of complicity and helplessness, where colonizer and colonized, men and women, collude to project their psychopathological ‘nervous’ conditions”.

Nervous Conditions uses food and cooking as a dominant motif, expressing various aspects of the colonizing experience. Food, its cooking, the inability to cook, or cooking as a form of emancipation, or food as sustenance on the homestead, or food as a symbol of colonial luxury, and most importantly, perhaps, food as a symbol of what is missing from the female body: all of these are aspects of how the text shows that the physical and the psychological are closely linked in the colonial experience. Food becomes the site of resistance for the maligned, “victimized” female body. Anorexia, bulimia and watery stools became one of the few ways women can “own” their bodies and *voice* resistance. It is through the use of food which the women produce and then prepare – even though they live on the left-overs from the men – that the female characters are offered a chance to *stop* being victims. The stories of Ma’Shingayi and Nyasha and their reactions to food should not be relegated to mere “vignettes of victimage” (Bahri 1994, 4). While Nyasha is aware of

victimization, she cannot be termed a victim: her stance is to challenge the discourse of victimhood and to claim for herself a measure of authority. Similarly, Ma'Shingayi is aware of the "weight" of womanhood, and her response to the loss of her children is to use her body as a tool of resistance. Her periods of not eating go "unnoticed", or are deliberately overlooked, and are certainly given no credibility by the young Tambu. But later when Ma'Shingayi makes clear her dislike of "the Englishness", and of how the "men" have "divided me from my children" (187) her health begins to decline rapidly. She would spend, the narrator informs us, whole days without eating, not changing her clothes or feeding Dumbudzo, who eventually develops "a horrendous watery stool that ran and ran" (187). Despite this, her mother remains indolent and unresponsive.

Jeremiah's first response is to take her to a medium (which would probably have helped her), yet Tambu is afraid her mother will put some dangerous curse upon Baba, which would have an indirect impact upon her. For all his laxity, Jeremiah still has the foresight to turn towards the traditional aspects of his culture for a sense of anchorage. In the same way, Mbuya's stories to Tambu of her ancestors will provide a sense of anchorage for her, much later on. Baba, on the other hand, has become far too anglicised. When Jeremiah suggests a cleansing ceremony to free the family of "evil spirits", Baba in turn suggests a "white wedding" for Tambu's parents, even though they have been married for nineteen years. As Ma'Shingayi says: "He says we must jump and we jump. To wear a veil, at my age to wear a veil! Just imagine – to wear a veil" (187).

Ironically, while Baba may have tried to veil her (sight), and Tambu dismisses her mother as entrapped, in many ways Ma'Shingayi is far-sighted. Rapidly losing weight and deliberately negating her maternal functions, since Baba decides what

happens to her offspring, she is level-headed enough to suggest that even the ancestors would not/could not *stomach* so much of the Englishness. With hindsight perhaps Tambu will learn that what ails her mother does not have to be kept quiet and secretive – ironically, her “testimony” lays bare her mother’s anguish so that her pain reverberates through the text.

Tambu’s moment of rebellion against Baba and his proposed “cleansing ceremony” in the form of a Christian white wedding for her mother and father, is also shown through the body. When she realizes that Baba’s plans for the wedding are indeed serious, Tambu admits that she “suffered a crawling over [her] skin, [her] chest contracted to a breathless tension and even [her] bowels threatened to let [her] know their opinion” (51). She refuses to attend a wedding that will turn her parents into comic-book caricatures, and of the morning of the wedding says:

I found I could not get out of bed. I tried several times but my muscles simply refused.... I was slipping further and further away from [Nyasha], until in the end I appeared to have slipped out of my body and was standing somewhere near the foot of the bed. [Upon Baba’s arrival and subsequent threats] the body on the bed didn’t even twitch. (168)

Psychic trauma results here in somatic “catatonia”. Tambu, who is in Baba’s words an example of a “good African girl”, is doing here what Baba cannot conceive she could do. He sees it as “misbehaviour” and a lack of discipline, and disobedience of his Word. But as Tambu maintains:

[Baba] did not know how I had suffered.... He did not know how my mind had raced and spun and ended *up splitting into two disconnected entities* that had long, frightening arguments with each other... the one half maniacally insisting on going, the other half equally maniacally refusing to consider it. (169, italics mine)

Her punishment is the administration by Baba of “fifteen lashes” – one for every year she has lived. In Baba’s world a “lack of discipline” calls for punishment. As he reminds Tambu “[she] is not a good girl” and that “[he] is the head of the house. Anyone who defies [his] authority is an evil thing in this house, bent on destroying what [he has] made”.

In contrast to Tambu, Nyasha’s response to the constraints of both patriarchy and African “tradition” is the most significant and destructive in the text, and demands that the female characters and their problems are given attention, both by the patriarchy and by readers of the novel. Nyasha, whom Tambu describes as “far-minded and isolated . . . [and whose] whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful”(1), is actually the one character who, through her vacillation between periods of anorexia and bulimia, subverts the hierarchical structures by using her body as a site of resistance. As her health and weight rapidly decline and as Baba demands that she eats everything on her plate, Nyasha shovels food into her mouth and later vomits. Her actions may be read as an ironic comment on Jeremiah’s words when Babamukuru first arrives from England:

[Her] father jumped out of Babamukuru’s car and, brandishing a staff like a victory spear, bounded over the bumpy road, leaping into the air and landing on one knee, to get up and leap again... “Hezvo!” he cried, “do you see him? ... Our father and benefactor has returned appeased, having devoured English letters with a ferocious appetite! Did you think degrees were indigestible? If so, look at my brother, big brother to us all! ... All was conquered! (36)

Clearly, Baba’s appetite for and devouring of English letters has been far too ferocious. His “food” has not been as digestible as Jeremiah assumes it has been. Nyasha’s bodily suffering and rejection of food literalizes the indigestibility of the

English letters. All has *not* been conquered. Instead, the “letters” have imposed their own “story” on the Sigauke family, which they, in turn, cannot fully stomach.

Nyasha’s anorexia and bulimia are an attempt to gain control in an environment where power has been wrested from her. Her “illness” is also an embattled plea for her father to recognize her for the hybrid that she is – that he created by taking her to England. Her own “small story” is being occluded and the only way she can “tell” it is with her body. This, as Fanon (1967) reminds us, is one of the only choices left to the colonized. But Nyasha extends her rebellion both bodily and ideologically when, later in the novel, she tears apart “their” history books (which are useless to her) and when she smashes pottery and uses the shards to mutilate her own body. The physical and ideological conflict resulting from “forced feeding” (both of food and of European culture) is finally played out one night after supper when Nyasha, after vomiting up her food, cannot do a simply mathematical equation. Her hysteria is openly played out, finally, at three in the morning when she awakens Tambu, complaining about Baba being nothing but “a bloody good munt” (204). When the parents arrive

[t]hey could do nothing.... Nyasha was beside herself with rage. She rampaged, shredding history books *between her teeth*... breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and *jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh*... “They’ve trapped us.... I’m very tired.... But I can’t sleep. Mummy will you hold me? She curled up in Maiguru’s lap looking no more than five years. “Look what they’ve done to us.... I’m not one of them, but I’m not one of you,” she whispered softly. (205, italics mine)

Fittingly, she must use fragmented mirrors to tear her flesh, symbolic of her fragmented self-image, and the fragmented pottery, symbolic of fragmented histories, like the teeth-torn history books she cannot fully ingest. “There’s a whole lot more” she says the next morning, when her parents think she will get better. Her calmness

the morning after her suicidal ranting is but “the eye of the storm” (205). She is unable to separate her own personal experience from the wider political struggles in Rhodesia. By attacking her own body she attempts to reclaim power over the very thing the colonizer has sought to control.

Significantly, Nyasha’s “illness” remains undiagnosed, even at the close of the novel. The first psychiatrist refuses to believe her symptoms might denote an illness deemed to be European. “Africans did not suffer in the way we had described. *She was making a scene*” (206, italics mine). There are no black psychiatrists who would or could understand Nyasha. The second psychiatrist was more “human” and prescribed rest in a clinic where she is given large doses of “Largactil” (206). This lack of diagnosis of the black child supports Heidi Creamer’s (1994) observation that there is a serious lack of attention paid to the mental suffering of black women, especially those who turn from food. Recent studies on the eating patterns of black Zimbabwean girls focus on the eating problems of adolescents only. When, in an article entitled “Anorexia in a Black Zimbabwean” in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (1984, 358-9), Buchan and Gregory do give a diagnosis, they do not show, Creamer points out, “how gender and colonialism might be operating in the patient’s life and psyche” (1994, 358 n.8). Ironically, even today anorexia and bulimia are read as white, middle-class illnesses.

In an interview with Dangarembga, Kirsten Holst-Peterson (1991) asks her if it is at all possible that an impoverished, rural woman like Ma’Shingayi can actually suffer from anorexia. The implication of the question is: can Tambu’s mother afford, as a rural woman, the luxury of suffering from anorexia? Dangarembga’s response is terse. She maintains that just because Ma’Shingayi is poor and rural it does not necessarily follow that her body will not suffer the effects of the struggle to draw

attention to the consequences of her blackness, femaleness and rural poverty. The novel exposes the myths surrounding anorexia and bulimia amongst black women, and in so doing collapses some of the boundaries between reality and perception of the physical effects of women's subjection to patriarchal hierarchies.¹

Rather than being reductive about the experiences of women and food, the text explores the various ways in which the very food that women are responsible for producing (as in Ma'Shingayi's case) is used as a way to rebel against patriarchal and colonial constraints. Significantly, and somewhat ironically, by being complicit with Baba and "playing his game", Lucia secures herself a job as a cook at the hostel of the mission school. When the text closes, she is working hard towards her Sub-A examinations – the first year of primary school. While she sees this as empowering, we cannot dismiss the fact that it is as something of a servant that she comes to Baba, to learn the English letters, and become its "cook".

Nervous Conditions raises several important questions about the status of women in pre-independent Rhodesia. As readers we are forced to address also the status of women in postcolonial African countries. Dangarembga's novel is perhaps the first text to expose the "fact" that rural African women also suffer "nervous conditions", thus correcting Fanon's primary focus on the male subject in *Wretched of the Earth*. Perhaps with the greater awareness that the text creates, women's anguished relationship with food and their pain under patriarchy will not take years to diagnose. Perhaps the text has helped to create a different reading of women's illnesses in the African context. There is undoubtedly a great power in diagnosis; in

¹ *Marie Claire* (January 2006) reports that a young black woman, now 23, suffers from "bouts" of anorexia and bulimia. It took her doctors six years to even begin to treat her, and none of the doctors she visited even thought of anorexia as a diagnosis. She was diagnosed by a social worker. Since she was not white and middle-class the doctors, despite her weighing but 35 kg's, did not associate her symptoms with an eating disorder common to many middle-class white girls. She is now recovering in Tara, a clinic specialising in the treatment of anorexia and bulimia.

so far as diagnosis is tangible, the hysteria that women experience can be named and treated as “dis-ease”.

The stance of *Nervous Conditions* is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood’s in her novels of the ’70s, in which she “fictionally” diagnosed anorexia as a clinically treatable disease. Even clinical psychologists took their early cues regarding the disease from fictional accounts by writers. Fiction can and does reconfigure those aspects that history, and in this case psychology, has been unable to deal with. Could it be that “dis-ease” with food is thought of as a “woman’s problem”, an idiosyncrasy that does not deserve research? Perhaps, but as Nyasha informs us: “it’s more than [food] really, more than just food. That’s how it comes out but really it’s all about other things” (193). Deliberately, the passage uses the vague markers of “it”, “all” and “other things”. As readers we have to piece these vague markers together to make them something more “tangible”. As Nyasha, the far-sighted cousin, informs us: “It’s bad enough when a country gets colonized, but when its people do as well, that’s the end!” (150). Have we ourselves become so blinded by the consequences of colonialism (and patriarchy) that we do not see the complex web into which it draws us – so that we become complicit, perhaps like Holst-Peterson questioning whether rural women can suffer from eating disorders.

Certainly, the text cautions against becoming complicit with the forces of patriarchy and colonialism; it cautions that we do not become part of the intricate web these institutions so surreptitiously spin. And to return to Bhabha’s interview with David Attwell cited above, I would propose that while the space of the margins can be creative as Bhabha suggests, it must not be forgotten that it can be equally uncomfortable, or that the birth of creativity is not without anguish of its own.

It is through pain, anguish and gradual self-realization, that Tambu understands the surreptitious process that urges her to walk in Baba's footprints. She realizes that it is Baba's colonially directed footprints that have led the family to a place of destruction. Later, when she realizes the love she has for the four women, and when she is able to tell their stories, then only is she able to create her own footprint.

Chapter Three

Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow

A breakdown doesn't necessarily have to be a collapse; it can also take the form of a quiet slide into resignation.... (325)

We live in a world of compressed juxtapositions. (340)

Not Just a Detective Story

Peter Høeg's novel *Frøken Smillas Fornemmelse for Sne* was translated and published in 1994 as *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*. It is a text akin to a set of Chinese nested boxes, with each narrative joined to the other by a single thread. The thread holding the various narratives or boxes together is in this case the idea of mourning, but mourning construed as a permanent state: the narrative concludes that there is no "resolution," no "conclusion" to the anguish and grieving that Isaiah, Smilla, and indeed the whole of Greenland, have endured, and continue to endure.

The novel's refusal to entertain closure, despite its "detective story," ostensibly linear narrative, places it in the realm of the postmodern text. It can be read as an example of *écriture*, a text self-consciously aware of its own nature as text. If we can accept that there can be no final "truth," as the novel declares at its end, then we may accept that the detective genre does not itself offer any final resolution. The denial of resolution encourages the reader to empathize with Smilla, the focalizer, and the resultant empathy bears out another of postmodernism's claims, that the only really stable character in a text is the reader, who is himself or herself partisan with regard to his or her own "truths."

The text's postmodernist characteristics therefore deliberately problematize its generic identity as detective fiction, and encourage the reader to investigate other and various levels of meaning. On a superficial level the novel is the story of the young boy Isaiah who has been found dead after allegedly falling off the high-rise prefabricated building in which he lives with his alcoholic mother Juliane Christensen. Smilla Qaavigaaq Jaspersen attempts to discover the truth about Isaiah's death and, like a detective, goes about her work with cold precision. At another level, however, the novel can be read as a comment on the Danish colonizing mission in Greenland, and so invites a political reading which in itself uncovers narrative dimensions more complex than the detective story genre would traditionally allow. During the period of colonization the Danish government referred, rather euphemistically, to Greenland as its "neighbour". For any reader aware of the distance between Denmark and Greenland's vast, snowy expanse, there can be little doubt that the relation is not that of "neighbour". It may not be amiss to argue that Greenland became the "killing fields" of the Danish colonizers.

The history of Greenland's relations with Europe goes back to the time of Eric the Red, a Norwegian, who first established settlements on the island in the early 1000s. It was only in the 18th century that Denmark officially colonized the territory. This came about through the work of the Danish-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede, who went to the Inuit settlements to convert them to Christianity. He learnt the Inuit language. In 1776, in an effort to control trade with Greenland, Denmark established The Royal Greenland Trade Company. The language to be spoken in Greenland was Danish. It became the language of the education system. As Smilla says, her teacher in Greenland knew only Danish and had no intention of learning East Greenlandic, the Inuit language. One of the consequences of colonization for the Greenlandic people

was an alarming rise in alcoholism. As Smilla puts it: “they [Greenlanders] became a strong endorsement for the curative powers of alcohol They say people drink a lot in Greenland. That is a totally absurd understatement. People drink a colossal amount” (21).

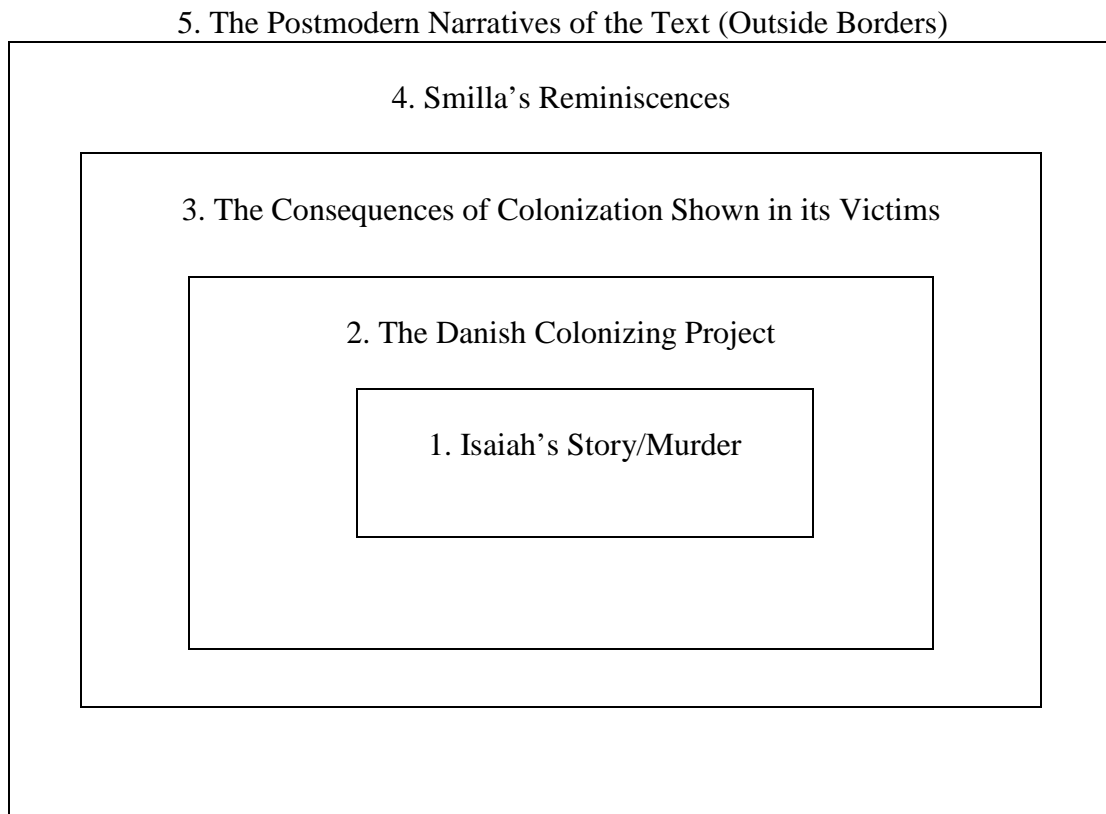
The final subtext or nested narrative in the text is the story of the Cryolite Corporation, a huge multinational with a link to Greenland that has been dormant for approximately three decades. It is renewed when the corporation begins conducting scientific experiments on a huge rock which seems to have been a meteorite. The lake in which the rock stands is infested with a parasite, considered to be a “bad parasite” because it kills its host by causing massive internal organ damage. The corporation has taken upon itself the experiment of grafting the parasite onto the bodies of HIV positive Greenlanders, to see what the parasite will do – to “monitor its progress.” Ultimately, the idea is to use it as a weapon of war. What the Danish do in Greenland is tantamount to genocide. The story of the parasite, the meteor and the Danish “scientific ownership” over it may be read both literally and metaphorically. Literally, the meteorite exists, as do the parasites grafted onto Greenlandic bodies. This forced penetration evokes, at a metaphoric level, the colonizing mission of Denmark: an uninvited parasitic enterprise, it does not protect Greenland (its host), but instead eats it up.

Even though Greenland was given what Denmark referred to as “Home Rule” in 1979, the dire consequences of Danish occupation continued to be played out in a series of severe setbacks for Greenlanders. A turning point was reached when the Danish nationalized major corporations. This is seen in the example of Smilla’s brother, a hunter for the Greenland Trade Company which is closed down in the same year as Home Rule is granted. Of her brother, Smilla says:

My brother had been a hunter there for ten years, *the king of the island*, as unassailable as a male baboon. The closing of the store drove him south to Upernavik. When I was posted at the meteorological station, *he was sweeping the docks of the harbour*. The following year he hanged himself. That was the year when the suicide in Greenland became the highest in the world ... [t]he Greenlandic Ministry didn't write that there was bound to be a quite a few more suicides along the way. *But that was understood*. (109, italics mine)

I would like to argue, therefore, that the “detective story” in which Smilla seeks out the killers of young Isaiah is, from a structural point of view, only one of the nested narratives, albeit a catalytic one that brings to the surface the other buried narratives relating to the Danish colonization of Greenland. The postmodernist nature of the text allows for a larger framing of the various narratives, which include genocide and Smilla's loss and mourning – mourning for her brother, her mother, the loss of her life in the openness of Greenland (replaced as it is with “The Cells” housing development for Greenlanders), and for Isaiah, the boy whose life and death prove as prophetic as his name. Smilla mourns, too, for the relationship with her physician father, Moritz, who has, since her mother's death, been little more to her than a link to the material world. Whenever she is in need of money she approaches her father, who readily gives it to her in order to maintain a link with her mother Ané. As Smilla says, despite her father's marriage to Benja, a twenty-six year old ballerina, the “landscape” of her father's heart still belongs to her mother, Ané. “Somewhere inside Moritz there is a landscape [Benja] will never reach. The home of his feelings for my mother” (216).

Should one attempt to represent the narrative structure diagrammatically, it might look something like this (note the clearly hierarchical structure):



Level 1: At the heart of the narrative is the killing of Isaiah, the prophet-child. While his death is passed off as an accident, Smilla can detect, through the pronation of the prints in the snow, that he has been forced to jump from the roof of the building. Since he was afraid of heights, Smilla knows that he only climbed to the top of the building to escape a pursuer.

Level 2: The narrative also offers a picture of the Danish Colonizing Mission, taking over the “house” of Greenland like a parasite taking over a host. Surreptitiously, like the equally surreptitious penetration of the parasite into the body of its Greenlandic hosts, the narrative of colonization “nests” within the larger narrative, ultimately taking it over as the predominant theme. The very language of the original text, Danish, is the “ticket” out of the barrenness of Greenland for the colonized Inuit, but at the same time, that ticket leads inevitably to cultural colonization or acculturation.

Level 3: The third level of textual meaning is suggestive of the consequences of colonization, especially upon the Inuit. Colonization infantilizes the Inuits, making them dependent on the colonizing Danes. Decolonization, as a result, leaves them abandoned, no longer with the tools of hardiness to cope in the aridity of their own land, and without the resources provided by the Danish. This is one of the reasons alcohol consumption becomes so high. This is the stark contrast between the Greenland of Smilla's childhood and the Greenland of her adult life. As a child her mother, who was still in touch with the land and its snowscapes, teaches Smilla both the beauty and ferocity of the natural world. Now as an adult she must watch as her mother's people lose themselves in a foreign culture and stray ever further from their origins. Her mother Ané had encapsulated for her the softness of a woman who had carried her in *amaat* (pregnancy) as well as the sturdiness of the hunter who hardly misses a shot. She teaches Smilla that life carries on, as it must, through the narwhal that she captures: "[it] was a pregnant female When my mother opened the abdominal cavity with a single cut to remove the intestines, an angel white, perfectly formed calf half a metre long slipped out onto the ice" (29).

The consequences of colonization are literally figured in Smilla's body, born as she is of an Inuit mother and Danish father. But it is each parent's inability to cross over meaningfully into the other's world that finally drives them apart, and leaves the children in a state of loss and, eventually, mourning. By the time Smilla returns to Greenland to seek out Isaiah's killers, it is to her mother's "house" she is returning, years after she had been lost at sea, probably killed by a whale, and after her brother has hanged himself, and after she has almost entirely lost her sense of cultural affinity with her past.

Level 4: The fourth level of the narrative “belongs” to Smilla’s reminiscences and her philosophical ruminations on life and the state of the world, which include existential angst and a fascination with mathematics. It is not entirely coincidental that when we [and Isaiah] first meet Smilla she is reading Euclid’s *Elements*. It is through her reminiscences that the reader comes to discover Smilla’s childhood in Greenland and her later adult development in Denmark. Through these reminiscences the reader is introduced to her palpable solitude that is the consequence of her exile. Her respect for mathematics is shown through the several relationships she sees between mathematics and “human nature”. Of the relationship between human life and the number system she says:

the number system is like human life. First you have the natural numbers. The ones that are whole and positive. The numbers of the small child. But human consciousness expands. The child discovers longing ... [and] the mathematic expression for longing is ... negative numbers. The *formalization* of the feeling that you are *missing something* ... [and then] the child discovers the in-between spaces. Between ... stones... moss ... on stones and between people... [h]uman consciousness... [then goes] beyond reason ... [it] produces irrational numbers. It is a form of madness because irrational numbers are infinite. They can’t be written down. *They force human consciousness out beyond the limits.* (102, italics mine)

Since it is necessarily through the mediation of Smilla’s remembering and philosophizing that we interpret the novel, this chapter takes its cue from these aspects of the text. Smilla’s constant need to link the (diegetic) present of the text with her childhood leads to the text’s elliptical quality, as the reader is “thrown” from present to past to philosophical enquiry and back again.

Level 5: The final or “outermost” level of meaning is the novel’s metafictional nature. Self-reflective in the sense that it alerts us to its own methods, the novel is the story of a borderline, acculturated woman whose methods of narrating serve to expose the inadequacy of narrative’s attempt to “close the borders”, as it were. Like the multiple meanings hidden in snow, there are multiple ways of reading the cross-cultural conflicts which have formed Smilla and thus also her narrative. The text is itself about borders and borderlessness, and the loss of coherent linguistic signs by which to determine identity. Its quest motif – and its aim as a detective story – is ironically more concerned with showing the inadequacy of all narratives and the futility of questing after “truth.”

Jane Smiley, writing in the *Washington Post* (quoted in Galens 2003, 202), maintains that the most important element of the text is its reference to “the broader political issues, especially the meanings of borders and boundaries between countries and cultures.” Similarly, William A. Henry (quoted in Galens 2003, 202) suggests that “Smilla is at a deeper level ... about cultural collisions between the industrial world and ... [the so-called] primal places that have fallen under Western sway.” Smilla, and by implication her narrative too, is the product of a relationship which cannot bridge the cultural divide and collapses under the strain, just as one might argue that the text demonstrates the collapse of coherent meaning systems under the strain of cultural variance.

You might get a vague notion of the white hot energy between [my father Moritz] and my mother if you consider the fact that he stayed [in Greenland] for three years. He tried to get her to move to the base but she refused [he was] imprisoned in a land which he hated by a love which he did not understand and which held him captive. (33)

While these five levels do suggest something of a hierarchal structure, the hierarchy can be read in both directions. The young Isaiah's death is either base or pinnacle, and the postmodern nature of the narrative's meaning is either its foundation or its end-point. It is a combination of opposing forces that figures the novel's primary theme, the conflict between Danes and Greenlanders, a symbiotic but also parasitic relationship. The text may be read as chewing up its own meaning in a manner not unlike that of a parasite – or of a colonizer, deriving its meaning or identity differentially from the colonized. Smilla's return to Greenland to find answers to Isaiah's death is as much a journey into her inward self, her national history, her hybrid nature – the one part feeding off the other – as it is a detective quest for a specific answer to a specific question.

The combination of personal loss with its attendant loss of meaning, and textual loss of meaning, leading to a kind of textual "mourning," is aptly summed up by Max Pensky (quoted in Norseng 2003, 217) in his discussion of Julia Kristeva's work on mourning

It is [the] very proliferation of signs that draws the melancholic's attention, both as the exact schematic representation of the sites of the melancholic's loss and as the only possible medium in which the Thing could be glimpsed. The chaotic mass of symbolic signification-of-names "means" the loss of meaning. It therefore signifies in a double-motion. For the melancholic who is able to recover the paralytic, illogical thrall of loss – who can sublimate it – meaning translates into the continually frustrated fascination with the rifts and discontinuities that remain in the proliferation of signs.

Smilla, afloat amidst the various signs of different cultures, which in themselves signify her loss, finds herself in the middle of the struggle between Danes and Greenlanders, one which becomes primal:

Not one day of my adult life has passed that I haven't been amazed at how poorly Greenlanders and Danes understand each other. It's worse for Greenlanders, of course. It's not healthy for a tightrope walker to be misunderstood by the person who's holding the rope. And in this century the Inuit's life has been a tightrope dance on a cord fastened at one end to the world's least hospitable land with the world's most severe and fluctuating climate, and fastened at the other end to the Danish colonial administration. (79)

It is the same tightrope dance that confines Smilla to the White Cells, the housing complex where she lives. The White Cells is the inhabitants' nickname for a series of "prefabricated boxes of white concrete, for which [the Danish Housing Association] has been awarded a prize by the Association for the Beautification of the Capital" (5). Smilla, a character who is by her own admission of "marginal existence", is caught between the "home space" of Greenland and the "space" she occupies on the margins of Danish society. Her marginalized existence is depicted in the very first sentence of the novel: "It is freezing, an extraordinary -18°C , and it's snowing, *and in the language which is no longer mine, the snow is qanik* – big, almost weightless crystals falling in stacks and covering the ground with a layer of pulverized frost" (3, italics mine).

The marginal existence of the Inuit in Denmark is reflected in the way in which Greenlanders may only be buried in a specific part of the cemetery, the part where Isaiah is laid to rest. Smilla speaks of how the Greenlanders go to Lov Lane just to be amongst other Greenlanders, but soon realize how their language has "left" them, how soon they can pick their language apart with their fingertips. And after her brother's suicide, Smilla realizes that there is no escaping the destiny of "quivitogg" (refugee): Denmark has ensured that those like her and her brother will always be "quivitogg" in both places – a sad straddling of despair, loss and melancholy.

Postmodern Mapping

Before I attempt an analysis of what one may term Smilla's love affair with melancholy, I would like to say more about the postmodernist nature of the text. Because of its breaking of textual boundaries on a number of levels, the novel can usefully be described as intertextual. Smilla's world is awash with various different discourses. Smilla is herself, we discover only on page 100, a glaciologist. She has published papers on geology, using her own innate or instinctual knowledge of ice and snow to develop an international profile. Although she has attended several institutions and begun several degrees, that she has finished none of them takes nothing away from the accuracy of her intuitions.

When she is still young her mother realizes the power of her instinct and makes her sit in the front of the sleigh. When the fog is deep and dense and the way ahead almost invisible, Smilla leads the entire hunting party back home, following what she perceives as a direct line of light between the sleigh and their home. This same instinct later teaches her knowledge of the different kinds of snow, an innate knowledge that helps her win out against Tørk.

While the novel's blend of varying discourses figures the disjointed context in which Smilla exists, it also offers the richness of difference through which she can finally emerge into her own version of light. She is brought to this by holding to her own "line of light": her Inuit origins and her love of snow. The eclectic, polyphonic blend of philosophy, mathematics, music, translations of the different types of snow, knowledge of the sea, shipping and engineering, and even of cooking (the first meal the mechanic Føjl cooks for her tastes simultaneously of Greenland as home and the romance of the tropics) – brings to the text a richness which ultimately shows the

power of difference to conquer its own division. Talking of mathematics, and particularly Fermat's theory, Smilla speculates that Fermat's final solution to his problem is presented most clearly in the margin of his text – and yet the margin is empty. This becomes a mathematical allegory for what has happened politically and socially to the Inuit: as the missing "solution," the Inuit are separated from their social and cultural roots, and hidden through overdetermination by stereotypes (such as being big headed yet brainless, bow-legged and wide-faced). The generic term "Inuit" refers to a collective, since there are approximately 123 different types of Inuit occupying the polar regions of the world. Like Fermat's empty signifier, written under erasure, the Inuit, lumped together under a single colonial term, live invisibly on the margins.

A further aspect of the novel's exploration of marginalization is the insight it offers into the use of maps and mapping, construed as a different way of reading. Maps symbolize the geographical force of ideological difference and of politically imposed social forms. Smilla's concern with maps is therefore as much a concern with social identity as it is with simply finding the answers to her detective dilemma. Drawn to scale, the first map we encounter in the text shows the specific area of Copenhagen where the White Cells are built, as well as Vestre Cemetery and how it is demarcated into separate sections for the Danish and Inuit. This discrimination in death and beyond is exacerbated by the fact that the State Autopsy Unit for Greenland is actually located in Copenhagen. Why should the Autopsy Unit for Greenland not be situated in Greenland itself? The situation presents itself as a surveillance mechanism to help ensure the Danes' control over their "northern neighbours". That there is no autopsy unit in Greenland is indicative of the lack of currency that Greenlanders have in Danish society. Only those Inuit deemed worthy of an autopsy

are sent over to Copenhagen. To Smilla's question about the geographical location of the Greenlandic Autopsy Unit in Copenhagen, Loyen replies:

The institution is only three years old. Previously, there was no autopsy centre for Greenland. The district attorney in Godthåb would send word to the institution whenever it was necessary. (17-18)

Ironically, in the battered, intertextual network of Smilla's "world", the maps become one of the few elements of the real. But this realism is undercut by what the maps have to "say" to their readers. It is not Smilla's view that the Danes and the results of colonization are "all bad". But Denmark is not hospitable to the Inuit. The second map, entitled "The Sea" actually shows the "inconsistency" of the Danish incorporation of Greenland into its territory. The geographical distance between the two countries foreshadows the huge cultural, linguistic and historical chasm that the Danes seek to wipe away, just as Loyen and others seek to wipe away Isaiah's footprints in the snow.

Furthermore, the second map is important in that it states, in a different form, what Smilla has explained to us in her narrative: the impracticability of Denmark ever being Greenland's "neighbour". Instead of "neighbourliness" the Danes brought Capitalism, which eradicated the Inuit culture and nomadic way of life, removed their language and rendered them a hapless nation of excessive drinkers and over-medicated dependents (on medicines supplied by the Danish pharmaceutical companies). As Smilla so perceptively says: "A breakdown does not necessarily have to be a [total] collapse; it can take the form of a [long], quiet slide into depression" (325). The maps not only invite a different mode of reading (we may term it a kind of metareading) but also signal the colonialist use of cartography, where land claims, boundaries and borders are determined by political expediency. These maps become

tools of nationalism, helping to develop a Danish national identity by contributing to the maintenance of a sense of superiority over the Greenlanders. They fuel the national imagination into believing that what the map says is real, endowing them with the authority either to consolidate a nation's power, or reveal its powerlessness. While it may be argued that the meteoric rock and the parasite that collapses the organs of its host are typical elements of science fiction, they can also be read allegorically, as symbols of the plundered land, and of the experiments, for which Shell and Baron prefabricated buildings litter the landscape. The rock itself can be read as a symbol of capital, since it is so highly sought after that the Cryolite Company is obsessed with getting it and removing it. That no one is concerned with the human capital involved in retrieving the rock indicates the degree to which greed has become the dominant force. Only the Inuit are allowed to dive into the water around the stone, since only they are seen as truly expendable. This diving ultimately lends a new meaning to the symbol of mapping in the text, for it is only the bodies of HIV positive men who have the parasite grafted into them, and only some of these eventually find their way to the Greenlandic Autopsy Centre. They are given biopsies both before and after death (Isaiah's final biopsy is after his death) in order to assess the effect of the parasite. Danish "mapping" is thus literalized on the body of the colonized.

The postmodern notions of "reading" maps, of writing under erasure and of intertextuality return us to the concern of this thesis. By "plotting" deliberately vague markers of history, what is apparent is that the Danes carried out a surreptitious siege of Greenland and continued the siege even after Home Rule was granted in 1979. In this instance it is important to note that the Cryolite Company had sent out its missions to Gela Alta in 1964, and in the diegetic present of the text they are sending

out the second mission thirty years later, in 1994. This is fifteen years after the granting of Home Rule. Elsa Lübing, who provides Smilla with the first concrete clues as to why Isaiah may have been killed, and the extent of the Cryolite Corporation's involvement in the first mission to Gela Alta, says:

Thirty is the biblical number... Judas received thirty silver coins. Jesus was thirty years old when he was baptized. With the new year it will be thirty years ago that the Cryolite Corporation switched over to automated bookkeeping. (108)

Elsa Lübing, who gives Smilla the first key to the Cryolite Corporation's conspiracy, once worked for the corporation but has now given her life to Christ. In Smilla she seems to have found an auditor, someone who can help her set the record straight, someone whose actions may redeem her own, for Smilla has an "inordinate sense for numbers and [a] belief in honesty" (113). Quoting from Mark 4: 22, Lübing says to the non-believer Smilla: "For there is nothing hidden, which shall not be manifested; neither was anything kept secret but that it should come abroad" (113). Could Elsa Lübing's reclusiveness and her devotion to Christ ("I am the Bride of Jesus," she remarks – "in a manner both serious and coquettish", 59-60), be a kind of penance for all she has known and not done anything about during her career with the corporation? Sheltered, celibate, living in the White Cells and dressed in white, pure as the driven snow outside her windows, with a crucifix as her only adornment, she indeed appears to lead a life of penance, of regret and melancholy. In this sense, she is a Danish version of Smilla, whose melancholy comes from the experience of being Inuit.

A Love Affair with Melancholy

The theme of melancholy, depression and anguish is a central thread running throughout the text. It is evinced in Smilla's forced removal from Greenland, in her inability to return later (for she becomes *quivitogg* not only in Denmark but also in her homeland), her brother's suicide, her mother's disappearance, and the desolation felt by both Isaiah and Juliane. These two are kept under surveillance by the Corporation, since Isaiah unknowingly carries the "imprint" of the scientific experiments on his body (as suggested above, simultaneously a symbol of colonial penetration). Juliane's response to this surveillance is to drink herself into a stupor, and thus neglect Isaiah.

Smilla may be said to have a love-hate relationship with melancholia and the trauma of her loss(es). She distinguishes between the European and Greenlandic methods of dealing with depression. In the European way, she says:

You can try to cover up depression in various ways. You can listen to Bach's composition for the organ in Our Savior's Church. You can arrange a line of good cheer in powder form on a pocket mirror with a razor blade and ingest it with a straw. You can call for help. For instance, by telephone, so that you know who's listening. (95)

She takes the Greenlandic way, however, which consists of

walking into yourself in the dark mood [and] putting your defeat under a microscope and dwelling on the sight.... I picture a black tunnel in front of me. I go up to it. I strip off my nice clothes, my underwear, my hard hat, my Danish passport and then I walk into the dark. I *know* that a train is coming. This I can do because I am thirty-seven years old. I *know* that inside the tunnel there is a little spot of light. (95, italics in original)

To confront one's demons is the old Greenlandic way and, importantly, a strategy that has been effective in keeping the Inuit away from the anti-depressants that the giant pharmaceutical companies "make available" to them. In Smilla's case the depression may mostly be attributed to the way in which she was forcibly removed from Greenland as a child, and her unease in Denmark, testimony to which is borne by the numerous attempts she makes to escape Denmark and return to Greenland.

Moritz, her father, brings her back many times. On the last attempt, instead of lashing out at Smilla physically for running away yet again, Moritz starts to cry, making Smilla realize how much her mother's disappearance and death have affected her father:

In that moment I caught a glimpse of his soul. When my mother disappeared, she must have taken a part of Moritz with her. Or even worse: part of his physical world must have drowned along with her [and] I remembered him in Greenland before my mother's death ... in the midst of his lurking, unpredictable mood swings there had been a gaiety expressing a joy in life... my mother had vanished with all the colours ... [and] he had been imprisoned in a world that was only black and white. (98)

The "black and white" world is the one Smilla seeks to escape when she confronts the demons of her life. Into this space she seeks to inject "all the colours" of life, even if the colour means finding out who killed Isaiah. She realizes that when love gives up hope, there is memory to latch onto, and it is thus in the land of memory that her fiercest inner conflicts are fought. The power of memory, intangible though it is, demands that we attend to it, as Smilla discovers when Isaiah is laid to rest.

They're pulling the ropes out of the eyelets on the side of the coffin.
For a brief instant my yearning comes on like madness. If only they

would open the coffin for a moment and let me lie down beside his cold little body which someone has stuck a needle into, *that they have opened up and photographed and cut slices out of and closed up again*; if only I could just once feel his erection against my thigh, a gesture of intimated, boundless eroticism, the beating of a moth's wing against my skin, the dark insects of happiness. (69, italics mine)

It may be argued that the text sets alongside each other two types of memory and archiving: private archives and public archives. By drawing on our private memory banks to construct narratives of experience that we preserve throughout our lives and that live on after us, we show that personal memories can become part of the national memory. Personal memories, excavated, can lead to the development of national histories which do not emerge only from the “grand narrative” imposed by political power. As the works explored in this thesis demonstrate, the more postcolonial fictions produce “hidden histories”, the more the visage of the national archive will change, in order to incorporate these histories, give them a presence and return them to their rightful place in the national narrative. Paul Ricoeur (quoted in Hesse 2002, 165) reminds us of our “duty to remember” and maintains that “the ethical question of memory” is embedded in asking how we “make the past more visible, as if it were present, while acknowledging our debt to the past as it actually happened ... [so that society can address the] problem of evolving a culture of *just memory*.”

This injunction raises several questions: for example, how do we acknowledge a debt to the past as it “actually happened”? Furthermore, how does a society put into process the evolution of a “culture of just memory”? In as much as it may seem Ricoeur oversimplifies or overstates the possibility of “*just memory*”, the important point of his argument is that memory cannot, and must not, be engulfed by the betrayal of forgetting. A “just memory” would be one in which all stakeholders

have a claim to the archive, and in relation to which histories need no longer remain “hidden”. Significantly, the power of inscribing “counter-narratives” ensures that there may be ethically “just” memories. An “ethicity of memory” points to what has been wronged and hidden events which can be retrieved (“remembered”, as Morrison has it) and then reconfigured. Within the postcolonial context, such a “just” memory may encourage a movement away from the colonizer/colonized binary and allow the emergence of a third category, the therapeutic.

I must agree with Hesse (2002, 170) when he argues that the term “ethicity” should not (as some would have it) mean a turn away from the political. As he puts it: “the passage from ethics to politics [is] analogous to the move from responsibility to questioning”. This stance demands that the political be responsible enough to identify and deal with the ethical. This has important implications for the role of the writer in relation to history. As Abdulrazak Gurnah (2005, 292) points out, our knowledge of history is never complete, and so our reconstructions are at best tenuous. He suggests that “ultimately we have to be resigned to the notion that the past will always be beyond our grasp, that in reading the past we are reading back from the present, and that at best we should resist the possibility of capture and paralysis”. This means that fiction must operate in a sphere outside the strictly historical. As he puts it (echoing J.M. Coetzee in “The Novel Today”): “Writing operates in terms of its own procedures, not in terms of the procedures of history; and arrives at conclusions which it would inappropriate to check by history. Writing can challenge history’s idea of itself and reveal its discourse, just as in its turn writing reveals itself as discursive” (291). I would suggest that it is in the meeting of the historical and the discursive that memories can be encountered and reconfigured, and so be made to become therapeutic.

The notion of the therapeutic that I am proposing is not one that allows for *forgetting*. Instead, it is a kind of healing that depends on remembering in order to achieve its aims. It does not forget, for to do so would be to disempower the one who has experienced the pain. Hesse concurs in this regard, maintaining:

The ethics of postcolonial memory concerns itself less with the “historical wrong” of the colonial question than with interrupted and incomplete forms of decolonization and their relation to contemporary social constructions of justice/injustice. In this precise sense, postcolonial memory in the West is not concerned with the (colonial) past through an obsession with the past, but through an engagement with the (liberal-democratic) present.... In a postcolonial idiom [to remember] is to encounter or confront... what has constituted (imperial) history [which is] triggered by ... discontinuities of postcolonialism and global injustice and continuities of racism and global inequalities. (165)

The remembering of the past (personal or public) is seldom affected by the amount of time that has elapsed between the event and its “rememory”. A distant but meaningful event may well be more real in our memories than recent, less meaningful, ones. The effect of this differentially elongated memory on postcolonial experience is that, as Hesse (165) puts it: “In postcolonial memory it is the memory of present predicaments that recalls the dislocations of the past. In the ethics of postcolonial memory, remembering slavery can no more be experienced than generations of racism can be experienced. It is less a structure of feeling than a passionate intervention.” Memory becomes, for Hesse, an intervention, not just a matter of recollection. Postcolonial/Late-colonial efforts to restrain memory, via antidepressants, shock therapy, cognitive restructuring and so on, may be seen in this context to be little more than colonially imposed remedies to pain visited upon bodies and minds long before, the memory of which is not to be seen as anti-therapeutic, but rather the beginning of healing. While selective forgetting may appear to be

therapeutic, and something worthy of mastery, it may also prove to be the entrance to the bottomless pit of total amnesia. Artificially induced forgetfulness is not therapeutic, any more than is the “line of good cheer in powder form on a pocket mirror with a razor blade... ingest[ed] with a straw” (95), which dominates the Western upper-class Danish mind and culture.

This, Smilla tells us, is the “European way”, but increasingly in a Denmark occupied by the Inuit, it becomes the Inuit way too. In this sense memory is not something to be fought against, instead it is something to be “managed;” it is the struggle to balance forgetting against memory (to re-arrange the words of Milan Kundera). Sethe, in *Beloved*, realizes that keeping memory at bay is as damaging as forgetting to remember – a deliberate act. Derrida, in this context, uses the term “undecidability”, which is cited by Hesse. The term breaks away from the traditional idea of memory as something static and waiting in abeyance to be directed towards some form or event which energizes it. As Hesse (168 n 13) puts it:

In the undecidable sense, memory is not instinctive or repetitive, it is certainly not a tradition. It comprises the outcomes of ‘decisions’ taken in relation to conflicting, diverse and uncertain claims for interpretations of the past in the *act* of remembering.

In the light of the above, it may further be argued that the past is not always where it is now (or was before), nor in the form that it is or was in. The shape and form of memory alters, influencing what is remembered and what is forgotten. Furthermore, the idea that neither remembering nor forgetting is static may be one of the reasons why novels that deal with memory, forgetting and trauma are often elliptical, “written beyond the ending” – where the processes of memory and forgetting are in an ongoing state of flux.

It is this flux that dominates Smilla's life. At the outset of the novel she is the fashionable recluse, living off handouts from her father Moritz, even though she is a world-renowned glaciologist. Isaiah's death changes her life, bringing her back into the world. As she witnesses Isaiah being devoured by the grave, her anguish rises, as much for herself as for him. While she has become his protector yet failed ultimately to protect him, it does not escape the reader that Isaiah at least has a grave, whereas Smilla's mother does not. No matter how painful it is for her to watch Isaiah's body being lowered into the grave, she remembers that her mother's body will never be found and that therefore "there will be no closure" (410). In this way, it is Isaiah's death and her subsequent search for his killers that take us deeper and deeper into the tunnel of her memory, a memory which – as the elliptical structure of her narrative shows – is not static. For example, Smilla never tells us the whole story of the love between her father and mother. Instead, we find out in snippets interspersed with other memories: Ané's status in the community, her ability to exercise both her male and female selves without having to decide between them (as is common in Inuit culture), and Smilla's own ability to judge snow and to see a clean, straight line all the way home. It is only much later that we hear that Moritz, who is presented by Smilla as fastidious and openly arrogant, lived in Greenland for three long years trying to persuade his wife to live at the base. Only when she finally refuses does the marriage disintegrate.

In a sense, then, Smilla's memories "flood" her because of Isaiah's death. Her memories ignite the narrative and become an archive of the way in which the Inuit were treated by the Danish. In the same way as the snow covers Isaiah's grave like a blanket, Smilla's memories blanket the geography of the place she inhabits. Yet the blanket is by no means unequivocally protective, including not only her own sense of

loss and dislocation, but also that caused by the Danish plunder of Greenland, a plunder continued by the corporations which have taken over where the Danish government left off after Home Rule. Like the “splintering” of human relationships under colonialism, the novel represents Smilla’s memory as splintered, between past and present, between the various childhoods – her own, her brother’s, Isaiah’s – and between the life lived and the philosophical ruminations around that life, none of which is static, and to none of which she can ever give full closure. But if the blanket of memory is painful, it is also healing, just as the snow blanket proves to be. For the snow provides the clues to Isaiah’s death, clues which only Smilla can read with accuracy. Similarly, only she can “read” her own memories and piece together the blanket of experience which makes them up. The novel progresses, in this sense, in a way suggested by Acty Tang, a young South African dance artist, interviewed recently. “The driving slogan of *avant garde* this century”, he says, “was to transgress ... crossing boundaries as the task of art exhausted itself I believe it should shift away from this ...to the idea of redemption, healing or restoration” (*Mail and Guardian*, 6-12 July 2007, “Friday”, 2). The ethicality of politics is very much concerned with the “redemption, healing and restoration” of which Tang speaks. *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow* shows that the warm blanket of recovery may be found within the cold snow of isolation and loss, but like the ever-changing snow, it is contingent, always in flux.

In *Smilla*, it becomes quite obvious that ethicality is not what the Danish scientists are interested in when it comes to the Inuit. But the text emphasises that not all the Danes are of “wrong intent”. Such is the case with Elsa Lübing, and with Laagerman and Ravn, who, through his silence, and resolve not to act against Smilla, allows her to continue her hunt for Isaiah. Later, the reader learns that Ravn himself

has suffered every parent's worst nightmare – his daughter, a diplomat who apparently knew too much, has been killed. Natalie Ravn was one of twelve remaining detectives who had discovered the corporation's activities, escaped the execution and fled to Singapore, only to be tracked down there and pushed off her hotel room balcony. In a sense, Ravn's encouragement of Smilla is a way for him to come to terms with his own daughter's death.

Childhood and Trauma

According to Smilla, “grief is a gift, something you have to earn” (10). Smilla has indeed earned the right to grieve. In fact, so ingrained is her despair that she maintains that she looks forward to her solitude, and imbibes it “the way someone in exile will also [imbibe it]”. Her bond with Isaiah is initiated through her recognition that he too “is not afraid of solitude” (12). Her admission that on six of the seven days of the week she would rather not get out of bed, makes quite clear the severity of the depression she suffers, brought on by her loss of Greenland, her mother and her brother. To all intents and purposes, her father is lost to her as well. It is through her memories and her “sense of orientation” that she recollects her childhood; Isaiah's isolation and dislocation also serve as a reminder to her of her own. His mysterious death hence becomes an important catalyst in her own search for a lost childhood (literally, a lost/dead child), her own desire to return to a lost landscape of memories. Returning to Greenland allows Smilla to deal with her mourning in a way she has not allowed herself till now. It is a way of recapturing the lost mother – both the real, literal mother, and the mother of her continent and Inuit culture. For while she has

stayed with Moritz after realizing how much he needs her, she has also denied herself the chance of dealing with her own past. Isaiah provides her with this chance.

This may be one of the implications of his name: the Old Testament prophet who is able to tell the country from which he comes that it has sinned in the eyes of its God and will be punished. Isaiah also foretells the coming of the Messiah, the suffering servant, and the final judgement on all who have not served the Creator. To kill the prophet (as the Danish do) prevents him from foretelling the future. But Smilla knows that the prophet speaks not only of the future, but also of the past, and he provides a way of understanding the past, present and future. For this reason Isaiah's death leads Smilla back in time, to her own childhood and the "killing" of her country by the Danes. To discover the future one must first re-encounter the past, and the journey forward often involves a journey backwards in time. This in turn reflects the cyclical nature of the universe, a truth Smilla's mother taught her. From death came life and from life came death, and this should be respected, in the same way that Ané could simultaneously kill for food and carry in her "amaat" (pregnancy) the children she had, and conquer the heart of a cold hearted Danish physician.

Smilla's repressed memories suffer quite literally from being pushed and shoved about on the ship Kronos, aptly named after the Time-god who eats his own children. Her journey on the Kronos, literally back in "Time" to the Arctic, is a flight from herself as much as it is a return to her past. It sets her on a collision course with her own depression. In her need to "save Isaiah", the prophet who is killed by those to whom he prophesies, there is also a grave need to save herself from all that Denmark has taken from her. Smilla must go through the stages of mourning outlined by John Bowlby (quoted in Norseng 2003, 211) in his study *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (1980). And these stages can be identified in her actions.

Bowlby points out that the root word for “bereave” is “rob”. Smilla is robbed, not only of her mother, brother and Isaiah, but also of her ability to mourn them. She can only recover this ability by going through the stages of mourning Bowlby describes. The first stage is that of “Numbing”. This is the stage we find Smilla in at the beginning of the narrative. She is numbed by her sense of dislocation from home, and further numbed by Isaiah’s death. Significantly, references to her designer clothes and her eye for fine detail proliferate at this point in the text, suggesting that her taste for high fashion fills a void in her. The second stage of bereavement is “Yearning and Searching”, particularly marked in the context of a child’s inability to come to terms with the loss of a parent. The yearning of bereavement is carried by the child into adulthood, when the child-adult often displaces the search for a lost parent onto other people or places. However, if the grieving process unfolds fully, the search takes the individual into the third stage, “Disorganisation and Despair,” and onto the final stage, which is what Darwin called “Elasticity of Mind”, where the adult is able to accept the loss thanks to the “elasticity” of his or her mind. Smilla is not allowed the freedom to mourn – to “commit” to her mourning, as it were – and so does not reach the final stage of “elasticity”. Having been removed from Greenland after her mother’s death, she never fully recovers and exists in a state of what one might term suspended memory. Smilla’s academic pursuits, her mathematics, philosophical and glacial studies, and her interests in history and geography, are substitutes for the lost mother. She hides her yearning and searching by gaining an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of many different worlds, even those not yet written about.

We have to read the text at a metafictional level. Smilla is not necessarily who she would have us believe she is. She is still the girl searching for her mother, who exists for her in an iconic idealization:

“Smilla”, she says, “I have carried you in *amaat*”. It is the month of May and her skin has a deep brown sheen, like a dozen layers of varnish... [h]er hair is pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck and she is big and beautiful. Even now when I think of her, she is the most beautiful woman I ever saw.... At moments of great intimacy, she lets me drink from the milk that is always there, beneath her skin just like her blood is.... I go to her breast which is brilliantly white, with a big, delicate rose areola. There I drink *immuk*, my mother’s milk. (30)

Once Smilla leaves the city and boards the Kronos she appears to enter what Bowlby terms the third stage of mourning, “Disorganization and Despair”. The Kronos takes her back in time to her past and to her homeland, and is a kind of “middle passage” in reverse. On the ship she has no sense of orientation, unlike on the ice and snow. She must travel through time (on Time itself), be disoriented and in mental and emotional darkness in order to come to her final destination. The standard quest motif is reversed here too, for the “holy grail” Smilla seeks belongs in her past and not her future. The question she must ask at the end of her journey is equally unexpected: “Am I my name?” (279) Her name, “Smillaaraq”, is derived from “Millaaraq”, a name her mother once came home with – meaning “mild”. She is, however, anything but mild, with her sharp tongue and razor mind. Her name was anglicized to include the idea of “smile”, another relative misnomer. Rather, it is the sharp mind and instinct that allow her to orient herself in strange places. On the ship she uses the same technique she does in the snow.

Sinik is not a distance, not a number of days or hours. It is both a spatial and a temporal phenomenon, a concept of space-time, it

describes the union of space and motion and time that is taken for granted by the Inuit but cannot be captured by any European everyday language.... In the Dyrehaven I translated my *sinik* into metres. Ever since, no matter whether I'm walking in my sleep or secured to a line... I've always know exactly how much distance I am covering when I take a step. (279)

It is by maintaining her innate ability to read space-time that she is able to cope on the Kronos, and orientate herself in the “middle passage” of change and growth (but also melancholy and death) that the ship represents. As Norseng (215) points out, the god Chronos became in antiquity associated with the planet Saturn, and this planet associated in turn with melancholy and death – since time stole and ate its own children. Despite this, however, images of birth abound in the novel: the Kronos is a closed vessel, a foetus of sorts, making a blind passage through maternal waters; there is the equally foetal image of the unborn Isaiah waiting for Smilla at the end of the text, and the unborn narwhal calf slipping out of its mother as Smilla's mother kills it. All these are images of life in death, of the possibility of renewal, of the unending rebirth that Smilla's mother taught her was the way of life.

This birth-in-death experience is equally to be found in love. While she may maintain that “falling in love is overrated” (290), Smilla is still willing to “fall” when she meets Tørk. “Falling in love”, she says, “is a form of madness, closely related to hatred, coldness, resentment, intoxication and suicide” (290). She knows that had she met Tørk ten years ago she might have loved him, but now she is all too aware that “it's nothing more than a short-lived, lethal illusion” (291). But her willingness to “fall” is the same drive that leads her to the Kronos and allows her to survive the passage to Greenland, signalling the death of her old life of loss and isolation and the birth of a new one. It has taken Isaiah's death to bring her to resurrection, just as it

has taken his death to bring the Danish Corporation to justice. Smilla looks like a corpse when she disembarks in Greenland:

There's no skin on my kneecaps. Between my hips there is a wide yellowish-blue patch that has coagulated under the skin... [t]he palms of both my hands suppurating lesions that refuse to close. At the base of my skull I have a bruise like a gull's egg.... (293)

She is in the house of her mother, which has often called her but to which she could not previously respond. Now she puts down her pain in the expanse of Greenland, mourning as much her own lost childhood as her lost mother.

Her mourning for the maternal echoes various other parental losses in the novel. Children in the world of the text are neglected in various ways and fall through the fissures of society. Smilla's loss, informed by the retrospective sequences in the text, take us back to the mother – to the hunter, teacher, and solid figure in the village that Ané was. She could hunt while pregnant, and hunting was usually a privilege reserved for men. Traditionally, those women who chose to adopt masculine ways had to forgo their roles as mothers and wives. But “it was different for my mother”, Smilla says: “She laughed and gave birth to her children and gossiped about her friends. But she shot and paddled a kayak and dragged home meat like a man” (28). Despite the Inuit community's tendency to stereotype the sexes, it still held that “each of the sexes contains the potential to become its opposite” (28). That Smilla's mother could perform the functions of both sexes with ease, and contain within herself a kind of hybrid nature, shows her special place in the community and the exceptions they were prepared to make for her. This makes Smilla's loss even greater than it may have been, for she has lost the one figure who may have been able to show her how to

maintain a hybrid existence, which she must now do alone. All she has as a guide are her early memories and the instinct for snow gleaned from her mother.

So mourning and loss frame the narrative of Smilla's world, for the beginning and end of her quest meet in her ability finally to mourn her lost childhood, symbolized in the white expanse of Greenland, her mother's home, which carries the face of Isaiah as she looks back at it in the final moments of the novel. The quest to return to her lost maternal space is therefore also framed as a quest for a kind of rebirth, a coming to terms with past losses. The rebirth can only happen when Smilla herself becomes a instrumental, not unlike Isaiah, in making public the wrongs perpetrated by the Cryolite Corporation, symbol of Danish colonialism. It is a situation not unlike that of a parent deliberately neglecting the child, and the child having eventually to find its own feet in the cold "snow" of human relationships.

Isaiah's childhood is lost to him when he panics and dives into the parasite-infested water after his father. He is removed to Denmark by the Danes, placed in the White Cells and monitored to see the action of the parasite in his body. He is the only human the parasite has not killed. His mother has taken to drink and neglected him. Smilla becomes, against her will, a surrogate mother, a figure she herself never had after the death of her mother. She sometimes feeds Isaiah, gives him a bath, lets him sleep in her bed, reads to him and listens to him, which no-one else does. He understands her hybrid nature and addresses her in Greenlandic at times. It is not long before "she ha[s] an extensive pact with Isaiah about not leaving him in the lurch, never, not now [even after he is dead] either" (4).

Tørk, who can be seen as Smilla's doppelganger, her dark side, is himself one whose childhood has been lost to him. He was violated and neglected as a child, which may explain his cold-blooded killing of both Isaiah and Ravn's daughter,

pushed from her Singapore balcony. Tørk Hvidd is the son of a “famous” composer who, despite his brilliance, never sees his music performed publicly. Father and mother ignored their child, as Victor Halkenhvad tells Moritz:

They washed their hands of the boy. Holes in his clothes, red-eyed, never had a bicycle, was beaten at the local proletarian school because he was too weak from hunger to defend himself. Because Johnatten was supposed to be a great artist [who never made a penny]. *You’ve betrayed all your children.* And it takes an old queen like me to tell you... I visited them only once [after they returned from Greenland]. The son was there too. Handsome as a god. Some sort of scientist. *Cold.* We talked about music. *He* asked about money the whole time.... *The boy was ice.* (180, italics mine)

According to Norseng (208), “[w]ounded children killing wounded children, wounded children avenging wounded children is the underlying *modus operandi* [of the novel]”.

Significantly, when Smilla remarks that love between adults is overrated, she feels that the one man she could love is Tørk Hvidd, a man whose glance meets hers at their first chance meeting like cutting ice. He becomes the man she cannot have because of what his wounds have led him to become. In the final sequences of the novel Smilla sees him as transparent, “the child inside him steps forth”. Smilla takes her cue from this image and asks about the bicycle he never had, mentioned as it was in Halkenhvad’s letter. When “the meaning [of the question] sinks in ... he staggers as if I’d hit him. He almost drops everything on the floor, but then he pulls himself together” (398). His relation to Smilla as a doppelganger figure is reinforced at the end of the narrative. The only difference is that she knows the ice, whereas he does not. He allows the new ice to dictate his movements, so that he loses his bearings. For Smilla, the ice has a “nocturnal hospitality” (410), but for the outsider there is no

winning against the snow. And in the end it is Isaiah whom Smilla imagines as pulling Tørk towards the ice that's "as thin as a foetal membrane".

...and under it the sea is dark and salty like blood, and a face is pressing up against the icy membrane from below; it's Isaiah's face, the as yet unborn Isaiah ... it is Isaiah pulling Tørk along or am I the one who is trying to head him off and to force him towards the thin ice? (410)

All three wounded children coalesce into one here.

Tell us, they'll come and say to me. So that we may understand and close the case. They're wrong. It's only what you do not understand that you can come to a conclusion about. There will be no conclusion. (410)

Isaiah's footprints in the snow, which have led Smilla throughout her journey and returned her to where she began, have brought her to a "certain truth" about the ways in which the Inuit have suffered at the hands of the Danes. The face of the "as yet unborn Isaiah" once again forces us to deal with the ambivalences of memory and forgetting. Are we to believe that "since there will be no conclusion" (410) the yet to be born Isaiah (and by extension the Inuit) will continue to suffer the after-effects of colonialism? Perhaps the novel's answer is that *in this particular case* at least, the footprints cannot be wiped away.

Chapter Four

Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith

Listen, I will tell you a story you will not easily forget – one you cannot turn away from, or deny, or leave behind in the folds of my hands and on the edges of my lips.

(Gina B. Nahai, *Sunday's Silence*)

She's dying of Guilt, you see. Over what she did to you, and to your father before you. She's dying of sorrow, over the life she could have fixed and didn't. So much pain bottles up inside you. There is a word for it in Farsi: "Degh," to die of sorrow.

(Gina B. Nahai, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*)

History, Memory and Cross-Cultural Wanderings

Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith (1999) explores the cross-cultural wanderings of Iranian Jews who have had to leave Iran for America, but long to return home. It brings a narrative feature to diasporic fiction evident in neither Dangarembga's nor Høeg's novels: magic realism. Comparison can be made with *Beloved*, but – to the extent that Nahai also gives "magical" treatment to events in the narrative present, unmythologized by memory – *Moonlight* is more strongly reminiscent of the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. And like Marquez's evocation of South America, the novel has recourse to magic realism in order to convey painful historical and political events.

Cross-cultural wanderings, the novel suggests, ensure that no adequate conventional, linear History can be written of the experiences of the diaspora. More apt is a narrative that interweaves the magical with the "real," the imagined with the

“historical event,” for the experience of the diasporic community is dominated not by the events themselves but by the meaning that is attributed to them; likewise, the memories of the exiled record how the events live on in their collective imagination.

The novel is set partly in Tehran and partly in the United States, where Miriam the Moon and her extended family seek refuge in the wake of the atrocities committed during the dictatorship of the Shah and his Savak. The novel interweaves several narrative strands. The backdrop of Tehran under the iron-fisted rule of the Shah (the past is glanced at several times) is offset by narratives of experience in America, by the elements of magical realism, by the recuperation and deliberate tossing away of histories, and by the attempt to find consolation for the inconsolable.

In order to “tell the stories” of her lineage to Lili, Miriam the Moon maintains that it all went back to

[their] Lubovicher great-great grandmother who ran naked through the temple on Yom Kippur, to how [Roxanna’s] mother tried to kill [her].... [Roxanna was] the Jewish girl who had married the prince’s son, slept with Teymur the Heretic [the prince’s father] inside her husband’s house.... Near dawn, Miriam’s voice trails off, then stops. Mercedes finally sits down on the edge of [the] bed watching Lili, waiting to see if knowledge has freed her [Lili] or destroyed her. (367)

The text uses what may be termed an embedded textuality or “*misé-en-abyme*,” as postmodernists like Hutcheon (1988) and McHale (1988) put it. To stage occluded female histories, Nahai employs various techniques and styles that resort under the category of magic realism: soap-opera-like sequences, myths, flights of imagination, oral lore. These multiple dimensions of fictionality ostensibly offer the reader a choice between what Paul Ricoeur has termed a hermeneutics of belief or a hermeneutics of suspicion (quoted in Columbus, 92). But the text clearly invites a

hermeneutics of belief that flies in the face of the thorough disenchantment of our postmodern age. As readers we cannot help but believe that the irremediable losses of the family – which reach a climax when Roxanna flies off into a star-studded sky – will somehow be transcended and consolation will be found. Roxanna's daughter Lili, doomed to fourteen years of loneliness because of her mother's action, watches her mother fly away and lives with the pain that her mother did not stop to think of her:

[Roxanna] stood on the railing, in her bare feet and white gown and instead of looking down, she stared up at the sky.... She turned and looked back. Her eyes rested on me [Lili] but did not see me. I was invisible to her – one ghost among many, a voice she could not (would not?) hear.

She opened her arms and leaned into the night. (169)

Roxanna's flight into the night is significantly preceded by a stealthy night journey with Lili to the fair that they have always wanted to go to. When they sit on the Ferris wheel, Roxanna tilts Lili's head upwards and says:

"Look *up*"....The sky washed over [Lili] like water. [And Roxanna says] "One night I grew wings and flew... from that time on I could never stand the feel of my feet on the ground anymore". (163)

The young Lili is stunned, both by the flashing lights of the circus and by her mother's admission of her ability to fly.

When Lili's screams tear through the house and she still cannot articulate what has happened, Jacob (Fräulein Claude's brother) says: "I saw that girl. Your son's wife. She had white wings and she was flying outside the kitchen window" (170). Roxanna has flown away, abandoning daughter and husband, because she is afraid that should she stay in the House on the Avenue of Faith, she will bring the family to its knees. Roxanna has known from the first meeting with Teymur – long before they

break a taboo with their lovemaking (between father-in-law and daughter-in-law), long before Jacob can coarsely report to Fräulein Claude: “Your husband was screwing that girl from the ghetto last night” (134) – that she would have to leave to save herself, Lili and Sohrab. But it is only later that she understands what Miriam meant when she spoke of destiny, and realizes that the reason why Teymur never looks at her is because “she was already in his eyes, from before he had met her....he knew that she smelled like the seas he had already sailed; that he did not have to touch her because he knew she had no weight – like sleep or desire....[and] that he has seen her wings...transparent feathers...against the blue sapphire sky of her longings” (109).

Roxanna’s flight is equally a fall because it fulfils the curse cast upon the family ensuring that in every generation one female leaves the house without permission, abandoning the weight of her life. When Roxanna is born, her grandmother warns Shusha (Roxanna’s mother) that Roxanna will bring the family into disrepute by emulating the ways of her female ancestors who were destined to “[wander] naked and sorry though the deserts of central Iran, where even scorpions perished, wanting to return home but not being allowed to” (15). Despite Shusha’s mother’s wish to keep her childless so as to escape the stranglehold of destiny, Shusha marries and produces five daughters. On the day Roxanna is born, “[t]he sun came up at seven in the evening, and from that day on, the order of day and night changed forever in the Tehran ghetto” (26). On that same day Shusha’s mother arrives to warn her that Roxanna is the “bad luck child” who should be given away or killed by Shusha herself. The growing sense of inevitability culminates in Roxanna’s realization, after making love to Teymur, that flight *is* the only way to safeguard her husband Sohrab and her daughter Lili.

But the stories of the family are not to be read separately from the story of the nation as a whole. *Moonlight* uses its mythopoeic techniques, including magic realism and oral tradition, as a way of combining the personal and the public, so that the stories of the ghettos of Tehran become inextricably intertwined with the stories of the nation. One of the lasting impressions of the political struggle comes from Teymur the Heretic (called thus because, despite his mother's curses, he gives up Judaism to become a Muslim). When Sohrab returns from school one day enthusiastically extolling the virtues of the Shah, and how he is being taught the "latest version of Iran's history" (80), recently dictated by the Reza Shah himself, Teymur decides to show his son an alternative version of Iran's history. He takes Sohrab to "Freedom Square," ironically so named because of the four rows of makeshift gallows erected there. A military truck arrives containing condemned men, and Sohrab witnesses their hanging, a spectacle made worse by the fact that their bodies are left to hang from the noose:

...for an entire day, so that as many citizens as possible could see for themselves the results of opposing Reza Shah. They dangled from ropes like statues of lead – heads fallen to the side In the centre, riding his horse to save the world, Reza Shah's statue never turned around to watch his victims fall. (82)

The scene becomes pivotal for Sohrab, who has now seen the true nature of the "freedom of the individual" that the Shah has required his historians to chronicle as his legacy to the people. According to the official version there is both personal and political freedom, and the government respects the law enshrined in the constitution extending equal rights to all citizens. The military police, protected by the Shah and brainwashed by his propaganda, carry out their task with impunity. No one dares to ask about the victims, or why they have "fallen." And Teymur advises

his son on that morning that he should “[r]emember this! ... This is the freedom your teacher told you about. This is the price you will pay if ever you believe her” (82).

The incident leaves its mark on Sohrab: as a successful businessman – and unlike his father Teymur – he is careful never to antagonize the Shah and his regime. Yet Freedom Square, where Sohrab’s childhood and faith are destroyed, is also the place where he meets Roxanna, who brings into his life “a field of light so radiant” (82) that it decides the fate of the entire family. In moments like these the novel shows how closely and poignantly the destruction of “long held beliefs” is linked with and, as it were, enabled by beauty. Sohrab later recognizes that Roxanna, bearer of the most radiant light, has brought him to the darkest destruction. Even their first meeting is a mixture of darkness and light. Roxanna appears with her “pale skin” and her “dress made of lace woven by Italian nuns ... so beautiful with her gossamer step...[that] everyone who saw her at that moment swore she had been touched by the hands of God” (119). But this day, and indeed their entire married life, is darkly shadowed by the ideological “subversions” of the Shah:

the Shah’s father, liked to erect monuments to himself. He had been a half-literate soldier the British had picked to rule Iran on their behalf. When he disobeyed their orders, they had removed him from the throne and put his son in his place. Still, in the short while the two Pahlavis had been in power, most of the streets of Tehran had been named or renamed in their glory. (78)

The Magical Narratives of the Ghetto

Moonlight’s simultaneous chronicling of the personal and the public is usefully accounted for in Ella Shohat’s observation concerning the identity politics of postcolonial communities:

For communities who have undergone brutal rupture, now in the process of forging a collective identity, no matter how hybrid that identity has been before, during and after colonialism, the retrieval and reinscription of a fragmented past becomes a crucial, contemporary site for forging a resistant collective identity. A notion of the past might thus be negotiated differently: not as a static fetishized phase to be literally reproduced but as fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences on the basis of which to mobilize contemporary (hybrid) communities. (330)

As already indicated, *Moonlight* weaves together a number of narrative strands and elements that individually might seem “fragmentary.” The other striking feature of the text is the emphasis it places on the female characters and the histories that they live and tell.

Female genealogies are traced in detail, mainly to recall the various ways in which women have been oppressed by both the precepts of Judaism and the rabbis themselves. This retrieval of lost female histories appears as an unveiling of what was previously kept covered up by the religious patriarchy. The unclothing is symbolized in the story of the Lubovicher grandmother and her daughters, locked in their quarters by their rabbi husband and father so that no man could see their bodies. But the grandmother removes all the clothing that has imprisoned her, and walks naked and singing through the crowded temple with her daughters (still veiled) in tow. They are thus avenged, for every man who sees the rabbi’s wife openly lusts after her, “white as the river’s foamy waters, blond from her head down to her feet, slender and curved and scented like every young man’s dream of copulation” (13).

Aranjo (quoted in Berry, 93) maintains that such stories enable the recovery of the personal histories of the women “by means of a non-linear structure which enhances the idea of separateness and bifurcation, but also multiplicity.” This is demonstrated in the novel in terms of its narrative structure, its use of magic realism

and its variety of narrative voices. The non-linear and anti-realist narrative structure suggests that the recuperation of lost histories does not take place in a linear fashion, just as memory itself has no inherent linear pattern. The events which take precedence in the lives of the characters, and determine not only their future actions but also their identities, are often the very moments that they themselves have suppressed or sublimated, and which therefore require excavation before healing can take place. Perhaps more importantly, however, the individual “small stories” offer different versions of the past from that enshrined in the national memory – or “disrememory” – so that their telling is an excavation of the nation’s past, but from varying points of view. And since excavation – commencing to dig, not knowing what lies beneath the surface – is at least in part haphazard and contingent, the text stages the recovery of lost memories as an equally disordered process, moreover (finding buried treasure?) an essentially “magical” one.

Thus the textual performance of recovery must, in a sense, allow itself to succumb to the magical, in the same way that the characters must allow the magical to enter their lives if they are to be transformed. The re-memory of past events circles back to the past and by remaking it “magically” transforms the future. This is what happens with the jar of almond tears, into which generations of the family’s women have cried tears of pain. Shusha uses the jar as a vessel from which to drink the boiled scorpion tails, committing suicide, and it comes to Roxanna through Miriam who brings news of the death. Later the same tear jar becomes the repository for the almond tears that Lili makes for her mother by preserving her faith in her. Finally the tear jar takes on a new, positive meaning when Roxanna begins to tell her secrets. Lili feeds her mother almond tears from the jar, and Roxanna realizes that “Miriam went back and found [the tear jar], carried it across the world, saved it in her house: the

only gift my mother had to give me, the only one I am going to leave Lili” (368). The act of swallowing the tears causes Roxanna to vomit “yellow fluid from [her] lungs” (369). She herself cries “tears ... so dense [that] It is [as if] the tears have weighed [her] down” (371). By the time Lili brings the second spoon of tears to her mouth Roxanna feels ready to “stand up. [She] feels lighter, thinner, more weightless than [she has] felt in a year. She puts [her] arm around Lili and ... [they] glide through the glass door, into the yard, across it, into the night sky” (372). In a postscript to the novel, Tina Jackson writes: “For members of displaced communities, memory becomes sacrosanct and superstition nostalgic where it evokes images of lost times and places. This is when the element of magic creeps into [the] work: it only takes a slight shift in pitch for the weightless, detached, troubled Roxanna to grow the wings she needs”(n.p.).

The tear jar serves as a bearer of cultural memories that transcend pain and rather become a means toward healing that pain. Its magical quality recuperates what is lost, in the same way that the sunflowers planted by Miriam become a symbol of transformation: they grow up overnight and make Lili’s room in the convent bright and sunny, helping to allay her loneliness.

These magical-real moments are one of the ways in which *Moonlight* seeks to break down the monolithic control of an “official” History. Instead of the endless conflict between historical viewpoints, and the power shifts that accompany that conflict, *Moonlight* offers “faith” in the (personal) power of the individual to triumph over the public, and thereby remake the public. It is Lili’s faith in the power of almond tears that enables Roxanna finally to be healed, which in turn enables the healing of the whole family.

According to Abdulrazak Gurnah, “Writing [fiction] can challenge history’s ideas of itself and reveal it as discourse, just as in its turn writing reveals itself as discursive” (291). If viewed as a conceptually equal, competing modes of discourse, magical realism becomes an entirely appropriate vehicle for the re-telling of stories and truths more important than mere “facts.” Magical realism is arguably capable of conveying what no other narrative mode could, because it functions at levels beyond the purely diegetic and cognitive. Magic realism is a form of “replenishment” because it seeks to re-establish roots with the old traditions “eclipsed by the mimetic conventions of narrative realism” (Zamora and Faris, 2). From an ideological point of view, magic realism is subversive because it challenges the “traditional” logic of realism, positing instead “a political and cultural disruption [which requires] readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality [and] motivation” (Zamora and Faris, 3).

It is worth noting also that that which Western readers construe as magic may well be seen as “normal” or realistic in other contexts. And while such forms of writing may have been marginalized through Western discursive practices, the re-emergence of “small stories” from occluded histories in recent fiction has meant a review of what constitutes literary “value” and “seriousness,” as well as what constitutes historical truth. Roxanna’s flight is not seen as magical by her family, since it is accepted that she is “fated” to fly. Miriam the Moon learns of Roxanna’s ability to fly when Roxanna is only three years old. When Roxanna awakes from a deep sleep to tell Miriam that she has dreamed of being a bird, Miriam coaxes her back to sleep. But an hour later when she lights a candle Miriam “realized the room smelt strange...[it] smelled of the sea...[Roxanna’s] hair was wet, her arms stretched to her sides, and she was afloat in a bed of white feathers” (10).

Roxanna's flight is both real and allegorical, and thus reminds us that "reality" need not be read only literally, and that "truth" resides as much in how events are perceived as in the events themselves. The ability to accept the world of magic is seen in Miriam's observation that:

the feathers in Roxanna's bed came from her dreams, that in them Roxanna was flying...away from the tight borders of their ghetto, that the wings and the sea air spilled over the edge of the night sometimes, skipping the line between desire and truth. (11)

Here it is clear that the magical element is serving a similar cultural and political purpose to that which distinguishes its use in Latin American and other literatures. But more importantly, in *Moonlight* the mode is used to develop what *Beloved* terms a "clearing space" in which the reader is able to interrogate cultural and political boundaries, in such a way that a collapse of the walls between discourses becomes possible. The magic realist novel is transgressive in the sense that, through their travelling back in time and entering the archives of occluded spaces, writers such as Rushdie, Paz, Chandra, Marquez and Nahai (to mention but a few) open up "possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction" (Zamora and Faris, 4). The stories ignored or effaced by the official narratives of History can only be excavated in an "in-between" space, in which "[the] phenomenal and spiritual regions [of] transformation, metamorphosis and dissolution" (Zamora and Faris, 6) become acceptable to the reader, while at the same time the orderliness and authority of realism are challenged and destabilized.

But the destabilizing effects of *Moonlight* are not achieved only through its recourse to magical realism. The novel's circularity and its magical element is also evident in the narrative voices. For instance, the use of multiple narrators – Miriam

the Moon, Lili and Roxanna herself – both enacts the notion of “multiplicity” of point of view and suggests the idea of a composite women’s story continuing through the generations. The narrators’ stories must be told to allow the inconsolable grief that hounds the family to become “bearable.” The telling of the stories is therapeutic – it helps Miriam to accept her tragedies; it teaches Lili to learn the importance of faith in the “old ways” (by making almond oil, a traditional means of seeking and granting forgiveness), and in this way finally release herself and her mother from inconsolable grief. Roxanna herself is eventually empowered to talk about her entrapment in the “lightness of being” (as Kundera would put it), and to accept that with life comes a burden of responsibility. She is able to perceive that life away from her daughter actually damages herself more than anyone else.

In the novel the notions of “lightness” and “weight” are literalized. When Roxanna is young she literally flies in her dreams, and breathes the air of the Caspian Sea. The feathers that remain around her bed are the only sign of her flying. But this lightness is also linked to her fragile, almost ethereal beauty. She walks, we are told, without seeming to touch the ground. When she seeks solace in forgetfulness in the murky bowels of Turkey she fulfils the family curse about each generation having a female who will “wander through the desert ...wanting to return home, but not being allowed to” (15). Roxanna occasionally takes a lover to enhance her forgetfulness, demanding that he tell her a story after making love to him, saying nothing in return. As the years pass she loses her urge to fly, speaks no Farsi and deliberately avoids Iranian tourists. She has seemingly left her past behind, shed it like a burden discarded. Sometimes “Roxanna would be struck by the realization that she was loose, and unknown, and that she was going to die in this town – free, it was true, but also alone” (220).

But she does not anticipate the tenacity of Miriam, who deliberately breaks the pattern of the past and repudiates the curse, by coming to hunt her down and take her “home” to America with her. Neither does she count on the strong demands that the past makes, and that she must address before she moves on. Roxanna forgets that her past is inscribed in all her presents and futures, so that forgetting (rather than remembering) becomes a burden, weighing her down from within. After she has been discovered by Miriam and told about Lili and still refuses to “return” to America, signs of the burden begin to show. The forgetting that Roxanna chooses starts to fill her body with its toxicity. Initially, the weight of memory, as a marker of her repression of what refuses to be repressed, actually marks her body: her clothes become ill-fitting and her feet swollen. Her employer warns that she should get some new clothes if she intends to stay in his employment. Soon, however, Roxanna

was having trouble fitting through aisles of clothing that hung in the back of the dry cleaning store, and the bus drivers sighed and rolled their eyes every time she stepped on board. The manager told her to stop gaining weight or not to come back to work. So Roxanna walked into a clinic where the doctor...gave her some diet pills...[and] an inhaler and sent her home. (326)

When Roxanna finally decides to return to America, with the ticket and money that Miriam the Moon has left for her, she continues the process Miriam herself began when her son was drowned in the swimming pool which Mr Charles (her hapless husband) insisted on filling with water to impress his “silly” American friends. Miriam blames her daughter Sara for the boy’s death, having left her to look after the boy. When they find Joseph “[h]e was floating face-down in the pool already bloated.... [and] Miriam the Moon would remember the events that followed with the lucid objectivity of a bystander” (255). Miriam’s reaction to Sara’s heartbreaking

screams is to slap her and accuse *her* of killing Joseph. While Miriam observes shiva for Joseph, she is unforgiving towards Sara, despite the interventions of her sisters, and she insists that it is not about forgiveness, but about responsibility. On the twentieth day of shiva, Sara commits suicide by drinking bleach. Despite her outward bravado, Miriam has aged “two decades in one year” (256). She must learn to forgive herself, as well as Sara. It is a long journey that Miriam has to take, denying the gods the pleasure of seeing her tears. But on some rainy days she “sat up in bed, horrified at the thought that her children were far away, soaking in their muddy graves” (257).

Part of Miriam’s atonement is to track down Roxanna, and it is to Roxanna that she articulates, for the first time, what has been “unspeakable”, that “Joseph drowned. I killed Sara” (320). She tells Roxanna that, unlike Miriam, all she has to do to recover her child is to “turn around” (320). Miriam’s atonement is vicarious, working through Roxanna’s. When Roxanna finally returns to Lili in America, having never seen her father again and seeing her mother for the first time in thirteen years, she is not the person Lili remembers. Roxanna was once “a young girl with watercolor eyes and translucent skin, [who] could stop the world with her laughter.... so light and delicate, so undisturbed by the laws of gravity” (5). But now Lili sees a woman metamorphosed into “three hundred and ninety-three pounds and gaining by the day, her frame so vast she [has not been able to] pull it upright in more than two months or ...fit through any doorway without first having to take the door off its hinges” (5).

In the time that Roxanna has been away she has given up responsibility in favour of a life of “lightness,” the lightness that comes without the burden of responsibility. Unknown, unseen and unheard of, she intends to spend her life in Istanbul, living out the curse she feels she is destined to suffer. But the weight of her

repressed memories finally engulfs her, even in New York after her return to Lili – who thought her mother dead and buried in the grounds of the House on the Avenue of Faith, as so many others had disappeared in Reza Shah’s rule. But even in New York and despite sophisticated medical treatment, Roxanna’s bulk does not diminish, for the only way for her to begin to “unburden” her body is to embrace her memory, a challenge for which there is no Western remedy. Miriam the Moon finally decides that it is time to evoke an old (almost lost) traditional practice: making almond tears. As she explains to Lili: “it’s an old ritual we used to do back home, whenever we were faced with a tragedy we could not resolve” (356). It is “a long and laborious process, designed to procure miracles when all else had failed” (33). Miriam explains that the ritual takes almost two days, and at the end, when the almond tears are formed, someone with a “pure soul” should feed them to the afflicted.

In exchange for the making of tears, Miriam the Moon tells Lili the repressed stories of their family. She speaks of “[all] the secrets...and [all] the sorrow” (356). In this way the novel both recuperates old rituals for the benefit of future generations, and itself becomes a repository for the memories of several generations of women. In order to write both *The Cry of the Peacock* (1991) and *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (1999), Nahai conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with Iranian Jews who left Tehran in the last days of the Shah’s reign. Like all political exiles, the Iranian Jews were relieved to find sanctuary and liberty in a new land, in this case America. But with this sanctuary comes the very real possibility of forgetting the stories nurtured within the walls of the ghetto, told and retold, elaborated and dramatised.

By retelling the stories of the ghetto and its rituals, by interweaving history and fiction, the novel, in Jackson’s words, “[creates] a complex and engaging context in which to view a portion of this experience, and, in doing so, has ensured the

survival of these largely untold tales” (n.p.). Dramatizing the return to an old tradition like the making of almond tears to enable reconciliation has what J.L. Austin would call a performative force, rather like Roxanna’s own attitude towards language and narrative: “Roxanna the angel believed that nothing was real until it had been named, that no-one existed until they had been spoken of, out loud before a witness who could hear their tale. All the rest, she thought, even pain, was illusion” (108). *Moonlight* of course performs the same function on behalf of the characters whose stories it tells.

Ironically, it takes Roxanna approximately thirteen years to speak about herself, before an appropriate witness, and thus disburdened, begin to become lighter. And she can finally tell her tale only because of Lili’s faith, as embodied in her careful feeding of the almond tears to her mother. It is because of such faith that Roxanna can finally say of her relationship with Lili: “I did love her it is true. But I did not love her enough” (361).

In the fictional world of the novel even the slightest action can have endless consequences. Once, long ago, Miriam the Moon points out, in the claustrophobic domestic sphere, women were given a *single* chance. But the example of Lili shows that faith and “a handful of crushed almonds [can] alter the course of...destiny” (360). The novel as a whole demonstrates the power of magic and faith to tear asunder repetitive patterns that have haunted generations of women. The interweaving of family histories, memory and magic produces an opportunity for a second chance, moreover a “magical” second chance. The novel’s response to the pain of bad marriages and failed loves, lost opportunities and squandered chances, a thousand years of women’s suffering stacked one upon another, is thus faith in the magic that can bind the characters to ancestral practice without binding them to patriarchal

dominance. The magic that Lili, the youngest generation of the family, produces through the tears frees Roxanna and allows her to realize the consequences of *not* turning around and looking back. She will learn that Alexandra the Cat (who took her own mother's burial money and left the body to rot) was wrong when she said that one must embrace one's exile:

Alexandra the Cat taught me that the secret to survival is to embrace your exile, move into it and move on. You must travel ahead in spite of what you leave behind.... Bury a child and go on. Lose a war and go on. Above all...you must not look back. (365)

But in fact it is Miriam's turning around that saves Roxanna by enabling her finally to realize what she has lost. The making of the almond tears intercepts the "*degh*" – the sorrow from which Roxanna is dying – and transforms the banal domesticity and gossip that dominates Miriam's room with its own magic:

the tall, beautiful tree standing in the new light of dawn, its branches wide and long and full, golden drops of oil falling from among them into the yellow and red and purple plates below, gathering there to reflect the red bark of the tree, the warmth of the rising sun, the promise of an unlikely miracle. Even Mercedes [who had not an ounce of compassion] cries with joy. (368)

Until the almond tears are poured into the tear jar for Roxanna to drink, the jar has signified only pain, loneliness, loss and death. Shusha cries into the tear jar for three days and drinks her own tears; Shusha boils scorpion tails and drinks their poison from the tear jar. When Roxanna has fled and Lili has been sent to boarding school, Miriam the Moon retrieves the jar, enabling its meaning to be changed when it becomes a vessel for the almond tears. The jar becomes simultaneously a cultural artefact that Miriam has rescued from their past life and, as the only gift given returned to the giver, the very embodiment of the reconciliation between mother and

daughter. Though faith it becomes a talisman of the age-old tradition of healing to which the exiled family can turn for solace. Soon the venomous poison of the past that has changed Roxanna from an ethereal angel to a beached whale, begins quite literally to pour out of her, as she vomits “yellow fluid from [her] lungs” (369). Amidst the chaos that follows, Roxanna is gasping for breath when she hears Lili call “Mama.” It is the voice of the five-year-old child she had abandoned thirteen years before. After Mercedes clears her windpipe so that she can breathe again, Roxanna “is calmer” (369). And when she finally tastes the “sweet oil” of the almond tears, she is transported back to her childhood, with the sunlight filtering through into the courtyard and her mother constantly praying for a miracle – a miracle, so often sought and so long deferred, that is finally bestowed on Roxanna through acts of love and faith. She begins to cry: “I cry quietly, my eyes fogged up with salt. My tears are so dense... [that] I feel lighter, as if with each tear I am shedding another pound, as if it is the tears that have weighed me down” (371).

When Lili brings another spoon of the oil to her mouth she clasps Lili’s hand tightly, stands up, feels “lighter, more weightless than [she] has felt in a year,” puts her arm around Lili, lifts her off the ground and together “[they] glide through the glass door, into the yard, into the night sky” (372). Faith has transformed Roxanna’s vertiginous freefall into an ability truly to “fly:” through the faith of Miriam, Lili and Mercedes, Roxanna comes to realize that in *this* land of choices, she can see the possibility of forgiveness, “the chance to sin and be absolved, to start again” (373).

On the Avenue of Faith, in that house forever linked in my memory with magic, I met a man who loved me, who gave me a child I wanted. At that time, in that house, I came to believe in the possibility of miracles. (370)

These are Roxanna's first "words" to Lili after their separation of thirteen years. The possibility of miracles seems ultimately to reside in the exiles' "turning around" and affirming their belief in the cultural practices that they carry with them.

However, it is also Miriam the Moon's sincerity in admitting to herself that *she* was responsible for both her children's deaths, and her resilience in the face of this admission, that becomes a catalyst in the family's healing. When Miriam asks Lili to make the almond tears, she promises that in return she will tell *all* the secrets and stories that lie hidden in the annals of their family histories. The unspoken past burdens Roxanna somatically, but it is Miriam who ensures that the past is not lost in the diaspora:

Years later, as she recounted the events [of their histories] Miriam the Moon would feel an ancient sense of dread, and tremble with the force of relived emotion: the sky was crowded with stars, the moon like a mirror over the earth. (35)

Women's Identities in the Diaspora

Moonlight explores the hybridised "in-between" spaces, both literal and metaphorical, that open up as a consequence of diaspora, and explores the ways in which the experience of cultural dislocation affects the bodies, memories and identities of its emigré characters. The novel effectively asks two important questions: first, what are the implications of diasporic living for the "construction" of women's identities? And, secondly, how does the recuperation of memories function in the "reconstruction" of their identities?

The questions are answered in several ways within the novel. The narrative demonstrates that exile is not necessarily a “rags to riches” story. “Alexandra the Cat” leaves her mother’s corpse at home and uses the burial money to live a life of comfort in Tehran. In contrast to the miserable lot of the masses, she sleeps till noon and in the evening dons romantic, expensive dresses and waits for her Abyssinian lover. Significantly, Alexandra all but refuses to acknowledge Mercedez, the result of her liaison with this lover, who is looked after for the first nine years of her life by the Abyssinian’s wife. Taking a similar moral trajectory, Roxanna’s flight into the night takes her into the bowels of Istanbul, where she works as a prostitute in dingy, unhygienic conditions. For both women the choice of escape leads to further denial, which must be vigorously reinforced for them to maintain (a facsimile of) emotional equilibrium. This denial becomes part of the fracture within the diasporic community, to the extent that, while past histories are dismissed, no new identities are able to be fully or effectively formed. Exile becomes more of a mental state than a physical or geographical situation.

The members of the family who move to America, the land of choices and chances, find their feet slowly and painfully, and after much suffering. For Miriam the Moon and her husband, the hardship begins with their journey from Tehran:

Miriam the Moon arrived in Los Angeles in March 1981, two years to the day after she and Mr Charles left Iran, huddled in the backseat of a rented Volvo that drove them across the border to Pakistan...[and then] to the refugee camp in Peshawar, on the Afghan border [meant to] house refugees of Afghanistan’s war with the occupying forces. (277)

Mr Charles is at the end of his tether when the US embassy in Brussels finally agrees to grant them visas. The protracted struggle to escape is a rehearsal for diasporic existence in general: a broken, perpetually provisional life in which no coherent sense

of identity can be formed, whose “space” is in no way fixed, either geographically or emotionally, and in which deferral becomes the dominant experience, a deferral which can engender “madness.”

The journey of Miriam and Mr Charles is juxtaposed with what is happening in Tehran. News of the demise of the Shah and the rise of the Ayatollah reaches Miriam in letters. She learns that the “Islamic government...had conducted mass executions on a scale unparalleled even by that of the Shah or his father” (280). Fräulein Claude’s fears are literalized when the fear she swallows makes its way deep into her intestines, making it impossible for her to eat, and soon her “body was forever surrounded by a permanent cloud of stinking vapors she could not erase” (276). The vapours anticipate “the garbled and broken” condition of Tehran and the arrival of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Lili hears from Sohrab (in a letter in English) that the new regime has taken over their house, and “turned it over to the Organization for the Defense of the Poor” (277). The House on the Avenue of Faith, built with such love and hope, is plunged into faithlessness.

In this way the novel presents even the “home space” as contested space, both for those at home and those abroad. The times when Lili followed Iranians in the park trying to smell “home” are past, since they can no longer represent that for which she truly longs. The nostalgia for home (etymologically – a yearning that cannot be fulfilled) gradually dissipates. The diasporic identity must evolve from one based on a longing to return to a lost past, to one which seeks deeper integration into the community that has been joined. This means that the pain of loss is in some ways alleviated but in other ways exacerbated, and the notion of “home” increasingly loses its geographical reference. “Home” becomes a meta-space, and in a sense fictional, though no less “real” for being fictional. For, as previously argued, the texts under

scrutiny do not separate History from fiction, and the fictional spaces, deliberately configured as blank spaces, can recuperate and re-tell alternative forms of history. In this re-telling, not only the past is remade, but also the present, and so too the future.

The interweaving of historical “fact” and personal imagination is instanced in the reference to warfare so intense that blood literally flowed in the streets of Tehran (to which the Shah’s smug yet frightening response is that citizens should ignore the red dye “planted” by his opponents). Time and again we are reminded of the omnipresence of spy networks and the state-controlled radio, to the extent that the boundaries between the public and private lives of individuals are collapsed. Numerous incidents of “being disappeared” are reported, so that Roxanna’s disappearance and the possibility that she might be buried in the back yard is not without foundation in the minds of the family, especially once the yard is filled over with concrete. The abandoned Lili inscribes her pain and sense of abandonment on her body, the only space over which she has some control. Her writing on the body is an attempt to make herself “visible” – in America, where one is supposed not to “disappear,” as can happen in Tehran.

Sister Ana Rose always punished me when I drew on myself: I would have to skip dinner and my television hour. And yet I kept drawing on myself, driving the pen even harder onto my skin, trying to create a shape, a figure that would make me real, make me visible to the girls in the school and the teachers in my classrooms, to my father far away, to Roxanna. (227)

This intertwining of the personal and the political is emphasized in the oral tradition of a specifically female lineage. Even Fräulein Claude, who casts aside her identity as Golbanaaz, the daughter of a poor vegetable trader, continues to believe in the power of potions and other traditional practices, such as her sacrificing of a goat in

the name of Morad the Mercury. Notwithstanding all the efforts of the American doctors, Morad dies within thirty days of returning to Tehran. Of his death Miriam says:

Morad the Mercury died of Sorrow, his doctors' subsequent and very useless diagnosis notwithstanding. Grief welled up in his body – so hard he could touch it under his skin – and poisoned his cells. Grief can do that....In the West, doctors and scientists have given names to grief's creations: Cancer, Diabetes, Multiple sclerosis.... But in the East, people have been dying of Sorrow since the beginning of time....There is even a name for it in Farsi – *Degh* – which means literally “to get sick and die of Sorrow.” (153)

In the same way that Lili makes a magical tear jar revitalize Roxanna, dying of the same Sorrow as Morad, so the novel offers its magical re-telling of the past as a “jar of sorrow” transmuted into a healing vessel.

The magical real changes the way things are interpreted in the diasporic community. Whereas once the jar represented tears and loss, after Roxanna is “healed” by drinking the almond tears the jar comes to represent “speaking aloud” the secrets of the family, and with it a comes a kind of redemption. The tear jar also becomes a repository of faith, taking over the role once played by the House on the Avenue of Faith. Faith is born from the jar because Lili believes, and her belief brings Roxanna “back to earth,” subject once more to the force of gravity. Hitherto Roxanna the Angel, with her delicate and translucent skin, her water-coloured eyes that hypnotized men with their beauty, has been “undisturbed by the rules of gravity and the drudgery of human existence” (7). Now her newfound sense of responsibility, of the “gravity” of existence, allows her to acknowledge Lili as her miracle child, born of an enchanted union with a man who loved her. And by taking responsibility with a sense of *authority* rather than with a sense of *victimhood*, Roxanna realizes that

Lili's journey in life need not end in sorrow. And with the last of the magic that she is able to conjure, she puts her arms around Lili and lifts her off the ground. Sailing through the air with Lili, she points out the landmarks of their lives:

Tehran is in ruins. There is war, and hunger. The trees have died along the Avenue of Faith....the house ... is inhabited by strangers who are hostile and angry. Among them, Fräulein Claude walks distracted and dishevelled, talking to her dead brother....Sohrab is alone in his room, at the end of his life, still grieving. (372)

Through this magical air-dance, Lili is transported to the night of her mother's marriage to Sohrab, when "Sohrab pulled Roxanna into the sunlight of his promise" (373), a promise Roxanna breaks by sleeping with Teymur. She is also able to admit to Lili that she could not have loved Teymur any less, nor stopped herself from having sex with him. Thus the magical enters the real and enables the transformation necessary for history to be rewritten. The dance of mother and daughter repeats the dance of the mother on the night she flew away from the House on the Avenue of Faith, as it does the "dance" on the night she and Lili escaped the House to go to the "outside world" and ride on the Ferris wheel, under the star-laden Tehran sky. But this time it is the faith of her abandoned daughter that instigates a new dance, a dance of return, which makes it possible for Roxanna to advise her daughter not to make the same mistakes as she had: "Turn around. It is possible to know and, at last, feel at peace" (374).

Toxic Memory

Not to "turn around," the novel tells us, is to bring the full force of toxic memory to bear upon the self, on both body and mind, and not only of individuals, but of wider

communities too. While Roxanna eventually learns to “turn around” with magical assistance from the jar of faith, other characters in the text are not so fortunate. Refusing to turn around leads to the suppression of lost histories and turns memory (or rather, the refusal to remember) noxious. Three characters represent this state of “disrememory” in the novel: Alexandra the Cat, Mercedes the Movie Star and Fräulein Claude. They and their relationship to their own pasts are allegorical of the wider community’s refusal to acknowledge its past, and of the consequences of such a refusal.

Alexandra the Cat arrives in the ghetto after escaping from her home-town on the Russian-Iranian border. Her mother, a blind piano teacher, denies her daughter and herself the most basic necessities because she is terrified that she will not be able to afford a decent burial. Every penny is saved and hidden in the piano. But after her death Alexandra leaves the body unburied and uses the money to leave, convincing herself that once she has met a rich man, she will return to ensure that a proper burial takes place. When she meets her Assyrian lover with a rich wife, she accepts his decision to find her a house in the Jewish ghetto of Tehran. When Mercedes is born of their liaison, he takes her to his wife and says she is the daughter of a distant relative and must be looked after. But when the child is seven, she is returned to Alexandra and the Assyrian lover disappears from their lives forever.

After three days of mourning the loss of her lover Alexandra goes blind. Her refusal to look back brings a blindness both literal, like her mother’s, and figurative, of the condition of the country in which they are living. “Do not look back, no matter what, do not look back” is one of her constant refrains. Being blind to her own origins leads to a literal blindness, while her callous treatment of her mother’s body

leads to the disfigurement of her own body – the physical inscription of toxic disremembering.

Alexandra the Cat, “old and wrinkled...her face painted a dozen colors...[wearing] a white cotton dress with French pleats becoming of a twelve year old” (70), dies quietly, of too much sorrow, at Miriam’s wedding. Roxanna remembers how Alexandra had “kept talking about a coffin she had left behind and a corpse that was alone and unburied...she said she could not return because [the city’s] name had been changed and its borders had been destroyed and its streets no longer existed except in old people’s memories” (47). But she does not tell her story and therefore dies still burdened by her memories.

Mercedez leaves to find herself a rich man – and like her mother before her, she chooses not to look back. She marries Amin for his money, does not quite “make it” in Hollywood, and instead purchases properties on the East Side that she lets to illegal aliens, pimps and prostitutes. In her restaurants patrons get food poisoning, and in her run-down buildings children sleep in drafts. She has no compassion for the sufferings of others, save Roxanna and Lili: she pays Lili’s school fees when Sohrab the Sinner can no longer afford to, and eventually helps Lili to give the almond tears to Roxanna.

But Mercedez’s history remains unexplored, and her refusal to turn around drives her to insomnia and fear. She is terrified to sleep alone and quite often drinks herself to sleep at the piano, where Lili finds her in the morning, hair splayed across the keyboard. Perhaps Roxanna is correct when she says that “some people are born into exile, they take it with them even if they don’t go anywhere” (364).

After Roxanna flies away and Lili has been forcibly removed to school in America, the atmosphere in Fräulein Claude's house is strangely muted. As Lili puts it:

In all the years after Roxanna's disappearance, after they had sent [Lili] away and remained in the house together, Teymur, Fräulein Claude, and Sohrab never spoke to one another of what happened. They went about their lives as if uninterrupted....Sohrab thought the silence allowed them to stay together – consoled them even,....Perhaps there was nothing they wanted to say, because they each understood the other's pain too well. In the end, *all that mattered was to endure one's loss*. (233, italics mine)

Fräulein Claude, who is quite literally not whom she claims to be, reveals how damaged one be by “endur[ing] one's loss” in this way, as she silently nurses her bitterness over her husband's affair with Roxanna. When Teymur dies after being tortured daily by the Shah's security police, we are told that “she did not mind” (244). As far as she is concerned,

nothing he endured in prison could be compared with the rage that he had instilled in her, the anger that poisoned her food and turned her nights into hell, that fought her like a fiend from within, that changed her, she knew too well, from the young girl who cared for all her brothers and their lives into an old woman bent on destroying everyone. (244)

The bodily weight of her bitterness leaves her perpetually unbalanced on her thin ankles and high-heeled sandals, and haunted by the memory of Roxanna through the dreams of Jacob the Jello, who shares with Fräulein Claude his nightly vision of “Roxanna...wearing blue wings, looking at me” (242).

Fräulein Claude has discarded her identity as Golnaz, the poor shopkeeper's daughter, in order to become Fräulein Claude, a wealthy married woman. She is transformed, after a trip to Germany, from a shop-girl into “a young lady with

platinum blonde hair and shaved eyebrows who bore an uncanny resemblance to Golnaz, but who introduced herself as Fräulein Claude” (102). She speaks only broken Farsi with a strong German accent. The villagers think her a “lunatic,” but play along with her tale. She wears tight cashmere tops that make her breasts protrude like “sugar cones” (103), and she attracts Teymur by sitting with “her ankles slightly crossed, her torso turned sideways so that the peaks of her breasts were maximized” (103). It is she who proposes to him, and he accepts her proposal because he realizes that she loves him and that she had “remade herself” (104) to be loved by him. He also understands that if he were to turn her down “she could sigh, right before his eyes, and turn to dust” (104).

The character of Fräulein Claude helps the narrative to interweave the events that affect the extended family in both Teheran and America. It is Fräulein Claude who allows Miriam the Moon’s visionary statement that ghosts occupied the House on the Avenue of Faith to be taken seriously. In a text that countenances magical happenings, it is initially quite credible to the reader that strange ghosts are indeed stealing everything of value in the house. But much later the extent of Fräulein Claude’s anger and bitterness is exposed: she has employed thieves to steal things from the household so as to create disruption and implicate Roxanna. With the introduction of Roxanna into the household, Fräulein Claude’s life metamorphoses from “a state of uninterrupted bliss... where no disaster, small or large, ever drew so much as a frown or a sigh of disappointment from her” (104), to that of a woman who convinces her son, Sohrab, to give up his daughter to an exilic life in America. It is the same bitterness, the consequence of Roxanna and Teymur’s betrayal, that allows her the calm she feels when Teymur dies.

Ironically, however, the text uses Fräulein Claude's bitterness as a way of showing us the inside workings of the Shah's reign. It is through her focalization that we are privy to the latter stages of his rule. Her inability to turn around from her bitterness leads to her bearing witness to the atrocities caused by his rule, so that it is she who must live in a single room in a house once wholly hers – built partly from money gained through her financial acumen. Now in the hands of the Shah, the house has become a kind of rehabilitation centre.

But if Fräulein Claude's memories turn toxic, isolating her and eating away at her from the inside, the text nevertheless suggests that even such toxicity can be a means towards renewal. Her personal archive of memories has been effectively locked away by her, even summarily "killed off," when she chooses to be Fräulein Claude rather than the "trader's daughter." Her new personal archive, based on lies and pretence, creates an anguish that ripples through all around her. Her reward for this is to be locked in a single room with a constant stench of burning bodies around her, the outcome of the Shah's reign of terror. The smell infiltrates her body, so that she has to carry not only the toxicity of denying her own identity, but also that of the Shah's murderous regime. In this way her story contributes to the "new narratives" which the novel uncovers, and in so doing undoes the formal History of the Shah's Iran. Her focalization allows us another, considerably harsher insight into the history of Iran. Through her, the novel allows hidden stories – the blood in the streets, the Savak and their actions, Sohrab's earliest memories of Freedom Square and the bodies hanging there, all Fräulein Claude's "reports" – to enter the public archive of Iran.

The novel does not "end." It loops back to the beginning, as the story is retold by Miriam the Moon, to help Lili delve into her personal archive and thereby

to help all of the women to “turn around.” The two broad types of character portrayed in the novel – those who consciously recuperate lost history and those who deliberately disremember it – thus lend it a certain ambivalence, as representations of the renewal of identities and futures appear side-by-side with examples of entrapment in the past.

Frantz Fanon (1963, 176) maintains that the experience of the outsider can be an experience “without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a [group] of angels [without any personal or political responsibilities].” While Bhabha argues that the state of the migrant is one of perpetual migration, it is not, as Aijaz Ahmad points out (1996, 289), in reality sustainable by the migrant, who must find a place of eventual rest. In this sense Stuart Hall’s arguments about identities in the diaspora are more convincing. He stresses the importance of “cultural identity”. “We should not... underestimate or neglect ... the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered identity entails” (1996, 111). At the same time he points out that he is not reviving the myth of an “organic communality.” Nor is this dissertation. For the literary evidence shows that no such organicism can exist. But “organic communality” can be *imagined*. The impossibility of “indivisible, homogenous meaning” can be countered by the benefits of imagined community. The diaspora (and, at the micro-level, Miriam’s family) provides an “imaginary reunification [by] imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, and acknowledging that the other side is rupture and discontinuity” (1996, 112).

For all its doom and personal anguish, *Moonlight* does offer various forms of hope. Where once the great-great grandmother walked naked, singing, through the synagogue before disappearing, now Roxanna and Lilli dance to the song she sang.

And the day that the great-great grandmother unveiled herself before all was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Her naked “footprints” down the synagogue aisle echo through the community’s history and through the narrative, forcing History to “turn around” and notice the “small stories” out of which it is actually constructed.

So the characters and the readers of the novel, too, must “turn around.” It is in the action of turning around and confronting the past that the footprints that were deliberately not made (in the case of Roxanna) or deliberately wiped away (as in the case of Fräulein Claude and her lies about her identity) can be (re)traced, (re)made in a new and therapeutic way.

Chapter Five

The God of Small Things

But unshed tears can turn you rancid. So can
memory. So can biting your tongue.

(Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*)

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

(T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding")

Housing Secrets

In a purely practical sense it would probably be correct to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem. Perhaps, it's true to say that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of a whole lifetime. And when they do, those dozen hours like the salvaged remains of a burned house – the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture – must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for. (32)

The novels discussed so far in this study have consciously sought to show the pain of repressed memories, and the greater pain of retrieving and confronting those memories. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a text in the same mould. But while the novels previously discussed have focused mostly on the larger social conflicts of colonialism and slavery (in the case of Morrison) and the dislocations of diaspora (in the cases of Dangarembga, Høeg and Nahai), *The God of Small Things* operates within the bounds of the postcolonial. By this I mean that it is set squarely in postcolonial India, and shows the effects of lost histories on a single family, not so much as a result of colonialism or diasporic dislocation, but rather of that family's relationship to the strictures of Indian custom. Its force lies in showing that in a "decolonized" India, where colonialism cannot be directly blamed for social

degradation, “small stories” remain lost or deliberately occluded, in favour of a postcolonial historical narrative which presents itself as an unquestionable truth.

Roy’s novel is a fitting one with which to conclude this study because it shifts the discussion about occluded histories from the colonial to the postcolonial world. In the process it demonstrates that many of the personal losses experienced under colonialism are continued under the new dispensation, sometimes in the guise of political “freedom.” The structures distinguishing colonialism, the novel shows, have not been fully dismantled in a world in which social classes are in conflict and certain histories are deemed more important, or politically correct, than “smaller” ones. Roy’s “small stories,” like the footprints of the Untouchables as they crawl away from Touchables, are wiped away by their own hands. Her project emulates Kundera’s in joining the fight of memory against forgetting, and its purpose is to reclaim – over and above human histories – certain human rights.

Roy seeks to examine the ruins of both houses and characters, while simultaneously “digging up” old memories that for a long time (twenty-three years to be precise) have been “preserved” through a careful programme of ideology-driven forgetting. The text therefore requires that those aspects of the past that have been “disremembered” to allow it to conform with the triumphalist narrative of Marxist struggle be recognized and faced. The secret that History House harbours in its grounds can no longer be contained or passed off as the “Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics” (14).

The text’s relationship with history may therefore be described as confrontational; it seeks to retrieve and dislodge old secrets so that the characters can take responsibility for what actually happened. Significantly, Roy’s novel caused a great deal of controversy in India, particularly in Kerala where it is set. This was due

largely to Roy's handling of the affair between Ammu and Velutha, the Paravan or Untouchable, which she provocatively details in the last chapter entitled "The Cost of Living," – which is, ironically enough, death. It appears that the idea of a Paravan and a Syrian Christian sleeping together, exacerbated by the intense clarity and detail with which their lovemaking is described, offended the sensibilities of the general Indian public. Like Baby Kochamma (Ammu's baby-aunt) says after she learns the details of the relationship between the two: "*How could she stand the smell?* Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell these Paravans" (257). Together Ammu and Velutha "sprung from [Vellya Paapen] and [Mammachi's] loins.... had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen" (256), not only in the world of fiction, but in the "Indian world." India, ostensibly the largest democracy in the world, wanted to retain its own house secrets, to keep the issue of the Untouchables a private matter. *The God of Small Things* explodes the boundaries between the public and the personal.

The Paravan constitute a group of so-called lower class Hindus; they are more often known as "Dalit" (literally, "those trampled upon"). It is only in recent times that India has offered them parliamentary representation, and only recently that schools have been started for their children. Despite such reforms they continue to comprise a marginalized community, most of them scraping a living by doing menial work. Their attendance at the Conference against Racism held in South Africa in 2003 created a great deal of controversy, particularly in the upper echelons of India's rigidly segregated, caste-based society. Many Indians, including the Prime Minister, felt that the Dalit should not be present at the conference, since their caste issue was not a race issue. But the more the government and its media supporters argued, the

more evident it became that they were living in a house shrouded in secrecy, and feared exposure of the ongoing discrimination against the Dalit.

Ironically, perhaps, the cause of the Dalit was done no favours by Mahatma Gandhi, who referred to them as Harijans (ie: *Children* of God), and thereby infantilized them. Gandhi emphasised the role of fate and karma (or karmic retribution) in their lives. In other words, if you were born Dalit, Gandhi advocated that you simply accept your lot. He also maintained that they should do their menial jobs with “love.” Again, if as a Dalit you were born to clean the toilets of the upper castes of society, then you should undertake your task with humility and love. The fatalism and predestinarianism of this view do not allow for the social structure to be challenged. Present-day Indian society protects its ancient boundaries and edges.

In *The God of Small Things* we are reminded that both Mammachi and Vellya Paapen still remember the old days when in the face of Touchables, the Untouchables had to prostrate themselves and crawl backwards, simultaneously wiping away their footprints so that the Touchables would not have to besmirch themselves by walking on Untouchable footprints. Even the shadow of the Untouchable was to be kept from falling on the Touchable. The novel’s exploration of the nature of Untouchability in the ’60s and then again in the ’90s (its setting shifts between 1969 and 1992), shows that the various characters are in their own ways collusive with the system. Only the young children Estha and Rahel, the eight-year-old twins, do not discriminate against Velutha, but love him unconditionally. To them he has given the gifts he is able to give, of joy and laughter and acknowledgement. When Ammu, in a single moment, notices these gifts, she realizes that there are gifts she could give him too. When their eyes meet

[c]enturies telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong footed, caught off-guard.... History's fiends returned to claim them. To rewrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. Ammu walked up the verandah.... Shaking. (177)

The transgression between Velutha and Ammu is "repeated" by Rahel and Estha twenty-three years later, when they too break the Love Laws. Their incestuous transgression is not driven by love but by a hideous grief and loneliness, and the loss of the "small things" which has left Rahel with an emptiness so large that when she returns to Ayemenem eight years later she is divorced and (according to Comrade Pillai) probably barren too. Estha, who "sentenced" Velutha to death and a pauper's grave, has silenced himself.

Slowly over the years Estha withdrew himself from the world. He grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquillizer on his past... his silence was hidden away, entombed somewhere deep.... (12)

Rahel's return, after an eight year absence from Ayemenem, causes social rupture. Her return is motivated by Baby Kochamma's letter informing her that Estha, who had been returned to his father after Sophie Mol's death, has now been re-retained to the Ayemenem house. During her time away she has married Larry McCaslin, lost a baby and been "die-vorced," because she carries only emptiness in her eyes, an emptiness that refuses to leave. She arrives home when it is "raining... [s]lanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire" (1), and returns to a house that is locked to the outside world, its secrets festering within.

[the house was] streaked with moss [and had] grown soft and bulged...with dampness that had seeped up from the ground... cupboard and books [were] swollen from the monsoon while locked windows burst open. (1)

So even while Baby Kochamma *locks* doors, windows, medicine cabinets and her peeling, flaking fridge (which house her cream buns from Bestbakery), the time for the revelation of the house's secrets has finally come and it "bulges."

That Rahel will expose the "official" story (significantly "buried" by the police and Baby Kochamma its instigator), is suggested by the bulging locked doors and the "burst-open" windows. Since Estha "who was the keeper of accounts" no longer speaks, it is Rahel who will speak the "true" story; the story that lurks within History House, which has now become a tourist hotel catering for the "exotic experiences" of American and British tourists. Under the paint of the House, under twenty-three years of June rain, there lies "a small thing" (127). Rahel's return is akin to that of an archaeologist who will excavate the buried things, bringing to the surface the "unofficial" version of that fateful night when the impossible was made possible and the improbable made probable. It is a "small" thing, like the death of Sophie Mol, but it will not be forgotten:

It is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for much longer than the memory of the life it purloined.... The loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive.... It ushered Rahel through childhood (from school to school) into womanhood. (16)

What has been "purloined" is much more than just the life of Sophie Mol, or the memories of the times before her death, but a possible future too.

Upon Rahel's return, Estha, who had been silenced by his unspeakable experiences, can't hear himself because of the noise, which is "quiet in [his] head until Rahel came. But with her she had brought the sound of passing trains.... [t]he world, locked out for years, suddenly flooded in, and now Estha couldn't hear himself for the noise. Trains. Traffic. Music.... A dam burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling... loneliness... and despair..." (15). The repressed

resurfaces in a swirling torrent, and the noise of their reunion is almost too much to bear.

Rushdie and Roy

Several critics have drawn comparisons between *The God of Small Things* and *Midnight's Children*.¹ These comparisons are grounded in the idea that both texts explore History and its shortcomings, and in so doing suggest that the “plural islands” of histories, as Rice and Waugh (1989, 307) put it, are more important than History which continues (an increasingly) residual colonial projection. Furthermore, most critics have been quick to point out that both texts use twins and both are ultimately concerned with what *Midnight's Children* calls the “chutnification of history,” and the idea of pickling and pickled histories.

While *Midnight's Children* uses the twins Salim and Shiva, it is Salim's tale (that is, the male's story) that we read. As Salim so bravely tells us, he has problems putting the pieces together and Salim's body literally starts to fall apart:

Look at me, I'm tearing myself apart and can't even agree with myself... talking, arguing like a mad fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes, memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain; none of it makes sense anymore.
(Rushdie 422)

However, in *God of Small Things* it is Rahel, the female child-focalizer through whose eyes we see, for Estha has long since been silenced and as we are told, takes an embarrassing interest in household chores and buying vegetables at the market, work regarded as a woman's. Furthermore, it seems more appropriate that Rahel, who is

¹ See R.S. Pathak (2001), A.N. Dwivedi (2001) and P. Brians (2003), among others.

somehow the more astute and outspoken of the twins, tells the story of what happened and when things “changed in a day” (32).² Rahel takes it upon herself to correct the mistakes that Ammu made, the fatal mistakes for which Ammu did not hold herself accountable.

Interestingly, one may say that the text is being “gendered” through using the female focalizer/character. Rahel has come home to make sure that the “unofficial” version, deliberately suppressed by the Touchable police, the Ipe family and Comrade Pillai (professional omeleteer) is made known and given its rightful place in the annals of the “small people’s” histories. This “gendering” of the text may be seen as a counter-balance to Rushdie, but it is not, as Roy suggests, to be seen as a deliberate response to Rushdie. Roy (Brians 165) whimsically brought a halt to any further speculation about the relationship between the two texts when she suggested that it was she who actually had more claim to the pickle motif, since it was her uncle who owned a pickle factory!

Part of the reason why *The God of Small Things* has stirred controversy is its subtle way of interweaving the so-called “small things” with the so-called “big things.” By pitting the “small” against the “big” the novel calls into question how one defines the difference between “big” and “small.” Roy implicitly argues for the equal importance of ostensibly “small” history (Homi Bhabha [1994] refers to postcolonial narratives as “petit recits”), written not by those who offer “fact” but rather by those who tell the “stories” of the forgotten (typically, we may add in the form of “historiographic metafiction”). Roy interweaves the worlds of politics, secularism, personal histories of suffering, and “infinite joy” (339). She is relentless in pursuing the small: from the characters who are Untouchable and whose “footprints” are erased

² When Ammu is angry with Estha for being rude to the Orange-Ade man, Rahel demands to know why Ammu doesn’t marry him. Only the twins know the truth about the Orange-Ade man.

by the caste system, through the small world of children, which is a big, black hole for Rahel and Estha, to the tiny ants that bite the bottoms of the lovers during their love-making. The text pits these small stories against the large: notably the epic tales of the Mahabharata (a traditional Indian dance), and the caste system that continues to discriminate against millions; it also protests against the commodification of India and its artefacts as symbols of an uncontested History. Significantly, the novel points out, even the six-hour dance sequences of the traditional Mahabharata are now truncated into twenty-minute cameos to “accommodate” impatient tourists.

If *Midnight's Children* draws large, well-defined fauvist brush strokes, dealing with the traumatic consequences of Indian independence (granted at midnight on 15 August 1947), then it may be argued that *The God of Small Things* is intricately painted, painted on a “small” canvas with delicate brush strokes, its detail intense and provocative, but not sweeping. Yet ironically, the novel suggests, it is the “small,” intricately woven stories that should be re-absorbed into History to create a more balanced account of Indian nationalism and “liberation.” The notions of a homogeneous Indian nationalism and “liberation” itself are fraught. Perhaps one of the more important insights about personal histories that the novel offers is about the subtle ways in which ideology controls us. Disregard for the Love Laws fractures family relations, causing fissures and ruptures that have a long-lasting effect on the Ipe family. Pappachi’s moth sits on Rahel, and carries the despair of the caste system and the Love Laws, demanding that she be the teller of the stories, in which, almost unknown to themselves, they have all become inextricably involved.

It is not as though the Ipe family is unaware of its tenuous status. The house is kept in an iron grip under Pappachi, who regularly ill-treats his wife until he is stopped by his elder son Chacko. Pappachi no longer beats his wife after Chacko’s

intervention, but he also never speaks another word to her, nor touches her.

Significantly, Pappachi is an entomologist whose job it is to preserve and catalogue insects, thus adding to European scientific knowledge. As Ammu perceptively observes: “Pappachi was an incurable British CCP, which was short for *chhi chhi poach* and in Hindi meant shit-wiper” (51). To the British, however, Pappachi, and by extension his family, conform perfectly with Macauley’s “Minute on Education” (1857). Anglicized Indians like him would administer and maintain the “Englishness” of the empire (see Mullaney 33).

Pappachi’s job functions as a *mise-en-abyme* (an embedded text) for the colonial enterprise itself, whose mission it was to collect and catalogue the artefacts of the colonies. When the moth that he finds is rejected as a new species, but later renamed after his assistant, a man whom he disliked intensely, Pappachi is thoroughly disillusioned. Since then, the moth, with its furry legs, has gathered up the house in its fury. But it sits on Rahel’s shoulder for the longest period. The Ipes themselves (during the sixties) live what can only be described as an (Indian) colonial life – but without much direction. As Chacko, in one of his lucid moments, declares:

[t]hey are a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away.... History was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. “To understand history”, [he] says, “*we have to go inside and listen to what they’re saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells*”. (52)

Ironically, it is Chacko, trapped outside his own history both personally and politically, who suggests that histories can only be accessed if “[you] go inside and listen....smell the smells.” It is not long thereafter that he and the rest of the family indeed come to *know* “the smells” of history.

An important question raised by the notion of “dredging up the past” is what Benita Parry (1996, 86) calls “retrograde valency.” Does going back to the past “set the record straight” (32)? Perhaps rather, it should be argued from the outset, the record of history can not be set “straight.” The novel offers alternative histories, alternative versions of the masquerade of public history. Rushmie Bhatnager (quoted in Parry 1996, 86) argues that it is dangerous to mythologize the past because it “can unwittingly serve the reactionary forces of revivalism.” While this caution is well taken, I would argue that retrograde valency does not necessarily amount to an idealization or idolization of the past. *The God of Small Things*, on the contrary, shows how the History of the past has been deliberately constructed so as to present a façade that upholds the status quo. Without facing the consequences of the past the family will fall through its fissures, into a morass of nothingness. As Glissant (quoted in Parry 1996, 86) suggests, “history is not only absence for [the postcolonial subject]. It is vertigo. The time that was never ours we must now possess. We do not see it stretch into our past and calmly take us into tomorrow, but it explodes in us as a compact mass, pushing through a dimension of emptiness where we must with difficulty and pain put it all back together.”

The Ipe family cannot “put it all back together.” In the face of this vertigo they will sink like the mighty Plymouth, whose tail-fins were proud and whose roof bore the sign of “Paradise Pickles.” When Rahel returns after eight years, the car has sunk deeper and deeper into the ground, unused, with each monsoon. Now only the roosters use it, and the hens have acquired a space for their eggs.

With every Monsoon, the old car settled more firmly into the ground. Like an angular, arthritic hen settling stiffly on her batch of eggs. The Paradise Pickles & Preserves signboard rotted and fell inwards, like a collapsed crown. (295)

Apart from the humidity, the bursting windows, the sinking car and its rotting sign, Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria have sunk into the habit of watching soap operas on TV, with the mess of the once imperious house settling around them. Baby Kochamma is afraid of Rahel, because she (Baby Kochamma) has concocted a story that Velutha actually intended to rape Ammu and had kidnapped the children. She “tames” the truth in much the same way as she tames her garden, after returning from America with her diploma in ornamental gardening – building an “angry” garden all came to see, where she “waged war on the weather” (27) and made her life as ornamental as her garden. When she forces the children to go along with her story, Estha has to identify Velutha as the “criminal” and his betrayal becomes “unspeakable ...worst of all he carried inside him the memory of a young man with an old man’s mouth. The memory of a swollen face and a smashed, upside-down smile....[his betrayal] that couldn’t be worried loose” (32). There is no moment of expiation, and only the two “Com-pose” tablets Baby Kochamma gives the children, induce (an ineffective) amnesia.

In a move to ironize any notion of a teleological history, and rejecting amnesia, the novel begins at the “end,” with the funeral of Sophie Mol, who has a special child-sized coffin, satin-lined. The funeral marks not only the end of Sophie Mol, but also the end of the relationships hitherto obtaining among members of the family. Ammu will never be the same again, and the twins will suffer a fate perhaps worse than death. She is now openly referred to as a prostitute and has recurring nightmares of her hair being cut off, and “[f]or generations to come, *for ever* now, people would point at [the Ipes] at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They nudge and whisper. It was all finished now” (258). Sophie Mol’s funeral effaces another death: the death of Velutha at the hands of the Touchable

police. He is unceremoniously thrown into the “*themmady kuzhy* – the pauper’s pit – where the police routinely dump their dead” (321). Sophie’s death, Sophie who was much loved from the beginning, obscures the death of Velutha (who was not, according to Mammachi, even supposed to be a Paravan), and makes its *absence* ever-present. After their fateful experience on that day the twins accept that death did not come for them: it was “Not death. Just the end of living” (321).

“The end of living” begins at the start of the narrative, which immediately calls into question linearity and the idea of a fully recoverable History. The narrative is made up of what happened before and after the day of Sophie Mol’s death, and this sustained use of prolepsis and analepsis creates a complicated sense of time – perhaps even serving to negate it in a kind of achronism. Memory’s events are not linear, and its after-effects do not take account of linearity. Memories of events in 1969 and their traumatic after-effects swirl around in the twins’ heads. For Estha the swirling of memories is exacerbated by his molestation at the hands of the Orange-Ade man, his betrayal of Velutha, his return to his father and then the second return to the Ayemenem household. In his head he carries the smell of blood and steel. Significantly, when he boards the Madras train, his last words to his mother are “Ammu, feeling vomity” (396). It is a repetition of the way he felt when he was molested by the Orange-Ade man. When the Madras train pulls out of the station “[o]n the station-platform Rahel doubled up and screamed and screamed.” For a long time after this cruel parting, twenty-three years, the inky tranquillizer of forgetting fills Estha’s head, but when Rahel returns he hears “[t]rains, [t]raffic, [m]usic” (15). Memories are as it were dug up from History House, and from under the sinking car, and from the pit at the back of the mind.

In attesting to the traumas, erasures and discontinuities that mark the histories of the marginalized, Edoard Glissant (quoted in Parry 1996, 86) maintains that “[the] postcolonial construction of the past... far from being a desire to discover a remote paternity, is an *imaginative reworking* of the process of métissage or an infinite wandering across cultures.” The past cannot be fully recovered, the fragments cannot be fitted together again. All that can be done is a kind of “imaginative reworking” capable of appeasing the sense of loss and assuaging the emptiness. Therapeutically, this involves going back to the past, exploring versions of what could have happened, deciding where responsibility lies, and then filling the “absence” with a certain kind of knowledge. The discovery or construction of hitherto absent histories, volatile as these histories may be, does not need to be, in fact should not be, linked to a search for a complete identity. For, as Glissant maintains, identity is not to be equated solely with a return to one’s roots. The archive itself may be seen as tainted, and there can be no final sense of “roots” in the postcolonial, diasporic world.

In what may be termed a mise-en-abyme of how history is constructed, Baby Kochamma is very instructive. As a young girl she attempts to “seduce” Father Mulligan; when this fails she enters a convent, but soon leaves to take up a degree in ornamental gardening in Rochester. Her love for Father Mulligan is unrequited, yet she continues to keep diaries whose pages are blank except for the inscription “I love you” (297). When she hears that he has joined Vaishnavas she is horrified, and when news reaches her of his death she takes it upon herself to “re-clothe his history.” In doing so she *constructs* a history she finds more suitable to *her*.

Once he was dead, [she] stripped Father Mulligan of his ridiculous saffron robes and reclothed him.... She snatched away his begging bowl, pedicured his horny Hindu soles, and gave him back his comfortable sandals. She reconverted him.... (298)

And in the same way that she “re-clothes” Father Mulligan, Baby Kochamma re-clothes what happened in History House, in order to keep the sanctity of the Ipe name. But she overlooks the rupture to which all constructions of History can fall prey. But not everyone is comfortable with a malleable history that can be conveniently (re)written to suit an individual’s purposes. This is why Baby Kochamma is afraid of Rahel, whose re-entry into the old house bulging at the windows will lead to her “set[ting] the record straight” (32).

And it is for this reason that Rahel sees Baby Kochamma as having a “double face” (21) when she first enters the house. She is “living her life in reverse” (32), watching soap operas on TV, overdoing her makeup in her attempt to emulate her heroines, and painting her forehead by mistake, giving the impression of a double chin. She dons all her sister-in-law’s jewellery and sits glinting across the table from Rahel: “The silence sat between grand niece and baby grand aunt like a third person. A stranger. Swollen. Noxious. Baby Kochamma reminded herself to keep her bedroom door locked at night” (21). Her actions show her to be two-faced, the hypocrite who salvages the family name so that she can keep the furniture after everyone is dead, the one who bends the past in her own interest. Not long after Rahel’s return the lost histories are already becoming embodied “like a third person” (21). What becomes evident is that what was construed as a “small thing” is actually a “big thing.”

While the text does not show an overt conflict between the colonizer(s) and colonized, and while its focus is the bedevilled caste-system of India, fifty years after the carving up of the map to effect Partition, the conflict between the peoples of India remains one engendered by colonialism. The “violation” of the carving remains, to

this day, evident in the conflict surrounding the ownership of Kashmir, once the “jewel” of India. Warring factions continue to rip the “jewel” apart, just as the “wars” within families, between castes and within the nation as a whole, can be attributed, at least in part, to the lasting effects of colonial control and the acculturation which it engendered. As the narrator informs us, the Love Laws which so closely guard the lives of the characters began many years ago. “Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a (his)story” (33).

Perhaps, then, Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel were not the worst transgressors. The transgression, the text implies, began a long time ago. The twins, Ammu and Velutha, become the “messengers” of what began a long time ago.

Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a tea-bag. ...

That it really began when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.

And how much. (33)

However, the text does *not* write back to the empire, as it were – it does not participate in a relationship in which the Indian (always) reacts to the colonizer. It breaks down the barriers between inside and outside, traditional and modern, colonizer and colonized. To hold on to such barriers would be to perpetuate what Appiah refers to as a “nativist topology” where “...the west initiates and the native imitates” (qtd. in Parry 1996, 89).

In this sense *The God of Small Things* may be described as a “counter-narrative;” that is, a narrative that runs counter to the prevalent ideology of the time. Counter-narratives are powerful in the sense that they allow hitherto “unknown”

stories to surface. This allows for other versions of the dominant narratives in circulation to be explored. Through counter-narratives the genre of fiction has opened up an entire field of possibilities in which the boundaries of hitherto hermetically sealed categories have been rendered porous and questionable, particularly (as argued in the introduction to this thesis) the boundary between history and fiction.

By juxtaposing the “official” and “unofficial” versions of what happened on that fateful day, *The God of Small Things* is clear about who has been betrayed by the official story. Of course the media are quick to adopt the official version

It has been in the papers. The news of Sophie Mol’s death, [and] the police “Encounter” with a Paravan charged with kidnapping and murder. Of the subsequent Communist Party siege of Paradise Pickles & Preserves, led by Ayemenem’s own Crusader for Justice and Spokesman of the Oppressed. Comrade K.N.M. Pillai claimed that the Management had implicated the Paravan in a false police case because he was an active member of the Communist Party. That they wanted to eliminate him for indulging in “Lawful Union Activities”. (303)

Of course nothing was said about the betrayal of Velutha by Comrade Pillai. When Velutha feels cornered by the betrayal of his father, he seeks out Pillai’s assistance but is rebuffed: “Comrade”, says Pillai, “you should know that the Party was not constituted to support workers’ *indiscipline* in their private lives” (287, italics mine).

Although Pillai is the leader of the Marxist group in that region he is still very aware of the fact that Velutha is an Untouchable: so much for the casteless and classless society the Communist Party espouse! Even before the “terror” begins, Pillai says to Chacko that it would be best to get rid of Velutha as “these caste issues are very deep-rooted,” and asserts that his wife “will never allow Paravans and all that into her house. Never. Even *I* cannot persuade her” (278). When the “terror” occurs, Comrade Pillai, chief omeletteer, does what is expected of him – he accepts the neatly

tied present thrown into his lap. And as the narrator caustically suggests: “To be fair to Comrade Pillai, he did not plan the course of events that followed. He merely slipped his ready fingers into History’s waiting glove. It was not entirely his fault that he lived in a society where a man’s death could be more profitable than his life had ever been” (281).

The “unofficial story” is, of course, suppressed. No-one is interested in how Estha is silenced, how Rahel is emptied of emotion or that Ammu, filled with cortisone, dies alone in Bharat Lodge. After the terror she is castigated by society and is forced into its margins. She moves from one menial job to another, losing her sense of time, so that even when Rahel is a teenager, she buys her toys more suitable to a seven year old. When Ammu’s body is fed into the incinerator

The heat lunged out at them like a famished beast. Then Rahel’s Ammu was fed to it. Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice. The way she used Kipling to love her children before putting them to bed: “*We be of one blood, ye and I*”. (163)

At the end Ammu is of “no blood,” reduced to a mere piece of paper: “Receipt No Q498673”. Mammachi advises Rahel that she too should write to Estha about Ammu’s death. But Rahel does not write for “[t]here are things you can’t write about – like writing letters to a part of yourself” (164). With Ammu’s death the twins are also robbed of their “Locusts Stand I” (*locus standi*), and they feel betrayed. “Et tu Ammu?” (161) asks Rahel.

Ammu and Velutha have thirteen days of “true love,” of happiness tinged with fear. Their tryst harks back to one of literature’s finest examples of Magic Realism. In Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), Sebastian St Amour advises his lover to wear a rose in her hair for him. When Dr Juvenal Urbino visits her to inform

her of Amour's death, she is already wearing the rose, signifying her prior knowledge of the death. In *The God of Small Things* "[V]elutha folded his fear into a perfect rose. He held it out in the palm of his hand. Ammu took it from him and put it into her hair" (338). And when she leaves him on the night of Sophie Mol's arrival, "She is wearing a rose in her hair" (340). So much betrayal and no one to be held responsible! As Pillai puts it, describing the consequences of his betrayal of Velutha: "[These are but the] Inevitable Consequences of Necessary Politics" (14).

And yet it may be argued that that which he terms "inevitable" need not have been so. As the narrator informs us earlier in the text: "It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag" (33). The apparent acceptance by Christianity of the Paravans is crucial in the text. When the Christian missionaries realized the outcast status of the Paravans, they gave them "a little food and money" (74) and converted them to Christianity. Among them was Velutha's father Kelan. They were known as the "Rice Christians" as a result, but they soon realized that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire because the British created separate churches for them, with separate services and even offered them their own pariah Bishop! Their conversion had merely entrenched their subaltern status. As Christians they were casteless: "It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints *without* a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to have footprints at all" (74).

To Velutha's father, it is the Ipes who have rescued the family from destruction. And it is because Vellya Paapen feels such obligation towards the Ipes that he can betray his own son to Mammachi. He is a man of mortgaged body parts – mortgaged to the Ipes. In fact, Mammachi had paid for Velya Pappen's glass eye after he had lost his own eye working on their estate. Held in bondage, as it were, by

this “magnanimous gesture,” he breaks the spell only on the day of his betrayal of Velutha – when he hands back his eye to Mammachi, who in her literal and figurative blindness, casts it away when she realizes she has been holding Paravan slime in her hands. And as it rolls away, it “sees” everything. Mammachi cannot stop washing her hands, will not listen anymore to what the “messenger” has brought her, and is filled with anger at the thought of her daughter coupling with a “black coolie.” She spits at the now weeping and grovelling Velya Paapen, and leaves him grovelling as tumultuous rain continues to fall (256).

Twenty-three years later when Rahel returns and Estha’s head roars with the sounds of the past, the past repeats itself. After the twins realize their (and Ammu’s) complicity in Velutha’s death, the Love Laws crumble again. For no-one can explain what happens when the stories are re-told and endless cyclical patterns of deferral are put into play. In Rahel, Estha sees traces of Ammu; Rahel has “[t]heir beautiful mother’s mouth” (327). After all that time, “Rahel, dark woman... turns to Estha in the dark... [d]rew him down beside her,” and while the twenty-three years of separation had rendered them strangers, “they had known each other before Life began” (327). What they share that night through their “love-making” is not happiness but a hideous grief that has held them captive to a history gone wrong. The “incident” between the twins is quiet, almost surreptitious, and accompanied through the repetitive refrain “It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The air” (299, 328, 338) – a phrase that the text repeats, just as history is repeating itself. There was nothing to say, even less to see:

Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-coloured shoulder had a semi-circle of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close.... Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (328)

This recalls Ammu's and Velutha's lovemaking. After the first night Ammu and Velutha break the love laws, we are told that while Velutha gathers Ammu into "the cave of his body" a breeze from the river cools their bodies and "it was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The air. But what was there to say?" (338). In chronological time, however, the incident between Ammu and Velutha (re-ordered significantly as the final chapter) – has preceded the breaking of the Love Laws by Rahel and Estha. The novel therefore records its own self-reflexive sense of deferral – an inherent admission that the complete story can never be told. Who will be left to tell of the shards that remain after the twins have (unwittingly?) broken the Love Laws?

In a sense, then, we have to question the nature of a therapeutic healing that results as a consequence of re-telling the past. Perhaps such a healing cannot itself be complete. There is a cyclical nature to rupture, suture and healing. Suturing a wound helps, but does not finally eradicate the scars. Similarly, the past comes back to the twins after twenty-three years. Will this "hideous act" result in any kind of therapeutic healing? Perhaps. The most significant thing about re-telling the past is that we will always retell it from the perspective of the present. The healing lies in exposing the past, so that it cannot hold us captive, and in preventing it from inflicting emotional paralysis. Herein lies the possibility of reshaping our present, and perhaps our future.

Globalization and Commodification

There is no doubt that we live in an era of globalization. While our world views may have broadened because of our access to technology, they have simultaneously

shrunk. We live in a global village where difference is elided: globalization seems to work on the premise that all places can be “one place” by sharing primary characteristics. The technologically bound capitalist marketplace assumes all cultures have similar needs and desires, and offers a homogenous response to these. This affects local communities both politically and economically, forcing them to conform to the marketplace economies still controlled to a considerable degree by Western, first-world nations. Roy has been extremely vociferous in her political writings and interviews regarding globalization. To her globalization is a way of extending colonialism. One of the pertinent questions she asks is: “Is globalization about the eradication of world poverty or is it a mutant variety of colonialism, remote controlled and digitally operated?” (quoted in Mullaney 2002, 14).

Part of the strategy of global capitalism is to commodify. Everything can be turned into a commodity, even religion, and anything can be repackaged to make a profit. This is apparent in the example of the Kathakali dance sequences, which are collapsed from six-hour-long ceremonies to twenty-minute cameos, for tourists who have short attention spans and cannot begin to understand even the truncated versions of the Kathakali, or the sacrilege that such truncations commit.

Roy has elsewhere argued that the only defence available to communities against the intrusion of “man-made structures” and globalization is a sustained “politics of mobilization” (quoted in Mullaney 2002, 17). This and other political views feed into *The God of Small Things* in several ways. A primary example is the representation of the Naxalites, the left-wing group of the Marxists, of which Velutha is a card-carrying member. The text is set during the time of Naxalite marches and turbulent political upheaval, a period which Mullaney (2002, 26) describes as an “in-between time” because it falls between the Partition of 1947, with its attendant

bloodbath, and the Emergency of the 1970s, in which Indira Gandhi invoked the Sterilization Act of 1974. The Naxalite communist rebellion was aimed at the caste-system which continued to dominate India, even after Partition. Roy suggests that to tell the stories of the marginalized after Independence will be to call into question yet other “official” histories, this time the History written by a new government. No History can be an objective, conclusive narrative, and all are, in some sense, politically tainted and ideologically bound.

The Naxalites surround the sky-blue Plymouth when the Ipe family is on their way to Cochin to watch “The Sound of Music.” And it is in a sense from this image of conflict between caste, class and the need for progressive change that the novel springs. The Ipes, the landed feudal lords, are surrounded by Naxalites demanding the abolition of the caste system and higher wages, so that suddenly, shining in the sun and in the midst of thousands of marchers, “the sky-blue Plymouth looked absurdly opulent” (65).

This division between the family and the marchers is aggravated when Baby Kochamma is almost pulled out of the car, asked to hold the Communist flag and say “Inquilab Zindabad” (“long live the revolution,” 80). After this, Baby Kochamma’s anger at her humiliation is focussed on Velutha. “In her mind he grew to represent the march... and all the men who laughed at her. She began to hate him” (82). Her vengefulness towards Ammu and Velutha is instigated in this moment of humiliation, and this is what encourages her to lie to Inspector Thomas Mathews. It is appropriately ironic, therefore, that on the day of her telling the inspector, and on the day of Estha’s unwilling condemnation of Velutha, Baby Kochamma is unable to flush the inspector’s toilet and must endure the further embarrassment of her stool being made public. She is “embarrassed that the inspector would see the colour and

consistency of her stool” (319), so that her true nature as a “stool” of the colonial authorities is unintentionally revealed.

Her derangement later is indicative of a political fear as much as it is personal. She gives up her ornamental garden in favour of the worlds of *Santa Barbara* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, DSTV soap-operas. She is frightened by BBC reports of famine and wars, worries about the growing number of poor and dispossessed people and “viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture” (28), inherited by outwitting the other members of the family. DSTV is of course a salient indicator of the extent of globalization. Its influence is felt in the terror that Baby Kochamma feels in response to everything about her. She locks up everything, just as she locks up the secrets of the house, the house where everyone is held hostage to the past, and to death in one form or another. Their loss, yearning and pain is compared to “Sophie Mol [who] became a Memory [which] grew robust and alive. Like a fruit in season. Every season” (267); and just as Sophie Mol came (in the era of globalization) from far away to be drowned, so the Plymouth, symbol of the settlement of the new world and global capital, sinks lower and lower into the ground with each passing season, taking with it the dead sparrow caught inside.

The commodification of India is obvious also in the new-look History House, now brightly painted and reworked into a tourist destination. From here the Kathakali dancers perform their shortened “blasphemous” performances (all men, though some perform female roles), before going home to beg their gods’ forgiveness for defiling their epics, or – as is the case with the man who plays a woman so often that he begins to develop breasts – to beat their wives. The renovated History House (like a renovated History) has been made the centrepiece of the surrounding buildings. In other words, the colonial bungalow had become the centrepiece, surrounded by

ancestral homes that the hotel chain had bought from families and had “*transplanted* into the Heart of Darkness” (126, italics mine). The hotel, Heritage Hotel as it is called, has produced “toy histories for rich tourists to play in” (126). Whatever “heritage” the hotel had brought was a veneer and literally created by *transplanting* houses. In addition to this, the hotel further exploits the heritage of the people in Kerala a step further by labelling couches, umbrellas and dowry boxes with placards which read “Traditional Kerala Umbrella” and “Traditional Kerala Dowry Box” (126). No doubt, such traditional artefacts are manufactured for sale to tourists.

But in order for the tourists not to be exposed to the slums and the smell of poverty and excrement, they are ferried to the hotel “across backwaters, straight from Cochin.” The speedboats exacerbate the existing pollution by leaving in their wake “rainbow trails of gasoline.” More significantly, perhaps, it is here that “History and literature [are] enlisted by commerce. Kurtz and Karl Marx joining palms to greet rich guests as they stepped off the boats” (126). That the “smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a warm hat” (125) seems to be overlooked by the proprietors of the hotel. They continue to advertise it as “God’s Own Country” in their brochures for, as businessmen, they understand that foul smelliness can always be covered over by “fresh tandoori pomfret and crêpe suzette” (125). The fresh smells of cooking not only overlay the smell of shit, but also cover the trauma underlying the painted veneer of History House. And what is it that is overlain? A small thing, was it not? After all, the life of a Paravan can never (“not ever”, as Estha would say) be compared to the creation of “God’s own Paradise.”

The same forms of commodification can be seen to operate in the physical nature of the Kathakali dances, where the body of the dancer conveys the meaning of his soul, “planed and polished and pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of

storytelling” (230). But just as the tourists now bare their bodies on the beach, and “courting couples [rub] suntan oil on each other [w]hile fathers [play] sublimated sexual games with their nubile teenage daughters” (127), so the bodies of the Kathakali dancers have been commandeered by the changes in the traditional dance. The dance’s truncation to twenty-minute cameos means that the soul has been taken out of the body of the dance. For the traditional dance form itself, as Mullaney (2002, 58) points out, is an intricate series of carefully choreographed dance patters that enact epic stories through the interplay of the character’s “speaking” with (delicate) hand movements (*mudras*) and the use of facial and eye movements to express emotional states (*bhasu*). The intricacy of the interplay between *mudras* and *bhasu* is lost on the tourists, as just another sequence of the exotic. The cultural meaning of the body is “sold” in the globalized exoticism of the tourist industry, and the “soul” of the culture is sold along with it, just as the traditional link between body and soul is “sold” in the dance’s new form.

It is generally acknowledged by Hindus that the Mahabharata dance is more than the stories it tells. It is concerned, more particularly, with the “unravelling” of the Four Goals of Life: Kama (pleasure); Artha (wealth); Dharma (duty); and Moksha (liberation). The truncation of the sequence for popular consumption means that the final stage may not be arrived at, and without “liberation” – which is liberation of body and soul – there is no completion of the traditional religious journey. This abbreviation therefore takes on more sinister forms in ordinary life in the new India, such as the arrest of bodies and souls by the Touchable Police in the name of caste preservation. Such is the “killing” of Liberation, both in the embedded texts of the dance and in the narrative of *The God of Small Things* itself, which must itself then be seen as an attempt to rewrite the Mahabharata as a form of protest against the

“killing” of the sequence of Life Goals that it engenders. To truncate the (his)stories of the traditional culture is, thus, to truncate the History of the people themselves, their journey from past to present, and the relationship between their bodies and souls. But the consequences of such truncation are also evident in the abandonment of investigating fully the more subtle questions raised by the Mahabharata, like: what are the consequences of Kama (pleasure)?; who is entitled to Kama?; what is the true nature of Artha (wealth)?; what is Dhama (duty)?; does it include the parental decision to betray a child, and does it include the “betrayal” of one part of the nation by another? To remove from a society its traditional cultural practices is also to remove from it a vitally important means of dealing with the past and with its own inner conflicts.

And finally, Moksha (liberation) is certainly difficult to attain, as it is linked more to soul than body, but it is not out of place to ask about when the text itself can offer a sense of Moksha, or whether it is limited to questions about its nature. Not coincidentally, the novel ends on the word “Naaley” (Tomorrow) (340), suggesting the possibility of a future liberation. But there is no tomorrow for Ammu and Velutha. As readers we have to ask if there will be Moksha for two lovers seeking Kama, Artha and Dharma together, or will the issue of caste always be a hurdle that stands in the path of Moksha?

Tourists have no interest in the questions and refrains that the Mahabharata offers. They are interested in the event only as a consumable cultural artefact, and there appears to be an implication that the consumerist world will eventually consume itself. Everything can be simulated. In Baudrillard’s term, taken from “Simulacra and Simulations” (1981), we live in a world of “simulacra,” in which the commodifier will pretend to have (in the commodity) what he/she does not have. “To simulate is to

feign to have what one hasn't" (quoted in Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 366). Lyotard's suggestion, in *The Post-Modern Condition* (1979), is that ours is truly a condition of high capitalism in which the metanarrative of History (that is, cultural hegemony) consists of "narratives of the legitimation of knowledge" (quoted in Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 357). The tourist in Roy's India, watching the dancers, imposes his/her own "legitimation of knowledge" on a cultural and historical form about which he/she knows little or nothing, and in so doing robs it of its identity and its liberty.

Another aspect of globalization is seen when Estha takes his daily walks after his re-return to Ayemenem:

Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils (13).

The influence of global capitalism extends to the migration of the inhabitants of Kerala, many of whom work abroad, and also to the money brought into Kerala, which changes the landscape. Sometimes Estha walks past the new "freshly baked, iced Gulf-money houses built by... [people] who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places" (13). These "freshly baked" houses stand beside the older houses of Kerala, where each old house has an epic history of its own. The "fiefdoms" of Kerala are mostly based on rubber plantations, unlike the Ipe's, which is based on Pappachi's (spiteful) entomology and Mammachi's Paradise Pickles. By the time Rahel returns, Paradise Pickles has been shut down by the Marxists and the remaining members of the Ipe family live on the modest means generated by the last erf of rubber plantation.

Globalization has widened the divide between rich and poor. The Untouchable School the Ipes started generations ago is now closed down, and instead

our attention is drawn to the nursery school that has been started for Touchable children. The ration-shop for the poor sells its staples, while trying to lure the poor with soft-porn magazines which “tempt[ed] honest ration buyers with glimpses of ripe, naked women lying in pools of fake blood” (13). Similarly, Comrade Pillai’s printing press – Lucky Press – which was once the hub of the Communist Party meetings and where lyrics of Party songs and pamphlets were printed, now lies idle, and “[t]he flag that fluttered on the roof [has] grown limp and old. The red [has] bled away” (13).

But globalization has allowed for many “crossings” across borders as is evident in the novel. Rahel leaves home for America, and returns. Baby Kochamma also leaves for America. Comrade Pillai’s own son, Lenin (now called Levin in order not to call undue attention to himself) has gone off to New Delhi. Going away, particularly to “Aymerica,” is regarded with admiration by many of the locals who have stayed behind in Ayemenem. Perhaps the most telling divide between those who have left and those who have stayed is made by the narrator when Sophie Mol and Margaret Kochamma are picked up at Cochin Airport. When the “foreign returnees” enter the lounge with their knowledge of better things and relative affluence, they look at the families who have come to meet them “[w]ith love and a lick of shame” (140). After exposure to cosmopolitan cultures abroad, they could not understand why “their families....were so ... so gawkish. *Look at the way they dressed! Surely they had more suitable airport wear! Why did Malayees have such awful teeth?*” (140, italics in original).

And, of course, the foreign returnees would soon comment on how “India was going to the dogs” – because to them the airport resembles a bus depot with bird droppings on the buildings and spit stains on the floors. And soon the small fissures

of their discontent would begin to show and grow large and deep, and the “Foreign Returnees would be trapped outside the History House, and have their dreams redreamed” (141). Perhaps, in this context, what Chacko says to the children on their way to Cochin is significant. The effects of globalization and commodification have caused the minds of both “fetchers from the airport” and “returnees” to have “been invaded by a war ... a war that [they had all] won and lost.... A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made [them] adore [their] conquerors and despise [themselves]....” Of these several crossings and re-crossings Chacko says:

“Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. No matter”. (53)

The crossings and re-crossings occur around the Meenachal River. In fact, the river, as portrayed in the text, is both a source of life and of death, “infinite” joy for Ammu and Velutha and the very reason for their “demise.” Vellya Paapen sees the boat bobbing on the waters, while the lovers, for fourteen nights, discover the joy of a casteless love.

During their childhood, the children’s memories of the Meenachal River are of a swift-flowing and dangerous body of water. They are warned to be very careful of it. The first third of the river is easy to navigate, and it is here that they have childhood memories of Chacko teaching them how to swim. They know that the second third is the really difficult part, where the current is swift and uncertain. The final third is shallow again, with brown, murky water, and overgrown with weeds. The twins, at seven, could swim *across* the river to the “Other side,” like seals, but

they were very aware of the strength of the Mighty Meenachal and they gave her due deference.

When Rahel returns (and when the story is narrated 23 years later), the Meenachal has become “no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side...” (124). Now its “teeth were drawn, its spirit spent” and while once it had the power to evoke fear and change the course of lives, now “[d]ownriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby” (124). Now there could be two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river.

Globalization, commodification and overpopulation have ensured that the Fisher People have lost their livelihood because the only fish the Meenachal produces are diseased, unfit for human consumption. The links with the outside world have quite literally caused an atrophying of both landscape and cultures, both of which have been “sold” to foreign tourists, or foreign conglomerates. When Rahel returns, the Meenachal “greeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (124). Whereas once the river had been a definitive feature of Ayemenem, and provided a livelihood for the Fisher People, now its sterility is “like an absurd corbelled monument that commemorated nothing” (125). It accommodates shanty “hutments” on its banks and the children defecate directly into the squelchy muddiness that once was a river, while “[u]pstream *clean* mothers washed clothes and pots in *unadulterated factory effluents*” (125, italics mine).

While the text may be seen to be preoccupied with memory, offering counter-narratives to pervading ideology, it does not evoke an Edenic sense of return (“paradise regained”), even once the “unofficial” version of its History has been “re-

told.” Roy does not allow for the closure that Morrison’s novel approaches, or any final restoration of social bonds torn asunder in the colonial experience. These bonds are still torn in the postcolonial era, and cannot be fully sutured. The colonial expectations of restoration in a future, postcolonial society have been dashed by commodification. This means that past memories of pain cannot be fully “buried” because no real social healing has taken place. Instead, these memories have arrested or stunted the emotional growth of those who hold them.

Rahel’s toy watch has 13h50 painted on it. In many ways, while the novel, like the expression of memory, winds and whirls its way through the reader’s life, it will always be 1963 and 13h50 in the lives of the characters. It is also significant that in *The God of Small Things* Rahel’s excavation of layers of memory does not cause therapeutic healing. Instead, the surreptitious, quiet incestuous scene between the twins is an expression of the hideous pain they have endured. The pain in their sexual congress “screams” at us, despite its quietness – a scream akin to the way in which Rahel screams and screams on the floor of the platform when Estha is returned to his father in Madras. The novel may therefore be said to “conclude” with an Estha and Rahel doorway, through which no one can walk. Theirs are not the “footprints” into which anyone may step, still present even after the “ghost” (like *Beloved*) has gone. Instead, these are the footprints made absent by the hands of those who have had to sweep their own past away. Their lovemaking is not an attempt to recapture it, but to mourn its loss. Perhaps they have sealed a pact – that, together with Ammu, they have loved a man (Velutha) to death. What more can be said? In the words of officialdom, it is “a small forgotten thing, nothing that the world would miss” (127). However, by making the absences loom so large, and by allowing the small stories become important because they are present in their very loss, the text suggests that the

God of “small things” is actually the God of “large things,” those things which ultimately cannot be buried and forgotten, and which make a society what it is, despite itself.

No one text can express India, its peoples or its sufferings. As Roy herself has been known to say: “There is no one language, there is no one culture” (Mullaney 2002, 51). Nayantara Sahgal echoes this sentiment when she says:

To start conceiving of India as the cultural monopoly of Hindus, with every other culture on Indian soil seen as an imposter and outsider would result in a shrunken, artificial self-image made up of selected racial memories. It would deal the death blow to my own cherished sense of “Indianness, whose very essence is its ethnic and religious diversity, and its cultural plurality.” (quoted in Mullaney 2002, 51)

While Baby Kochamma may call the twins “half-caste Hindu hybrids” and be appalled that Ammu could stand Velutha’s Paravan smell, she, like the rest of the purists in India, can be seen as being guilty of “loving” Velutha to death.

Lord Macauley, in his notorious British *Minute on Indian Education*, (delivered in parliament on 2nd Feb, 1835), remarked that a single shelf of books by English writers could readily substitute for all the Indian writing the subcontinent had produced. It is not necessary to make comparisons, but it is not unfair to say that some of the most delicate, whimsical, burdened and painful works of literature have been produced by Indian authors in English, ironically because of the lasting damage caused by the British, both during imperial rule and by the “nonchalant” way in which independence was granted. Significantly, Indians do not talk about Indian Independence. Instead, they talk instead of the “partition of India” – a country torn asunder from a distance. Roy’s “reworking” of the concerns that circulate in ideology show us a different, perhaps even more painful kind of “partition,” one that brings a family to its knees.

Significantly, on their journey to watch *The Sound of Music*, Chacko in his “Oxford voice” tells the twins that “though he hated to admit it they were all Anglophiles [p]ointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their own steps because their footprints had been swept away” (52). Suffice it to say that the novel’s multi-layered textuality and its exposure of secrets buried for approximately twenty-one years go a long way towards retracing the lost footprints that Chacko so eloquently talks about. More importantly, perhaps, the text seeks to restore the footprints of Velutha, the Paravan, who dared to have illicit sexual relations with the Touchable Syrian-Christian Ammu. In this retracing of lost footprints, Roy seeks to follow Nahai’s injunction that we “turn around,” so as to “rememory” (Morrison).

Conclusion

and in the salt chuckle of rocks
with their sea pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo
of History, really beginning.

(Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History")

Recovering Lost Footprints

As I intimated in the introduction to this study, my own personal history has influenced my decision to study contemporary texts which seek to uncover the "lost footprints" of History. While formal histories seek to tell their stories as literally and "objectively" as possible, these fictional re-tellings do not assume that any such "objectivity" is possible. They opt for showing the complexities of personal lives and their lost histories, each one a synecdoche of the larger life of the community or nation. In this way they give flesh to Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities."

The footprints of lost histories are to be found in *Beloved*, where the protagonist, after her exorcism from the community, can still be seen through her footsteps:

Down by the stream in the back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there. (275)

That her footprints are "familiar" and "fit" both child and adult invokes the shared history of a community; if that history is "taken out," a whole community disappears. We who are the descendents of "invisible" communities must put our feet in the prints of those who have gone before and, with inspiration from texts that assist the process of remembering, make sure they never disappear again.

In *Nervous Conditions* the footprints of the young Tambudzai lead to and fro between the rural homestead and the mission. They become fewer as she begins to feel the effects of “reincarnation” and acculturation in Baba’s house. The footsteps that take her to Sacred Heart cause her to lose compassion for both Ma’Shingayi and Nyasha who, unlike the younger Tambu would have us believe, is lost in her undiagnosed psychological pain. Later, much later, when the older narrating Tambu can put things into place, she realizes how her footprints were guided by blindness and the need to be a “good girl” – a female version of Baba, the “good munt.” Like the characters in *Beloved* who must learn to value their own past, Tambu learns finally to respect her own footprints, and the place where first they “fitted.”

Learning to read the footprints of both past and present, and in terms of both history and geography, is central to Peter Høeg’s *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*. Loss exists in the empty footprints left by Isaiah on the rooftop before his fall. But the story the footprints tell can be read only by one who has the eyes to read, and who understands the loss for what it is. Smilla Qaavigtoq Jaspersen, herself a hybrid, has the “gift” of reading snow, one for which her cultural hybridity is responsible. In this sense she can open up “spaces” are closed to those who are not hybrid like herself: Danes would not be able to read the snow to recreate the footprints’ cause, while the Inuit could not be in a position to grasp the political complexities of the events the footprints outline. Smilla’s borderline identity, despite its painful loneliness, opens new ways of seeing which ultimately makes the hybrid experience socially transformative. Smilla is able to tell that Isaiah’s footprints indicate he was forced to jump from the building’s roof. His body at the bottom of the White Cell Building is the body of the colonized dead, literally experimented upon by scientists like a lab animals. As the “othered” and colonized body, Isaiah becomes a kind of

doppelganger figure to Smilla, a mirror of her own alienated hybridity, whose “footprint” must be preserved and whose story must be told, for, like the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, his “words” will have a profound effect on the nation’s understanding of its role and identity. It is Isaiah’s “presence,” the presence of the lost and occluded past, which takes Smilla back to the Arctic – to uncover not only his story but also her own. She retraces both their steps by going back, and can only move forward by first going back. The steps are steps of loss and pain. Through Isaiah she must learn the state of quivitogg (refugee): to be neither here nor there, always to watch for the slipperiness of ice and to respect the snow which she identifies in the Greenlandic language long lost to her. Through the ice she can see Isaiah, past, present and future:

Towards the spot where the current has hollowed out the ice, so it’s as thin as a foetal membrane, and under it the sea is dark and salty like blood, and a face is pressing up against the icy membrane from below; it’s Isaiah’s face, the as yet unborn Isaiah. (40)

If Isaiah and his story are concealed under the ice, then the “ice” is effectively Tørk, the scientist, who was “ice” even as a boy. He uses science as an excuse for wielding power. He is “sick and twisted,” bent on making money in places where Western science holds sway. The devastation that the latter causes will ultimately lead to its own destruction: “The ice is hikulaq, a new ice, that has formed where the old ice has drifted out... [it is] *too thin to walk on*” (409, italics mine). Colonization creates thin ice, a veneer overlaying and hiding layer upon layer of the past. But ultimately, the text suggest, this ice will prove too thin to walk on. Nevertheless, the effects of its imposition will last far beyond its literal presence, like footprints not

easily wiped away. Of the possibility of closure to the loss and pain caused by the experiments on Isaiah and others, Smilla says:

Tell us, they'll come and say to me. So we may understand and close the case. They're wrong. It's only what you do not understand that you can come to a conclusion about. There will be no conclusion.
(410)

If Smilla's last statement sounds ambivalent then perhaps it is meant to be. Can there ever be a *conclusion* to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized?

The God of Small Things not only retraces the lost footprints of history, but also exposes the ways in which these footprints are wiped away so as to maintain the status quo within the community. When Ammu and Velutha decide to "merge" their footprints, breaking the "Love Laws," they pay the ultimate price. However, their "sin," as well as their grandeur, is to have made the "unthinkable" thinkable and the "unaccountable" accountable. For Velutha, who as an Untouchable must literally wipe his footprints out as he walks, and never cast his shadow on a Touchable, chooses to place his mark on the community so indelibly that it cannot act in any way other than to destroy him. However, nothing cements his footprint more than his death, which carries its own prints into the lives of those left behind, transforming them forever. Not unlike *Beloved*, the "footprints" Velutha leaves make the small family of Ipes more sensitive to their own inner conflicts and the class conflicts dominating their society. Chacko sees the society as a group of people on their way backwards: "pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps *because their footprints had been swept away*" (52, italics mine). Velutha's shadow stretches across the history the novel writes, and far beyond.

The shadow, and the lost footprints, come back to haunt Rahel a generation after the events, demanding “accountability” – and an “account” of what happened. The account given in the novel shows that the meaning of events lies not in their chronological unfolding, but in “rememory” of the kind Morrison brings to bear. The repetition of past events, their rememory, like Rahel and Estha breaking the “Love Laws” twenty-three years after their mother did, elides events and undermines temporal logic. Instead of a literalized, chronological account of what happened, the text offers a deeply metaphorical account, less of the actual events than of their effects on individual lives. In doing so it even creates its own words (for unspeakable events), and inserts fractured, subjective time-frames to show how “truth” cannot be contained in linear structures. It transforms the English language to suit its own ends, splicing sentences, using punctuation in a seemingly ad hoc manner, with upper-case letters appearing apparently randomly. The result is a lyricism seldom found in modern literature, but one which is its own “footprint” – showing the lyricism of the lives and loves lost under the stark literalism of official History.

Significantly, Chacko says to the seven year-old twins when they are on the way to see *The Sound of Music*, where Estha will be sexually molested by the “Orange-ade man”:

To understand history ... we have to go inside and listen to what they're saying [the ancestors whispering inside]. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells. (52)

It is the inability to go into History house, or to be represented by historiography “proportionately” that activates in the “other” (in this instance Indian society after Partition) the desire to seek alternate routes to histories to which they can lay claim.

Chacko says to the twins: “all their dreams have been doctored... [and their] lives [were] never important enough to matter” (53). But the novel seeks to re-member those dreams and by detailing their “doctoring,” invests those lives with importance.

In *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, the footprints traced take us from Teheran, to Istanbul, to America, and from the old matriarch who walked naked through the synagogue to the younger generation removed to America who must find their own power to (metaphorically) “walk naked,” by admitting to others and themselves their own losses. The “footprints” left by the great-great grandmother are an avowal of the value of women in a patriarchal society, and of the value of tradition in the healing of trauma. When all hope is lost and a character suffers from “degh” (Farsi for death through sorrow), then only the practice of ancient, maternal tradition can prevail.

Faith rescues those suffering the maladies of cultural, personal and social marginalisation. And telling the stories which have been kept hidden becomes a means of ridding the self of the (literal, in Roxanna’s case) weight of the past. Such telling enables the women to move beyond planting footprints to flying – literally and metaphorically – away into the night, repeating an earlier flight, but this time with very different consequences. Lili can discover her mother again, while her father, Sohrab the Sinner, still sits in a single room in the House on the Avenue of Faith, weeping for the woman who left him. The footprints of history then become a dance between mother and daughter, who now have the option to share a common history. The dance that uncovers the footprints may be seen as a “celebration,” a carnivalesque moment that rewrites the History of the past by replacing it with the “small” histories of the lives of “small” people. No longer is History carried as a burden. Instead, histories can be celebrated, even if they are subversive of the status quo, and when the

“dance” stops, the subversion it has brought into being will in some way have transformed the status quo.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez (quoted in Hesse 2002, 160) observes that: “What matters in life is not what happens to you, but how you remember it.” The corollary of this is, of course, that what you remember most clearly is what has had the most impact on you over the course of a lifetime. The footprints which remain most deeply imprinted in the mind are those which have resulted in the most profound changes in any life. Memories can be liberating rather than confining, if used creatively, as is so brilliantly instanced by the texts examined in this study. Novels such as these bring to contemporary fiction a “replenishment” of the “ethical turn,” as John Barth put it in his essay on the literature of exhaustion and the literature of replenishment (quoted in Marx 1995). Barth’s “replenishment” includes a return to the ethical, an idea similar to what Paul Ricoeur calls “just memory” (quoted in Hesse 2002, 165). This renewal of the ethical can only come about, however, if the “small stories” of the marginalized communities of the world are heard and taken seriously.

Postcolonial perspectives have substantially revised the idea of the West. Identities are no longer either “native” or “metropolitan.” Postcolonial life has, as Hesse (161) puts it, “recast the relationships between places, people, identities, and discourses in new and discontinuous ways, always bearing the imprint of an unsettling and unsettled multiculturalism.” This multiculturalism flags the development of a more inclusive “ethical turn” in culture and literature.

This “turn” is particularly relevant in the recovery of histories, especially women’s histories. The immense reconfiguration of cultural relationships that has emerged from postcolonial culture, and via postcolonial narratives, has brought with it new ways of viewing both the writing of fiction and the writing of history. Marquez’s

injunction about the importance of an event lying not so much in the event itself but in *how* it is remembered, clears the way for the birth of those stories which have not been excavated because the “how,” as much as the “what,” has always been dictated by the dominant culture. To show how contemporary writers are reconfiguring that “how” and recuperating that “what” from the shadow of History has been the project of this thesis.

One of the lasting images (for me) of the importance of excavating buried histories and then writing them comes from a text closely related to this thesis, but not discussed directly. In Yvonne Vera’s “Writing Near the Bone” (2003), as in *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, the retelling of lost histories becomes inscribed, not only in footprints, but literally on the body as well. Vera maintains that her body became the only accessible surface for her to write upon. It is the writing that “freed [her] and made [her] forget the missing laughter of her mother” (2003, 490). More importantly, when she uses a small piece of dry bark to write with, it leaves little dots of blood later “embedded” into the surface of her body. This form of inscription ensures that the story is hers and “such words could not depart or be forgotten” (2003, 491). Similarly, Lili, despite the nun’s anger, continues to write the story on her body:

Sister Ana Rose always punished me when I drew on myself Yet I kept drawing on myself, driving the pen even harder onto my skin, trying to create a shape, a figure that would make me real, make me visible To my father and Roxanna. (227)

Both examples of the literal inscription of history upon the body function allegorically in their respective texts, and stand testament to the ways in which *petit recits* will always find a way to be written. The trauma and memory they evoke, and the ambivalence they occasion, are painfully articulated by Latif in Gurnah’s *By the*

Sea (2001, 86): “When I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood. It’s a dour place, the land of memory, a dim gutted warehouse with rotting planks and rusted ladders where you sometimes spend time rifling through abandoned goods.”

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