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Transforming Limits: Home, Literary Activism and Engagement in South Asian Literature

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Abstract

This research project considers activism, in various fields, as a significant and recurring preoccupation of South Asian literary fiction and non-fiction predominantly in the twentieth century, with some notable extensions into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Relatedly, it considers the centrality of ‘home’ in cultural, social and political thought in twentieth-century South Asia, demonstrating how the dual issues of home and literary activism are made interdependent. In doing so, the thesis aims to chart how understandings of an activist engagement *and* an idea of home in the context of literature from South Asia may be reconfigured. In order to examine the links between the realm of the home, diversely politicised, contested, and idealised, and the specific entanglements of a literary activism stemming from this variously configured idea of home, this study analyses literary texts that span a number of generic and formal boundaries.

The analysis of the interrelation of activism, engagement and home begins with a case study of Cornelia Sorabji’s 1901 volume of short stories *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*. Highlighting the longer genealogy of South Asian literature that is actively engaged through the prism of the private realm, this case study also demonstrates the imposed limitations of such a literary mode. Section Two of the thesis continues the attention to issues of home, analysing the way in which home as a traditionally bounded ideal is extended to its ‘limits’ in recent literary treatments. Chapter Three analyses Kiran Desai’s novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in terms of its recurring attention to material culture; Chapter Four examines selected works by Arundhati Roy and Indra Sinha as interventions into an ecocritical domain; and, Chapter Five considers children’s literary texts by Mahasweta Devi and Salman Rushdie. Overall, this thesis argues that the narrative depiction of home, of its limits, and its potential for transformation, marks a key site for the understanding of literary activism and engagement in South Asian literature.

SECTION ONE: THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL
CONTEXTS

Introduction

This research project considers activism, in various fields, as a significant and recurring preoccupation of South Asian literary fiction and nonfiction predominantly in the twentieth century, with some notable extensions into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Specifically, the project analyses the *literary* elements of such expressions of activism and engagement, though it is also informed by an interdisciplinary interest in various forms of activism.¹ The centrality and variety of literary texts engaging with social, political and environmental issues within the contemporary South Asian literary scene, attest to the presence of a diverse but active engagement with such issues as a central shaping force. Relatedly, the thesis also considers the centrality of ‘home’ in cultural, social and political thought in twentieth-century South Asia, demonstrating how the dual issues of home and literary activism are made interdependent. The idea that the chosen literary texts, in their diversity, impose new demands and require new criteria from theoretical domains, rather than the more typically conceived reverse, is broached as a particular feature of literary activist texts which simultaneously hold notions of home at their core, emerging from South Asia. Broadly, the project aims to build on the extensive domain of postcolonial theory, extending these terms in various ways, and thus facilitating the development of a theoretical framework that demonstrates an interaction with the reconfigurations of the categories home and literary activism.

I.i Introduction to the poststructuralist/materialist debate in postcolonial studies

The debates which have primarily occupied the field of postcolonial studies, whose inception as a domain of theoretical study is often attributed to the publication of Edward Said’s work *Orientalism* in 1978, continue to annex the domain of study into the present moment. What may be described as the pinnacle of new and innovative work in this wide-ranging area of postcolonial studies in the late 1980s and into the mid

¹ This connection is particularly pronounced in recent notable instances of anthropological work; see for example Victoria Sanford & Asale Angel-Ajani, eds., *Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy, Activism* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2006), Charles R. Hale, ed., *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2008) and Sally Engle Merry, “Anthropology and Activism: Researching Human Rights across Porous Boundaries”, *PoLAR: political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 28.2 (2005) 240-257.

1990s also brought largely productive clashes between the varying perspectives involved in this burgeoning analysis. Edward Said's concern with the textual politics of orientalism and its encoding of power through knowledge, represented through the 'text' of empire, began an area of study which increasingly became more inwardly concentrated on the world of the text. Such a move was fortified by theorists such as Homi Bhabha who put forward conceptual explorations of the cultural space of the colonial encounter, arguing for a complex and contested situation which relied less on clear-cut binaries of coloniser and colonised, and more on concepts such as 'mimicry', 'hybridity', and liminal or interstitial spaces between discourses. In a related vein, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's perhaps most famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", brought the politics of representation and the potential complicities involved in speaking about those without a 'voice', amongst other issues, to the fore. Though both Said and Spivak utilise variations of Marxism in their respective analyses, these versions of 'textual politics' later came under increased scrutiny from Marxist critics, most infamously Aijaz Ahmad in his still influential 1992 work, *In Theory: Classes Nations Literatures*, though criticism, particularly of Bhabha and Spivak, has also been levelled by others such as Benita Parry and Arif Dirlik.

This rift within postcolonial studies was further sharpened as materialist critics critiqued lapses in methodology and object of study, further perceiving their own concerns as incompatible with the project of postcolonial studies as established by poststructuralist thinkers. Dirlik, for example, repudiates much of the work of postcolonial studies, arguing that "the identity of the postcolonial is no longer structural but discursive",² and further arguing that postcolonial studies has been removed from place and structural division, and therefore a contextual specificity. Overall, Dirlik's argument critiques the interaction of postcolonial studies with the present, in terms of what he sees as a failure to interrogate issues of contemporary global capitalism, and additionally he finds difficulty with the way in which the past is constructed in these theoretical pronouncements. Continuing this critique of how certain variations of postcolonial theory engages with its colonial past, Benita Parry comments impatiently on a trend whereby "few of the problems engaging radical anti-colonial thinkers figure

²Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism", *Critical Inquiry*, 20.2 (Winter 1994) 328-356, 332.

in the contemporary postcolonial discussion of the colonial past”,³ and she significantly reopens areas of liberation theory and nativism for renewed analysis, rejecting the charges of simplicity which has characterised the mention of these terms within postcolonial studies. Aijaz Ahmad, on the other hand, critiques a number of theoretical positions, criticising a process of dehistoricisation that extends to both the literary object of study and the form and method that study takes:

the surrender, in rapid succession, first to a Third-Worldist kind of nationalism and then to deconstruction – to poststructuralism generally, in fact – on the part of that branch of literary theory which is most engaged with questions of colony and empire conceals, instead of explaining, the relationships between literature, literary theory and that world of which these purport to be literature and the theory.⁴

Thus, what are underlined as most urgent within this domain of study are problems to do with clearly locating and situating these very modes of study and analysis, in addition to maintaining a theoretical engagement with past contexts and present locations that is more attentive to concrete material histories.

Even within the various types of materialist critiques of postcolonial studies, disagreements are registered, and Parry’s critique of Ahmad’s work is illustrative of this. Repudiating what she sees as Ahmad’s insular methodology which claims to renounce the impasses of other modes of blinkered theoretical enquiry, Parry argues that Ahmad’s method refuses to recognise forms of resistance which are not consistent with “rational notions of organized political insurgency”.⁵ As a consequence of such layers of materialist critique, the modes and methods of analysis through which texts from particularised contexts can be framed are deepened. Further adding to this multidimensionality, the fruitful possibilities of Ahmad’s work become most visible in the interrogation of what may be termed structures of mediation surrounding the literary text, an issue that retains its importance in the growing centrality of postcolonial and world literatures within academia. Ahmad, in reference to the opaque processes which accompany the movement of literatures from “other zones of the ‘Third World’” into India, notes that literature from such zones “comes to us not directly or autonomously

³ Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004) 9.

⁴ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes Nations Literatures* (London and New York: Verso, 2008) 37

⁵ Benita Parry, “A Critique Mishandled”, *Social Text* 35(Summer 1993)121-133, 132

but through grids of accumulation, interpretation and relocation which are governed from the metropolitan countries.”⁶ The exploration of these processes and ‘grids’ of circulation in terms of the western circles of academia will form a significant consideration within the following chapter; additionally, what Ahmad characterises as “those processes of circulation and classification” which are already inscribed in the literary text’s “very texture”⁷ is very much a related concern within the scope of the succeeding discussion.

Critiques of practice involved in exploring such texts, particularly in relation to the recuperation or recovery of diverse experience, have also been forwarded by theorists associated with modes of poststructuralism, most notably Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak is perhaps most prolific on the topic of the interventionist role of the critic or historian, a subject which emerged from her refutation of various modes of historiography and does not seem far removed from the concerns of materialist critics. Though Spivak’s work can be noted as further complicating the work of theorists such as Bhabha, whose theoretical interventions have often been criticised for their inflation of the role of the critic and incomplete attention to historical and material context, her work has in turn not escaped criticism. Benita Parry has been vocal in her criticisms of such theoretical positions for becoming overly focused on epistemological rather than material politics, remaining “ensnared in an increasingly repetitive preoccupation with sign systems and the exigencies of representation”.⁸ Particularly critical of Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Parry argues for a kind of recovery of voice, attentive to material conditions: “discourses of representation should not be confused with material realities. Since the native woman is constructed within multiple social relationships and positioned as the product of different class, caste and cultural specificities, it should be possible to locate traces and testimony of women’s voice on those sites where women inscribed themselves...”.⁹ Yet potential appropriation and complicity of practice remains a feature of any production of knowledge, and, though routinely criticised for raising issues concerning epistemological and representational processes, postcolonial critics, and Spivak in particular, see such issues as innately bound up with a more engaged practice of history. In their introduction to *Colonial*

⁶Ahmad, 2008, 44.

⁷Ahmad, 2008, 45.

⁸ Parry, 2004, 12.

⁹ Parry, 2004, 19.

Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, following a discussion of orientalist forms of knowledge, Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams argue that although colonial discourse analysis and postcolonial theory are critiques of previous forms of knowledge, they themselves are also forms of knowledge and so “they remain, potentially at least, vulnerable to the post-structuralist criticism of the way in which theories and concepts appropriate their objects of knowledge”.¹⁰ Indeed, such concerns of appropriation are not just limited to the remit of post-structuralist criticism; it is striking that Theodor Adorno’s concerns with aesthetic appropriation have demonstrated similar concerns.¹¹ In this manner, the split within postcolonial studies becomes most evident over the need to remain within an engaged attention to practice, whether theoretical, critical or aesthetic, with the simultaneous need to be attentive to context and material histories. Conspicuously missing from this divided debate is the way in which attention to practice and form, *and* an attention to contemporary and particularised contexts can be enabled through a literary and critical dimension.

Arguably the target of the most sceptical criticism is theorist Homi Bhabha, and again Parry’s criticisms remain some of the foundations of the critique of his work as preoccupied with “the generation of meaning within textual forms and functions”.¹² Bhabha’s 1992 essay “The World and the Home”, renders palpable many central concerns of materialist critiques, although many of the insights of this essay bear relevance to the analyses of this thesis. The central concept of Bhabha’s essay, the “unhomely”, speaks of what are now much dwelled upon ideas of the instability of the boundaries between public and private, home and world that have become a feature of postcolonial discourse. However, in an essay that aims to explore margins, interstices, and the particular experience of the “unhomely”, the potential of these variant experiences is sometimes closed down prematurely, as in Bhabha’s pronouncement of “a postcolonial place”, leading him to designate the unhomely “the paradigmatic experience”.¹³ Parry has also drawn attention to the totalising tendencies of such

¹⁰ Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Harlow: Pearson, 1994) 8.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment”, in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, 2 vols, II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 76-94.

¹² Benita Parry, “Signs of our times: Discussion of Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*”, in Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt & Ziauddin Sardar, eds., *The Third Text Reader: On Art, Culture and Theory* (London & New York: Continuum, 2002) 243-255, 244.

¹³ Bhabha, 1997, 446.

categorisations in Bhabha's work,¹⁴ which appears at odds with his concern with "a postcolonial transgression of boundaries...amply evident in his use of paradoxical and open-ended words: ambivalent, borderline, boundary, contingent, dispersal, disjunction, dissemination, discontinuity, hybridity, in-between, incommensurable, indeterminate, interstitial, liminal, marginal, negotiation, transitional, translational and uncertain".¹⁵ Though many of these terms are presented by Parry as indicative of the deeper failure of this theoretical frame, Bhabha's essay more innovatively explores modes of literary and aesthetic expression which renegotiate literary forms, particularly the novel, which are constrained by their origins. I would argue that his focus on renewed or different literary and aesthetic practices are ultimately more productive than the issues on which materialist critiques are likely to dwell, and his intervention provides a basis for new imaginings of an "unhomely" particular to the disruption and dislocation of postcolonial contexts, as will be demonstrated later in this thesis.

Most significantly for this project, Bhabha's essay presents important insights for renewed forms of aesthetic practice, exploring the paradox of an idea of literature, itself resting on 'limits' of various kinds, that can claim to house what he terms the "unhomely" today. This partially indefinable "unhomeliness" of displacement of various kinds is joined with the sense of the unhomely palpable in the literary:

In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible. It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation or historical migrations and cultural relocations. The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world.¹⁶

Thus from the beginning, a sense of clear division is eschewed and the proliferating effects of social, historical and cultural displacements and relocations which cannot be easily or neatly contained within the parameters of the literary are demonstrated. However, the role of the literary is also posed as a 'place' where these effects of the unhomely can be registered. Potentially an agent of transformation, the effect of the 'unhomely' is registered within an aesthetic or literary mode, in a manner that can challenge other modes; as Bhabha terms it elsewhere, "unlike the dead hand of history

¹⁴ Parry, 2002, 244.

¹⁵ Parry, 2002, 245.

¹⁶ Bhabha, 1997, 445.

that tells the beads of sequential time like a rosary, seeking to establish serial, causal connections”.¹⁷ Thus the unhomely functions in a dynamic that confounds historical processes: “The discourse of ‘the social’ then finds its means of representation in a kind of *unconscious* that obscures the immediacy of meaning, darkens the public event with an unhomely glow”.¹⁸ The unhomely registers most palpably, in Toni Morrison’s phrase as “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken”,¹⁹ but these silences, full of the unspoken, continue to haunt in a manner that provokes a consideration of literary limits:

And suddenly, literature asks questions at the very borders of its historical and disciplinary being: Can historical time be thought outside fictional space, or do they lie uncannily beside each other? Does the passage of power turn the agent of history into a stranger, a double agent living between the lines?²⁰

In this manner, Bhabha’s essay considers the active potential of literary explorations of such contemporary conditions, as a mode that can participate in, and not only reflect, particular conditions. Rather than offering a mode of accommodation for the experience of the unhomely within the ‘purely’ literary or aesthetic, Bhabha poses a “process of the aesthetic” that would allow for “historical re-cognition”,²¹ a process which involves a “re-cognition” or rethinking of both aesthetic and historical configuration. Locating this process at a distance to the somewhat limiting or limited potential of the aesthetic understood as a static spatial category, Bhabha thus proposes an alternative aesthetic temporality.

In applying Bhabha’s concepts to the texts under discussion later, the potential that the “unhomely” contains to instigate new aesthetic practices is especially significant. The power of such ‘places’ works to resist the confounding power of narratives of history in various ways, hints at the power that resides in these smaller recesses, and while complicated through its existence within an interstitial space, is also partially confined through its apparent limitation to the world of the text, whether the dynamics of a literary text, or the “dead hands of history”. A significant critical and

¹⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010) 6.

¹⁸ Bhabha, 1997, 447.

¹⁹ Bhabha, 1997, 446.

²⁰ Bhabha, 1997, 447.

²¹ Bhabha, 1997, 447.

conceptual impasse can thus result, which designates concepts related to the micro as necessarily confined to the world of the text, thus furthering ideas that only certain forms of active involvement may engender new relationships with modes of living in specific contemporary contexts. However, as my thesis will demonstrate, literary texts emerging from contemporary South Asia, and their historical antecedents, present a telling complication to the ways in which versions of ‘home’ and ‘unhomely’ are envisaged here. Renewed ideas of ‘home’ in these texts, though continuing to be complicated and troubled by unhomely presences in various ways, engender forms that begin to trouble the present and future, as well as engaging with and reworking the past. Through the focus on the everyday, a new aesthetic emerges: one which negotiates itself through the gaps and absences of the unhomely, but which forges new ground in terms of its processes and the interconnections it claims.

I.ii Literary Activism

The notion of an actively involved literature, whether political, social or even aesthetic, within the context of postcolonial literature, however disputed this term, can be considered as an irrefutable presence. The preceding discussion of postcolonial studies has highlighted the operation of a methodological division between what are pitted as irreconcilable modes of thought. This division draws a line between a world contained within the text, and real contexts and histories which remain insufficiently examined or accounted for; such a split, then, would seem to suggest the incompatibility of the ‘literary’ and the ‘activist’ in certain ways. One of the key objectives of this thesis is a challenging of this perceived incompatibility, exposing its simplifications through new readings of literary texts which demonstrate attention to both sets of issues in a manner that further registers their inextricability rather than mutual exclusivity. Robert J.C. Young, in an exploration of what the term postcolonial may entail, refuses to “challenge contemporary postcolonial work in terms of an opposition between textualism and political activism”, suggesting that “rather than berating postcolonialism for its textualism, we recognize that in many ways it has

created possibilities for new dynamics of political and cultural practice”.²² Young’s suggestions of a positive mode where the possibilities of textual practice do not remain confined to this realm, and which can engender new modes of political and cultural interaction, are important in terms of the analyses of this thesis. However, further claims made by Young in this editorial suggest the continuance of something more divisive between worlds of aesthetic and political praxis: “In institutional terms, the impact of feminism and postcolonialism has radically changed the criteria of what makes authentic art by challenging the cultural capital from which notions of the literary were derived. Writing is now valued as much for its depiction of minority experience as for its aesthetic qualities”.²³ Though Young uses this comment to argue that the textuality of postcolonial studies can also be foundational, as an area which gives “primacy to an authentic historical reality”,²⁴ the polarisation of ‘aesthetics’ and ‘representation’ or issue-driven literature still exists to some extent in the contemporary moment. In this manner, a new divide, prompted by the initial division within postcolonial studies, but entailing a further and more complicated schism, is registered. This thesis therefore is motivated by the aim to explore the navigation of this impasse and its various complications through new readings of literary texts emerging from South Asia which refuse to be contained within these particular straits of activism.

Within the context of South Asia, an actively engaged literary presence is, of course, not merely a recent development. Maintaining an awareness of the existence of the intense worldly engagement that has been an inherent feature in the South Asian literary tradition, and which was particularly notable in terms of a resistance against colonial rule and the aftermath of this presence, this research project begins from and is deeply influenced by this tradition.²⁵ However, the texts analysed in this thesis also constitute sources of excess and conflict within their respective established literary traditions, marking these works as sites of differently engaged literary practice. All of

²² Robert J.C. Young, “Editorial: Ideologies of the Postcolonial”, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (1998) 1.1, 4-8, 4.

²³ Young, 1998, 7.

²⁴ Young, 1998, 7.

²⁵ For a notable instance of this kind of critical work on the All-India Progressive Writer’s Association from the 1930s on see, Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, nation and the transition to independence* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005). See also P. Bayapa Reddy, ed., *The Indian Novel with a Social Purpose* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1999), which begins its genealogy in the 1920s, extending to the literature of Rushdie and others in the 1980s and early 1990s.

these literary works can be considered within the terms of the literary genre or form against which they establish their difference: the melodramatic early twentieth-century short stories by Cornelia Sorabji on women in purdah; the novels of Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy appearing to dwell on sentimental fiction's themes of familial and love relationships; the rhetorically charged prose of Roy's political essays; the boundaries of postcolonial novels surpassed and widened through Sinha's literary politics and expansion into the digital world; and what are typically the carefully constructed and monitored worlds of children's literature within which Mahasweta Devi and Salman Rushdie's texts are initially placed.

Further complex divisions are suggested by the differing relationships with socio-political issues maintained by the authors of these texts, beyond the parameters of the literary form. Some of the texts are driven by their situated realities: for example, the continuing environmental degradation of specific, marginalised places and the destructive role of contemporary global capitalism in precipitating multifaceted destruction within these contexts compel Arundhati Roy and Indra Sinha's literary aesthetic into new modes. Other texts intervene in moments of prolific public debate, as in the case of Cornelia Sorabji's short stories on Indian women in purdah. The vehement contemporary criticism which greeted these stories suggests the negative politicisation of this particular literary publication, yet also recognised an important plurality which refused the reduction of her female protagonists to a singular trope. While Kiran Desai's novel focuses on some of the most prevalent and consuming issues of recent decades, traversing issues of immigration, globalisation, poverty and communal stratification, her lack of engagement with such issues outside the literary might render her comment on such issues suspect because of her lack of activist involvement in biographical or socio-historical terms. Yet her most resonant comment is produced through the complexity of her narrative technique, most significantly through the complex irreducibility of the material 'things' that circulate through the narrative. The work of Mahasweta Devi and Salman Rushdie, which can be thoroughly differentiated in terms of their socio-political and cultural engagement, shares a navigation of the additional layers of complexity inherent in the situation of an adult speaking on behalf of and purportedly to a child.

Common to each of these texts, then, is an intense engagement with the literary world in which they are positioned, entailing a certain reordering or renegotiating of

that literary world. Through this reordering of a literary aesthetic realm, a domain which enables choice, creativity and singularity, an altered mode of active engagement can be imagined, in a manner that evades an easy reduction to a text-based politics. Of further significance in the following discussion of these literary works is the way in which such a literary aesthetic registers dual movements on multiple levels. Moving inwards on itself, the literary activism espoused by these texts can reflect, critique, or create a space that enables the critique of its own processes. The significance of this inward movement constitutes part of the core of the thesis, in terms of its examination of how a thoroughgoing concern with the micro – home, the everyday, and individual subjectivity – can promote the possibilities of engaged, creative singularisation through the modes of engaged forms of living. Somewhat paradoxically, the modes of literary activism engendered here, entail outward movements at these very moments, since it is through renegotiated, re-formed and re-imagined sites of home that prolific engagement with a wider world – worlds that can be considered as at the very limits or the farthest reaches of home – are formulated. Relatedly, limits of the literary are also breached, reassessed and re-formed: the limits to which the literary can be stretched, in addition to the limitations imposed and imagined through literary form.

The implications of this innovation from the level of the literary for a facilitation of new modes of critical practice will be explored in later chapters. As the lines of what have been construed as an inward-looking textual politics and relatedly what has been categorised as activism have been redrawn, so too have the categories for critique and analysis been reconfigured. The methodology employed in this thesis enables a critical focus specific to the concerns of each literary text individually whilst maintaining a transversal consideration of the formative categories of literary activism and home. In this manner, analyses of the texts are framed in terms of the interrelation of modes of literary activism and home, and yet continually move beyond this, demonstrating the scope for their extension and potential transformation.

I.iii Home

The domain of the home, and its centrality in much of South Asian cultural, social and political thought in twentieth century South Asia, has been documented in various ways, yet its power as a conceptual category has been confined to quite specific

practices. Its use as a mode of increasing the hold of political and cultural power in the colony, and later as a formulation of asserting specific nationalist forms of political and cultural difference, suggests that the channels through which ‘home’ was configured were politicised in an overt manner, metonymically designating certain ideological practices.²⁶ Ideas of home have also been complicated in various ways following these invocations of the term, particularly in terms of its centrality in twentieth century diasporic writing. Rosemary Marangoly George’s work *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction* (1996) is seminal, and demonstrates some of the changes in the way home is represented throughout the twentieth century, creating a kind of genealogy which links these categorisations of home in the colonial period through to the challenges home provides to linear nationalist narrative, and the “homelessness” of the South Asian immigrant in the west. George’s work significantly expounds the way in which the consideration of ‘home’ has often fallen under the rubric of binaries and endeavours to “read more than the domestic into representations of home, to keep location from being reduced (or elevated) to nationalism”,²⁷ and is a useful point of departure for some of the aims of this thesis.

However, the way in which ‘home’ is explored in the following chapters differs from these singularly constituted politics, and from ideas of home which are innately bound to politics of identity. Home in the texts analysed is a conceptual space, but not in the manner in which it is designated as a variously politicised space in colonial and nationalist discourses. As a result, the ‘place’ of the home, in its individual complexity, is less easily defined and contained as an entity. The deployment and invocation of home in multiple instances throughout this thesis centres on a shifting multiplicity, a place that is compounded by processes, eschewing any final sense of a revealing ‘core’ or ‘essence’. In the differing explorations of home, the greater importance assumed by processes, rather than an idea of structured place or politicised space, is revealing; for instance in Cornelia Sorabji’s narrative processes which continually shift away from

²⁶ See for example “The authoritative Englishwoman: setting up home and self in the colonies”, in Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge, New York & Melbourn: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 35-65, and Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: what women learned when men gave them advice* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004). See also Partha Chatterjee’s work relating to the attention given division of private and public in relation to the nationalisms in place following colonial rule: Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”, in Gregory Castle, ed., *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology* (Oxford, U.K & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

²⁷ George, 3.

revealing an idea of the private sphere that is constant in its sameness. The material 'things' which continually circulate in Kiran Desai's narrative of home in a globalized context also prevent a satisfied narrative closure. Home is further represented as a new mode of narratorial practice in the work of Arundhati Roy and Indra Sinha, wherein the figuration of home is registered as part of a negative narrative dynamic in Roy's work, or as a site of a disruptive presence, perhaps more accurately described as an absence in Sinha's work. Further emphasising the new dimensions forwarded through an interrelation of changed configurations of home and an active literary mode, is the way in which home is represented by some narratives through 'other worlds', not bound by the 'traditional' structures of home.

In this manner, 'home' cannot be consigned as a direct representation of political issues, and invocations of home in these texts do not correspond to a particular political aim or end. However, this is not to say that 'home' in these texts exists in contexts that are politically, socially or culturally neutralised; in fact, home is often entangled within political particularities, but, as will be demonstrated below, it is often invoked to increase and further such complexities rather than offering a mode of resolution. Instead, home is found to be both renewed and liberated from these housed boundaries; the fictional treatment of ideas of home which are intimately bound with an active sense of the everyday presents a form of home which relies on its change more than its capacity to remain a stoic presence.

Similarly, invocations of home which might variously refuse containment and potentially create new meaning will be considered throughout this thesis. By refusing to reveal innate, interior 'truths', often largely bound to ideas of identity, homes in these texts assert themselves as circumventing potential exoticisations, essentialisations, or sentimentalizations, even as the texts often speak to or are pointed towards western audiences, often culpable of imposing such generalising glosses. Cornelia Sorabji's literary short stories are positioned within the terms of particular debates surrounding reform focusing on women's lives and the private sphere, but extend outwards from these 'intimacies' in prolific ways. However, her stories refuse to occupy clear narrative territory in the terms set out by these debates, and the private sphere emerges from her work as a place of individual, irreducible and lived complexity, which requires an accompanying mode of new representation. Through her focus on the world of the

home, Kiran Desai's novel also resists exoticising tendencies and the politics of "postcolonial pathos"; in her portrayal, this domain is not merely reflective, but also an active presence in the creation of meaning. Roy and Sinha's texts further refuse to reflect a sense of predesignated or settled meaning, and 'home' is often used to draw attention to the possibilities of resistance while ultimately refusing such clear cut possibilities. Mahasweta Devi and Salman Rushdie's texts further increase a sense of not being bound to reflect a predesignated sense of 'home' in a child's world. Overall, 'home', in the texts which this thesis analyses, reflects a realm within which exist possibilities and potential through its very predilection for change.

Home, as invoked in these literary texts, can be said to complicate the relationship of the personal and political, and this will be explored throughout the following chapters. Such explorations, in turn, elucidate impetus for innovative engagement coming from within the site of the mirco in which the boundaries of home are reconfigured. Indeed, the moves to forego these traditional or typical enclosures of the home engender the exploration of new and productive relations *within* the domain of the home. The productivity and potential contained in female alliances within the zenana Sorabji describes – 'home' that cannot be fully imagined – engenders an active and individualised sense of this private sphere, previously blanketed by various generalisations. Roy and Sinha's texts, often slanting typical ideas of the family and the home, demonstrate how in a world in which the difficulties of the home are infinitely repeated, there can be no containment of the private and the public. Furthermore, though the actions prompted from the home do not represent clearly or simply defined political acts, they register disagreement in various ways. These disagreements, shaded with hues of conformist and divergent thought, in turn infiltrate modes of everyday existence, maintaining an active potential for renewal. Desai's novel demonstrates a redrawing of categories within and through ideas of home, producing nuanced insights into sets of relations engendered, while Devi and Rushdie's children's texts position the child as an active participant in the world of the home, and who incorporates various other nonhuman worlds in the process. In this way, the most intimate realm of the home is one which does not easily sit within the idea that the personal is political, nor does it claim the place of the home as political in its own right, or as an area of life that needs to be thought of 'politically'. Instead, it considers a wider yet more specific realm: the

practices of the everyday which contain the potential to alter consciousness, and which themselves come under scrutiny, in a manner that does not make the home simply political or ‘merely’ personal/subjective, but reformulates these entities in new ways that are not so easily separated. In refusing both an overt politicisation of the conceptual place of the home and its simplification as a place of origin or identity, ‘home’ as it emerges from the readings contained within this thesis, complicates and avoids reductive and restrictive categorisations in significant ways. Home will therefore be considered in a frame which encompasses a dual or double movement or alteration, one which incorporates literary activism as another category of dynamic reconfiguration.

Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “unhomely”, in his aforementioned essay “The World and the Home”, captures a sense of awkwardness and blurred meaning that resonates with intensity with the subject of home in postcolonial fictions. Its potential for aesthetic reconfiguration and invigoration has been mapped in previous sections, most prominently as a mode of creating an aesthetic temporality where the ‘unhomely’ can register its disaffection, and distance from certain forms of historical narrative. In Bhabha’s terms, as mentioned earlier, this has been most vividly rendered through the idea of “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” – silences that continue to haunt the narrative in a manner that provokes consideration of literary limits. However, the unhomely as it is registered in the texts analysed, features somewhat differently. Ideas of home in these contexts are already positioned and stretched to its outer limits, both in terms of literary limits and in terms of what is traditionally posited as part of an enclosed space of the home, and so unhomely presences too are rendered palpable differently. In important ways, the unhomely assumes a role that is largely more active than Bhabha would suggest, and which finds its end within the parameters of the literary text, however broadened they are by this experience.

The analyses of these texts suggest that while the literary aesthetic dimension is important, this does not designate an ending at this point. The unhomely is rendered not only within certain moments of the text, but exists as a kind of alternate face of the home, existing as a process which continually infiltrates the narrative. In Kiran Desai’s novel the unhomely pervades the material ‘things’ that circulate within the narrative, revealing itself as a tangible force, as the world of the home is rendered peculiar rather than familiar through the aspects of these ‘things’ that register longing and aspiration.

In Roy and Sinha's texts, layers of home and the family exist as a kind of spectre, and palpably in Sinha's text through *Animal's* imagining of a family that cannot be said to fully exist but is registered as a haunting. However, the intimacies of family, home and the domestic sphere in Roy's text effect a comparable sense of haunting in their excess which makes classification and containment impossible, though perhaps desirable. The unhomely in Devi and Rushdie's children's texts is marked by engagement with alternate realms: the nonhuman world of the larger environment in Devi's text, and the nonhuman world of the virtual and magical in Rushdie. In each case, these alternate worlds are places not entirely without threat, and through which the home is examined without returning to final, bounded conclusions. Finally, in Cornelia Sorabji's work, a more intimate view of 'home' does not come into view and remains at the necessary level of removal suggested by its being termed as the private or domestic sphere. Yet something akin to an unhomely presence can be noted through Sorabji's portrayal of instances of high melodrama which suggest a realm that cannot be fully realised as 'home' by the women within the zenana. Shared by all of these texts is a sense that the unhomely enlivens the home as a conceptual space of active engagement through its circulation throughout the narrative, maintaining a focus on process more complex than one that effects a "bridging [of] the home and the world",²⁸ as imagined by Bhabha.

I.iv Methodology

In order to chart these dual and apparently oppositional concerns of the thesis – the consideration of a literary aesthetic that is activist, and a configuration of the home that is not typically or traditionally politicised nor solely personal, but one that can yet be considered engaged – the theoretical framework also reflects this duality. Each of the following chapters continues to relate to the context of the material/poststructuralist division in postcolonial studies, as a division which needs to be surpassed in order to facilitate the examination of literary texts that exceed their literary worlds and traditions in various ways. The oppositional modes traversed in this rigorously divided debate do

²⁸ Bhabha, 1997, 451.

not provide a fully productive analysis of the complexity of the literary texts. However, the texts do not merely call for a more ‘balanced’ assessment of the literary and linguistic elements weighed with the material contexts into which they intervene. As the four chapters in this thesis will demonstrate, an altogether more complex mode of analysis and engagement is effected; one which, taking cue from the productivity of the interrelation of home and literary activism, extends in various directions, effecting transversal connections at diverse points, in a manner that continues to seek out and produce new relations.

Chapter One, “The Literature of Cornelia Sorabji”, employs a literary historical approach, paying close attention to contemporary reviews of Sorabji’s work from the archive, and situating this in terms of recent academic ‘retrievals’ of Sorabji’s work. Sorabji is perhaps best known in the context of her achievements in her law career, and also through the interest in her fragmented and interwoven heritage.²⁹ Furthermore, Sorabji’s self-constructed position is a conflicted and divisive one: simultaneously pro-imperialist, anti-feminist and anti-nationalist, yet also a thoroughly committed reformer and defender of Indian women in purdah, Sorabji embodied the many contradictions of empire. However, Sorabji’s fulfilment and navigation of these categories pose particular challenges for the categories set out by contemporary postcolonial theory. Sorabji’s literature, and its reception and mediation in the early twentieth century, and then again at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is viewed in terms of the division within postcolonial studies discussed previously. I argue that the nuances and contradictions of Sorabji’s work, the way in which she was positioned by her contemporaries, and her own self-alignment, present complex lines that an analysis employing either opposition of this theoretical split cannot accommodate. The theoretical framework for this chapter is informed by Aijaz Ahmad’s comments on the reception and mediation of literary texts as they move between various zones of the world, particularly as he remarks that these processes become part of the literary text itself, “is inscribed in its very texture”,³⁰ and my discussion gives analytical attention to the contemporary reviews, forewords

²⁹ Sorabji’s lineage is marked on both maternal and paternal sides by distinctly British inflections: her mother, from the tribal Niligiri region, was adopted by an English couple, the adoptive English mother being Cornelia Sorabji’s namesake; while Sorabji’s father, Sorabji Kharsedji, originally a member of the Parsee community, cut ties with this community to convert to Christianity. See Elleke Boehmer and Naella Grew, eds., “Introduction”, in Cornelia Sorabji, *India Calling* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004) x.

³⁰ Ahmad, 2008, 45.

and preface to the volume accordingly. This chapter draws heavily and deliberately on close literary readings of the text, focusing on the layers and nuances of Sorabji's literary oeuvre, which I will argue is largely responsible for its inability to be contained comfortably within the parameters of postcolonial theory. The remainder of the thesis follows a similar methodological trajectory in beginning with the text to negotiate the framework within which it is placed.

Chapter Two, "Textual and Material Politics of 'Things' in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*", brings together modes of analysis from cultural theory and anthropology, with a focus on literary close reading. Continuing the mode of allowing the literary text to guide the theoretical framework, the centrality of 'things' and the ways in which this focus is maintained is made manifest. This chapter utilises the anthropological work of Arjun Appadurai on the material world and material culture, facilitating a focus on the channels of circulation and mediation that structure both the world of the literary text, and the wider world within which the literary text is placed. Providing a valuable dynamism from its alternatively positioned reading of 'things', Bill Brown's analysis contributes to an exploration of the way in which 'things' create and embody an uncertainty that is productive in reconfiguring categories. From this multifaceted analysis of 'things' within the novel, in which cultural, social, economic, political and personal can often be noted at once, a more complex exploration of home is, in turn, effected. Furthermore, Desai's strategic use of 'things' builds a textual and material politics within the novel, creating complexity in ways which does not suggest an easy delineation or interrelation of various domains. In an analysis that situates Desai outside of conventional modes of diasporic loss and longing, I show how Desai's novel moves beyond the creation of small worlds within the confined world of the text, through self-aware narrative strategies that raise the act of engaged narrative practice into an active literary aesthetic.

Chapter Three, "Reimagining the Form and Scope of the Literary through the Ecocritical Interventions of Arundhati Roy and Indra Sinha", situates works of fiction, nonfiction, and various virtual expansions of a semi-fictional world within a review of the field of ecocriticism. Many of the theoretical debates and divisions within postcolonial studies are mirrored within this domain, as theoretical or abstract modes concerned with language and subjectivity are pitted against a more concrete return to

worldly issues. While there is an indication of impatience with such absolutes within the domain of ecocriticism, it has not fully moved beyond this, as my exploration will evidence. In this regard, Guattari's work *The Three Ecologies* (first published 1989, trans. 2000), which makes connections across three 'ecologies' – the environment, social relations and human subjectivity – is suggestive in its scope, linking these three ecologies with active ethical and aesthetic processes. Productively, Guattari's theoretical explorations work across apparently disparate domains, taking into account interiorities enclosed within the literary text and within subjectivity, and incorporating current realities of a technocratic management of the environment by governments and a similar management of subjectivity through the media.

The literary texts considered in this chapter continue the emphasis placed on the reimagining and reordering of the literary. The chapter argues that Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* creates a particular literary aesthetic, built around ideas of home and family that produces important insights and questions for the idea of an ethico-aesthetic engagement, while her nonfictional essay "The Greater Common Good" provides critical questions for various types of activist practice. Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* and the extensions of this novelistic world into the digital utilises the category of home in a manner that disturbs the narrative from within and imagines new frameworks of understanding, constituting the core of Sinha's literary politics. Tellingly, the place of the literary is further amplified within this chapter, and both texts extend Guattari's transversal interconnections in visible ways – through new and varied literary forms, through their different relationships with social contexts, through modes of reading offered relationally across fiction and non-fictional domains, and in terms of the modes of reading offered to the critic. In this manner, the chapters's theoretical framework – informed by its literary analyses – moves beyond the initially described impasses of both postcolonial theory and ecocriticism.

Chapter Four, "Extending Boundaries: Children's Literature by Mahasweta Devi and Salman Rushdie", focuses on this domain for a number of important reasons. Children's literature is often regarded as, simultaneously and contradictorily, an arena of conservative literary practices, in addition to being acclaimed as a field of recent formal and critical innovation. Additionally, the home has broadly retained its centrality in children's literature, featuring in both conservative and innovative texts. Similar to

the previous chapter, the theoretical focus of this chapter is drawn from a review of criticism and theory specific to children's literature, but focuses on the psychoanalytic and literary work of Jacqueline Rose, and the more recent work of Kimberly Reynolds who argues for the radical potential contained within children's literature, and through the innovations of new media more specifically. Furthermore, significant attention is given to postcolonial analyses of children's literature, which focuses on issues of liminality and hybridity, common to the work of Homi Bhabha, rather than offering any specifically situated materialist critique. Though children's literary criticism might sometimes lack a fuller attention to materialist analyses, a comparable methodological dilemma is present in the debate and to a certain extent, polarity, set up by Rose and Reynolds in terms of children's literature and its aesthetics. Rose makes arguments about the innately conservative forms of children's literature through a largely psychoanalytic perspective, and poses important questions regarding what constitutes the literary prompted by this genre. Reynolds, on the other hand, works from the premise that children's literature is not necessarily innately conservative, evidencing this claim throughout, but questions remain as to whether such dichotomies can be undone in this way. Through the literature of Devi and Rushdie, a thorough engagement with, if not a complete upheaval of these dilemmas is offered, as this chapter seeks to locate a more thoroughgoing disruption of this and other persistent dichotomies. As contemporary writers, both Devi and Rushdie continue to play important roles in the configuration of South Asian literary activist fiction, and their apparently disparate forays into the realm of children's literature merits close attention, particularly in terms of how such a movement into this domain of literature can contribute toward both a reconfiguration of home, and the continuance of an idea of worldly engagement.

SECTION ONE: THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL
CONTEXTS

Chapter One

The Literature of Cornelia Sorabji

1.1 Introduction

In the specific case of Cornelia Sorabji, tracing the methods and channels through which a literary text is mediated in its original context begins to give an indication of the refractions of the literary text in wider realms and also allows a mode of linking and analysing two chronologically disparate contexts for their comparability. From the evidence of the reviews, articles and correspondence regarding Sorabji's *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*, Sorabji's audience was a largely British one, although there is evidence of some familiarity with Sorabji and her various forms of social work within Indian and particularly Anglo-Indian audiences. Within Sorabji's audience, the sectors of those readerships which at least publicly interacted with her work were members of the elite classes of Britain, for example Lord Hobhouse and Lady Dufferin who introduce and preface her volume of stories. In addition to this, Sorabji received significant amounts of attention from sections of society holding significant religious or missionary influence, and also sectors of British society whose interest in the reform of Indian society was pronounced in various ways. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was marked by calls for reform on a number of social and political issues in India and for many British, as Priya Joshi notes "the abject condition of India's women affirmed the need for a colonial presence as protectors and guarantors of female uplift and advancement".¹ This was met with opinion from various Indian activists and figures who were split between maintaining the lives of Indian women as part of the realm untouched by empire, as keeping "tradition" safe, and those who thought that the anticolonial struggle required addressing the so called Women's Question and pursuing reform in this domain. Though Sorabji's fictional stories intervene within the terms of this debate, they do not assume the positions or rhetoric that can enable a clear or uncomplicated affiliation with any of the parties in this often rigorously divided debate.

The locations and channels through which Sorabji's work was published are also interesting; *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* was originally published in 1901

¹ Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 173.

by Freemantle and Co. in London, but tellingly, was not published simultaneously with an Indian publishing house.² A number of the stories from this volume were originally published in British magazines, namely the story ‘Achtar: The Story of a Queen’ published in the *Nineteenth Century* (June 1896) and the story ‘Thakrani’ published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* (May-October 1900),³ while ‘The Pestilence at Noonday’ first appeared in the *Nineteenth Century and After* in September 1899 under the title ‘An Indian Plague Story’, and ‘Urmi’ appeared in the same magazine in January 1893. Similarly, ‘Behind the Purdah’ is a republication from *Macmillan’s Magazine* for July 1900.⁴ However, *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* was not republished until 2003 in an ‘Oxford Classic Reissue’, edited by Chandani Lokuge, in Delhi and Oxford by Oxford University Press. In this manner, the vested interests of both original and present contexts become partially apparent from these situated histories of publication; examination of the structures and modes of mediation in these two contexts allows for a fuller interrogation of the politics of location that inevitably surround and saturate the movement of literary texts from one part of the world to another. In addition to these histories of publication, the textual corpus that comes to surround the literary text is of additional and specific interest. In Sorabji’s case, the textual corpus is composed of reviews, along with further categorisation and alignment of Sorabji and her literature depending on the orientation of the publication, usually newspaper, and its potential audience, in addition to prefaces and other types of endorsements from elite members of British society. Such a corpus provides a means to excavate the social, cultural and indeed political exigencies imposed on a text originating from India at that time, as further analysis in this chapter will show. Through an analysis of the structures of mediation, reception and location in the original context of Sorabji’s writing and in the present context the re-location of these texts within the academic domains of colonial discourse and postcolonial theory, a study of the material history of the literary text is proposed; one which is attuned to the text’s surrounding material history, but the material history as it is reflected and refracted in terms of the response to and

² The British Library’s catalogue confirms this.

³ Catherine Lynette Innes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 259.

⁴ <http://www.worldcat.org/title/love-and-life-behind-the-purdah/oclc/223825980?referer=br&ht=edition> Accessed July 20th 2009.

reception of the literary text.⁵ The adoption of this approach to the situation of Sorabji's text, in both contexts, will, in turn, pose questions about the place of the literary in a theoretical framework which puts forward a space of accommodation beyond the domain of poststructuralism, and yet does not wish to consign the literary to a simplistic or singular mode of accommodation.

1.2 Recent Reception of Sorabji's Work

The attention awarded to Cornelia Sorabji in her contemporary moment has been replicated to an extent in the present within particular circles of academic interest.⁶ This relatively recent resurfacing of interest in Sorabji's life and work is largely dedicated to an exploration of the myriad ruptures and contradictions within empire and the way in which Sorabji traversed and navigated these boundaries and divisions; a study that is mostly dedicated to Sorabji's public persona during her time spent in England, thus centring on her memoirs *India Calling*.⁷ In this mode of analysis, Antoinette Burton's studies of Sorabji contribute most powerfully. Burton's work, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (1998), which deals partially with Sorabji, primarily concentrates on the

⁵ Priya Joshi's insightful study *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2002), underlines the complex ways in which Indian authors reclaimed and reworked the British novel for their own various purposes, underlining the processes of cultural exchange and translation at work, rather than a more typically dualistic approach. Such an emphasis on broadening various frameworks within which the numerous issues of the colonial encounter and its literary adjuncts are formulated and discussed is a useful one for this chapter. However, my analysis retains a larger role for the close study of the textual, including the domain of textual responses incited by a literary piece, allowing for an exploration of the surrounding structures and influences in a manner that still remains significantly concerned with the literary, whereas Joshi studies patterns of production and consumption of literature within her study.

⁶ There has also been a renewed interest in Sorabji in spheres outside what may be termed the strictly academic. For example, the original 1902 *Times Literary Supplement* review of Sorabji's work was reprinted in *The Sunday Times* in September 2010. www.the-tls.co.uk accessed 20th April 2011.

Cornelia Sorabji also received significant attention as part of the recent conference "Bharat Britain: South Asians Making Britain 1870-1950", held in the British Library in September 2010. The aim of this conference was to bring the presence and role of Asians in Britain during this period to wider consideration and audience, including primary and secondary level education, in addition to launching the *Making Britain* database, which traces and contains entries on the histories of South Asians in Britain during this period.

⁷ For a significant perspective on Sorabji's travels between India and Britain see Pallavi Rastogi, "'The World Around and the World Afar All Seemed Compassed': Cosmopolitan Ethnicity in the Victorian Metropolis", *Women's Studies* 32.6 (2003) 735-759.

“colonial encounters *within*” [my emphasis]:⁸ encounters which occurred in the hub of the British Empire due to the presence of various colonial subjects from South Asia, assessing the construction of colonial subjects from an inverted perspective, as well as from an inverted spatial location. Through such reversals, Burton’s study effects a concentrated vision of overlapping territories and attention to the complexities of representation and location, thereby complicating any facile or dualistic notions of colonial relations. In her specific focus on Sorabji, Burton focuses on Sorabji’s construction of self, and in turn, how others constructed, or at least endeavoured to construct her, primarily through Sorabji’s correspondence with family and friends during her stay at Somerville College, Oxford between 1889 and 1892; treating this correspondence as an ethnography of late-Victorian Oxford in an attempt to excavate the particular conditions under which an Indian woman sought to speak in the voice of “the Indian woman” in late-Victorian Britain”.⁹

Burton’s more recent work on Sorabji, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (2003), investigates the way in which private memories, as domestic interiors, are themselves archives, and emanate from the same grounds as a “history conceived of...as a narrative, a practice, and a site of desire”.¹⁰ In this monograph, Burton turns her focus to the materiality of specific domestic spaces, moving the records of these women’s memories away from the realm of conjecture. In specific relation to Sorabji, Burton analyses, from the archive of Sorabji’s documents and from her published biographical writings, the way in which what she terms Sorabji’s “perpetual homelessness”¹¹ is played out beyond the realm of the home. In this monograph, Burton undermines what she designates as typical practice in historical research methods of primarily focusing on the subject or contents of an archive, rather than a more inclusive study of material which brings modes and practices of reading to the forefront.¹² In this manner, Burton is forwarding the notion of analysing women’s historical memory as “an *interpretive* act: as neither truth nor fiction, in other words,

⁸ Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998) 1.

⁹ Burton, 1998, 111.

¹⁰ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 4.

¹¹ Burton, 2003, 7.

¹² Burton, 2003, 25.

but as a continual reminder of the historicity – and, of course, the political valences – all traces from the past”.¹³

While Burton’s argument against the archive as “some ordinary – and therefore pure – site of historical knowledge or evidence”¹⁴ is a valuable one in terms of the perils of such a stratification of historical sources, the temptation to open out the work of Sorabji into a purely interpretive act could itself be destructive and requires careful treading in order to not simply make Sorabji’s work an exemplar of the multiple fragmentations and possibilities of the world of the text; a mode of reading that persists in the contemporary moment. Furthermore, and in specific relation to Sorabji, Burton, despite her calls for a mode of reading that would offer a more open and nuanced perspective on the intricacies of history as recorded by women, promulgates a reading of the various texts written by Sorabji which, contrarily, pigeonholes Sorabji quite specifically. For example, Burton’s readings designate Sorabji as believing “that its [the zenana] dwellers were politically useful to a colonial regime under siege by nationalist agitators”.¹⁵ Burton’s claims that Sorabji “aims to cast zenana women as intriguers at worst and as helpless illiterates at best”¹⁶ further document the perils of the critic’s advocated mode of analysing such sources in a processual act of interpretation, as the terms of such an argument could not be borne out within a recourse to Sorabji’s fictional literature. As one of the central strands of Burton’s argument in this work appears to rest on the inclusion of fictional literature written by women as a means of providing access to an untapped or alternative archive, the basis of Burton’s argument is doubly undermined when met with the often inextricable contradictions and complexities of Sorabji’s fictional prose.

A recent reissue of Sorabji’s memoir *India Calling*, edited and introduced by Elleke Boehmer and Naella Grew (2004), aims to restore critical attention Sorabji’s work within the study of empire and colony, as well as the domain of postcolonial theory. Boehmer and Grew’s introduction to this edition focuses on, in an overarching manner, the many divisions and contradictions that Sorabji embodied, as

¹³ Burton, 2003, 26.

¹⁴ Burton, 2003, 26.

¹⁵ Burton, 2003, 73.

¹⁶ Burton, 2003, 76.

“one of the most successful if internally divided Indian mediators of her time”,¹⁷; a persona augmented by the sense of divisiveness present in Sorabji’s various alignments. The introduction to the text of *India Calling*, in a similar way to Burton’s study, emphasises the somewhat patronising elements that can be gleaned from Sorabji’s texts, particularly *India Calling*, noting “In relation to the *pardahnashins*’ primitive helplessness or their superstition-bound obedience, as she saw it, she styled herself as, by contrast, their masculine practical helper”.¹⁸ Though such sentiments are, to a certain extent, applicable to the text of *India Calling*, they nonetheless present a skewed version of Sorabji’s life and work as a whole; Sorabji’s *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*, for instance, provides a narrative where there is no easy division between ‘superstition’ and ‘modernity’, much less the presence of a straightforward, authoritative ‘masculine’ narrative persona. This introduction concludes by noting the value of “critical attention which has focused on postcolonial ‘mixedness’ and cultural syncretism has forged new ways through which to read, in retrospect, Cornelia Sorabji’s writing, and the considerable achievement it marks.”¹⁹ Though Boehmer and Grew’s short commentary on Sorabji’s life and work does not, overall, valorise one element of Sorabji’s life and work over another, its inclination toward the underlining of a positive, or at least radical, hybridity borders on simplification.

1.3 Contemporary Reception of Sorabji’s *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*

The public and unprecedented roles occupied by Sorabji also generated particular interest at the moment of the contemporary publication of her work, and though the terms of the debate differ, the myriad complexities and contradictions remain, in addition to the tendency towards simplification and circumscribing of Sorabji’s work. Indeed, the material from the Sorabji archive is testament to the sheer divisiveness of the issues Sorabji presented in her fiction. Cornelia Sorabji’s quite substantial archive is held at the British Library in London and is made up of a

¹⁷ Boehmer and Grew, eds., “Introduction”, in Cornelia Sorabji, *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004) ix.

¹⁸ Boehmer & Grew, “Introduction”, xiii.

¹⁹ Boehmer & Grew, “Introduction”, xiv.

volume of texts including personal correspondence and diaries, correspondence regarding her work, particularly her position as Lady Assistant to the Court of Wards in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam. In addition to this, there are various published reviews and comments on Sorabji's own published work, letters relating to Sorabji's published work and various articles written by Sorabji for periodicals, both published and unpublished. The small but nonetheless clear furor that her work caused among its largely British readership is instructive in many ways – specifically within the body of documents relating to Sorabji's volume of fictional stories, *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* – revealing irreconcilable elements from her literature along with the imposition of various modes of interpretation, attitude and genre. The lines between these realms of fiction and non-fiction are constantly blurred or confused in these reviews, and though *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* is a largely fictional work, the commentary sustained through the reviews continually draws upon a register of possible or probable verisimilitude. Through both the presence of certain attributes of Sorabji's work and the various impositions of a largely British reviewing culture, and, indeed, the entanglement of both these presences, a specific, if often contradictory position is mapped out for Sorabji. This particular location was consequently furthered and complicated through Sorabji's various acceptances and refusals of such a role.

Reviews of Sorabji's only fictional work between dates ranging from late 1901 through to the first half of 1902 range in all their aspects, from the variety of publications which review the work to the range of attitudes these reviews express. Such a wide-ranging and divisive body of reviews, by extension, indicates the particular straddling of realms that Sorabji's foray into the English literary world involved. Magazines such as *The Spectator* and *Pall Mall Gazette*, weekly papers such as *The Saturday Review*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*, daily newspapers ranging from the *Daily Chronicle* (London) to *The Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore), in addition to a range of regional British newspapers all carried reviews of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*. The stance occupied by each of these publications, as well as their preoccupations and readership, varied in numerous ways; from what has been termed *Pall Mall Gazette's* general orientation toward social change and

“the influential middle classes”,²⁰ to the specific and rooted concerns of British India in *The Civil and Military Gazette* and beyond that to the more specifically literary in *The Times Literary Supplement*. These particular orientations are less explicitly apparent in the actual reviews, which interweave vocabulary from issues of reform, in addition to modes of the picturesque and exotic. At the same time, “the declining appeal of ‘picturesque’ India for the Victorian imagination – exacerbated by the events of 1857”,²¹ and the subsequent promulgation of a more documentary mode of writing about India is frequently a palpable and authoritative force within the body of reviews of Sorabji’s fiction. Specifically, each of the reviews comments, in some way, on Sorabji’s authorial position as ‘between’ east and west; some commenting favourably on this, on this site’s particular suitability as a location for a translator or mediator between east and west, while other reviews dismiss Sorabji’s literature as a failed attempt at this important act of mediation. This particular situation of Sorabji prevails throughout the British press in its various forms, though the mode in which this construction was formed varied from publication to publication; the intervention from British India, in the form of *The Civil and Military Gazette, Lahore*, marking the pinnacle of divisiveness on Sorabji and her literature amongst the reviews. However, the very modes of construction which work toward locating Sorabji’s short stories within a particular domain, and by extension, locate Sorabji as literary author, are revelatory in terms of *how* this mediation of Sorabji is achieved – often through the mode of the literary, a mode that is curiously denied to Sorabji’s work in various other ways.

Many of the reviews appear to give due treatment to the realm of the literary in their commentary on *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*, yet this consideration of the literary is overwhelmingly geared toward the pursuit or recovery of a ‘true’ depiction of this hidden aspect of Indian life in the form of its upper caste and class women. The *Spectator*, for example, begins with an even-handed assessment of the theme of some of Sorabji’s work, conceding that “There are some striking descriptions of the horrors of the plague, written with sympathy for the rulers as well

²⁰ Martin Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture* (London, California and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002) 99.

²¹ Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing 1770-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 241.

as the ruled”.²² The approval that presents itself in this comment on the perceived mediatory or conciliatory tone of Sorabji’s work is then tempered by recourse to Sorabji’s style as a literary author: “Miss Sorabji’s style is unequal; when she is beginning her story and introducing the characters she is rather inclined to the use of long words, and there is a slightly foreign sound in her sentences, but when she comes to the realities of emotion or interest she writes simply plain and to the point.”²³ Located in Sorabji’s style, according to some of her reviewers, is, then, the presentation of an inverse reflection of the symmetry found in her thematic depictions of the ‘rulers’ and the ‘ruled’; a superfluity in creating context and character that is deemed to work against an even-handed depiction of both British and Indian characters. The idea of the skewed nature of her literary style becomes an increasingly insistent feature of contemporary commentary produced on Sorabji’s fictional work, as well as a mode of contemporaneous categorisation of Sorabji herself. Such a categorisation of the author is furthered in a manner outside literary terms, i.e., through her public persona, by a comment which juxtaposes the introductory notes of praise from Lord Hobhouse and Lady Dufferin with “a charming photograph of the author in her graceful Indian dress”.²⁴ Privileged and elite aspects from each culture are highlighted in this sentence of the review, and reference Sorabji’s ties to such elite positions in both cultures, and indeed, positions that were inaccessible to much of her British readership. Such a connection reinforces the perception of Sorabji’s somewhat unique position ‘between’ the elites of both societies, emphasising her potential role as translator of ‘veiled’ aspects of the east; an alignment that did not always function according to the desires of British commentators.

The Daily Chronicle continues this method of placing Sorabji as intermediary, and tellingly, emphasises Sorabji’s occupation of a kind of symmetrical position between cultures of east and west as conducive to the modalities of the emergence of a truer mediation between the locations. The review begins by noting that the lives of Indian women are so carefully and effectively

²² Mss Eur F165/197, *The Spectator*, 4th December 1901.

This refers to the collection of Cornelia Sorabji’s private papers in the British Library in London, the contents of which have been detailed in the text of this chapter. Further references to this archive are based on the findings of a research trip made to the British Library in 2009.

²³ *The Spectator*, 4th December 1901.

²⁴ *The Spectator*, 4th December 1901.

veiled “that not even men of their own household, much less European strangers, are admitted to a knowledge of its secrets”.²⁵ Clearly stated here is the desired knowledge of the ‘secrets’ of Indian life, hidden from male vision including the usually penetrating imperial vision, in addition to how a depiction of this world might emerge: “Under these circumstances it would appear that our best hope of obtaining a picture of this unknown country would be from the pen of some woman born and nurtured among the mysteries of the East, and educated according to the modern method of the West. That is just what Cornelia Sorabji is”.²⁶ In addition to casting Sorabji in the mould of the ‘in-between class’ of Indians envisaged by Macaulay’s ‘Minute on Indian Education’ of 1835, the review also firmly places Sorabji within the burgeoning mode of documentary writing alluded to in the creation of these kind of ‘pen pictures’. This classification of Sorabji as a kind of exemplary ‘hybrid’ figure is furthered and made concrete through her notable presence in Oxford; the lens of the documenter is turned upon Sorabji here, and again, underlines her endorsement by elite British society: “Though a native of the East she was a familiar figure in the streets of Oxford some ten years ago in her graceful Parsee draperies; and this blending of Eastern knowledge with Western culture is vouched for by Lady Dufferin and Lord Hobhouse in their introductions to this volumes of Indian tales”.²⁷ The manner in which this review favourably notes Lady Dufferin and Lord Hobhouse’s ‘vouching’ for Sorabji’s various capacities as cultural commentator underlines the promise inherent within this distinctly upper-class connection; an elite association that coalesces with the firmly imperialist register of this review.

However, though Sorabji is, through the lens of this particular review, positioned as uniquely suited to the role as mediator, complications of the literary realm are presented as detracting from her potentially positive geo-cultural location. Interestingly, there is a simultaneous move within the review to reinforce the preceding imperial vision through a comparison of Sorabji with those at the helm of British imperialist fiction about India: Rudyard Kipling and Flora Steele. Conflicts of literary genre or form with the fundamental and superseding concern with issues

²⁵ Mss Eur F165/197 *Daily Chronicle* (London), 16th January 1902.

²⁶ *Daily Chronicle* (London), 16th January 1902.

²⁷ *Daily Chronicle* (London), 16th January 1902.

of reform are acutely palpable in this review; the review's endorsement of Sorabji's literature hinges on this very issue. The review concedes that

These eleven stories of Indian native women are pitched on the same note of melancholy, deal with very much the same themes of self-sacrifice, and lift a corner of the veil that has hitherto screened this particular side of life from our gaze.²⁸

However, the equilibrium maintained in Sorabji's stories between subject matter and its aesthetic form is again called into question through a comparison with the stories of Rudyard Kipling:

But they [Sorabji's stories] do not touch us as we are touched by Mr. Rudyard Kipling's "Without Benefit of Clergy" or "Beyond the Pale". Rather the effect is one of strangeness. Not only the landscape but the medium through which it is viewed are unfamiliar. All the springs of action are different from ours, and are not interpreted to us as a novelist of our own race would interpret them. Miss Sorabji presents an alien life from an alien point of view.²⁹

Thus judgement is passed on Sorabji's possession, or lack thereof, what are put forward as exclusively western qualities: of clarification and edification, and the ability to fulfil these purposes in an affecting, empathetic and emotive manner. Despite seeming to position Sorabji as 'between' realities of east and west, and possessing sufficient knowledge of both, this reappraisal of literary skill consigns Sorabji to the more restrictive location of failing to occupy the mode of the literary author in terms of comparisons with a lineage of British authors. The purported positivity of her distinctly hybrid status of western educated Indian is effectively translated into distinctly negative terms as a failed interweaving of subject and form. Furthermore, it seems that the inability of her British audience, as evidenced by these reviews, to situate Sorabji in terms of a single genre of writing constituted a major problematic in terms of her reception and subsequent location.

More specifically, it seems that one of the major perceived flaws in Sorabji's work was the misfit between her melodramatic and melancholy fiction, with the

²⁸ *Daily Chronicle* (London), 16th January 1902.

²⁹ *Daily Chronicle* (London), 16th January 1902.

interest many contemporary Britons held in the lives of Indian women in purdah rooted in the distinctly reformist zeal of imperial Britain. Notes of exasperation toward the heightened drama of the theme of perpetual and unconditional self-sacrifice running through Sorabji's stories are forthrightly stated and at once linked to Sorabji's 'defective' stylistic tendencies:

This implicit obedience to religious or social ordinances without respect for the claims of the individual heart so offends our rebellious Western instincts as sometimes to become positively exasperating. Instead of sympathising with such self-sacrifice, we are merely annoyed at it. This shows a certain defect in the representation.³⁰

This kind of excess in Sorabji's stories – of unwavering adherence to tradition in its various modes, and by extension, the tumult of melodrama such devotion incites within her stories – is a moment of particular contention within the terms of her British reviewers, drawing agreement ultimately on Sorabji's failed act of mediation in the creation of such excess. Revealingly, the *Daily Chronicle* review comments that

Perhaps the most artistically satisfying is "A Living Sacrifice", the story of a girl who personates her twin-sister on the sacrifice of *suttee*. This motive is again self-sacrifice, but it is a form of self-sacrifice that is intelligible to the European.³¹

Though 'A Living Sacrifice' is written in much the same vein as many of Sorabji's other stories, its subject matter - the contentious tradition of sati, figured simultaneously as a kind of metonym for the barbarity of Indian men and the success of British reform in this domain – allows for a sense of heightened excess not accepted elsewhere.

A review of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* carried in *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore, is especially interesting, both in terms of the publication's geographical location and also through the presentation and interweaving of standpoints dissimilar in many ways to the claims laid by British-centred

³⁰ *Daily Chronicle* (London), 16th January 1902.

³¹ *Daily Chronicle* (London), 16th January 1902.

newspapers, but which, nonetheless, arrive at curiously similar points of conclusion. *The Civil and Military Gazette*, a “significant Anglo-Indian newspaper”³², was also a publication which had pronounced connections with the imperial metropole preparing “special overseas editions”³³ and “was employed to carry official announcements”³⁴. A hint toward the multiple perspectives of this periodical – its reach encompassing Indian and Anglo-Indian audiences – is pronounced in the opening line of the review: “The book is introduced to the English reader by a preface from Lady Dufferin and a letter from Lord Hobhouse; but to the reader in this country its best introduction would be the talent displayed in its own pages”³⁵. Thus from the outset, the specificities of reader demographics are marked: “the English reader”, “the reader in this country”. The accentuation of difference in this manner in turn reifies the anomalous status of the inclusion of the review from this newspaper in Sorabji’s archive as the only Anglo-Indian addition. From a newspaper that is often well known for providing Rudyard Kipling with his first employment in India as a journalist,³⁶ and printing a number of Kipling’s short stories in the late 1880s, its consideration of literary positions seems fixed within a certain milieu, its comparison with Anglo-Indian authors, including Kipling, augmenting this association. The review states that

Though Miss Sorabji has many gifts of insight and sympathy, she has not that talent of a special writer which can recreate an unfamiliar society. She is not a second Rudyard Kipling or even a Mrs. Steele, with more than Kipling’s opportunities of observation. But at the same time it must be remembered that Kipling’s special attraction for the European lies in the fact that he regards Eastern topics from a Western point of view, he recreates them as if they were in terms of a familiar personality. Miss Sorabji with all her culture retains the Eastern point of view, and herself needs interpreting to the Western mind.³⁷

Here, the review moves into an increasingly complex domain, as Sorabji is compared, quite unfavourably, with the most authoritative figures on the Anglo-Indian literary scene. Thus, two contradictory elements emerge in this excerpt which

³² Chandrika Kaul, *Reporting the Raj: The British press and India, c 1880-1922* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003) 88.

³³ Kaul, 61.

³⁴ Kaul, 200.

³⁵ Mss Eur F165/197, *The Civil and Military Gazette, Lahore*, 31st December 1901.

³⁶ Philip Mallett, *Rudyard Kipling: A Literary Life* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 18.

³⁷ Mss Eur F165/197, *The Civil and Military Gazette, Lahore*, 31st December 1901.

are worth noting: first, is the valorisation of an unapologetically imperial mode of writing, with Kipling and Steele at its centre, against which Sorabji is perceived to be lacking, and secondly, Sorabji's reversal of this mode of writing is perceived to be carried out to such an extent that the author herself becomes object of this agenda of translation. The distinctly triangular co-ordinates disseminated by this review – the crosscutting domains of India, Anglo-India and the 'west' – are forcefully discernible as the merits of Sorabji's specifically literary skills are perused. Furthermore, what initially appears to be a more 'balanced' constellation of co-ordinates, with the introduction of India and Anglo-India, ultimately augments the complex and contradictory nature of the relations surrounding the reception of Sorabji's work. The specificity of the newspaper's geo-cultural location is asserted at the outset, as it declares the best introduction to Sorabji, "to the reader in this country" is not through her connections with Britain's elite but through Sorabji's own talent, but this is undermined to a large extent as the distinctly 'Western' co-ordinates come into view. Here, the purported skills of literary virtuosos to edify, clarify or to affect are upheld as distinctly 'Western' traits, while Sorabji's portrayals remain alien to the sensibilities of this clearly differentiated western audience:

Nearly all her Indian women are gentle, meek creatures with a pronounced bias for self-sacrifice; the springs of action that move her characters are not the same that appeal to us. They set all the claims of tradition, religion, and social observance above the claims of their own individuality to an extent that becomes exasperating to our Western notions of independence.³⁸

In the case of this review, then, Sorabji's characterisations of the women in her stories are not necessarily deemed false or exaggerated but are yet categorised as distant, their motivations alien. Moreover, this adds to an ever-increasing sense of the impossibility of imagining an effective mediation from Sorabji's position.

The review goes on to consider form specifically, momentarily suggesting the content and delivery of her stories are so far removed from the increasingly emphasised 'western' orientation and readership of the newspaper that the stories serve as a measure of the gap between east and west, sparking a "feeling of antagonism", ostensibly from the 'western' reader:

³⁸ *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore, 31st December 1901.

This feeling of antagonism is a testimony to the depth of distinction between East and West, and a proof of Miss Sorabji's verisimilitude rather than the reverse. She sees the life of Indian women from the inside rather than from the outside. But in order to fulfil the function of the novelist, she should see it from the inside, and portray it so that outside spectators should thoroughly understand it. This faculty she has not yet acquired.³⁹

Both the content of Sorabji's stories and their form, for this review, register the depth of the lack of understanding between the two countries, through this perceived disjunction between the issues traversed in the stories and the mode of expression employed in depiction. Here, Sorabji's work oxymoronically functions through its failure of mediation; the failure of Sorabji's stories to affect, or at the very least, clarify, the lives of Indian women to a western audience, only serves to cement the gap of understanding and to reinforce "a depth of distinction". Ultimately, Sorabji's failed attempt at mediation between two contexts is underlined; tellingly, this emphasis is echoed through the stance taken by the newspaper, as it moves from its initial self-professed multidimensional position to the binaries of 'inside' and 'outside'.

The more distinctly literary features of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* are taken up in both the *Saturday Review* and *Pall Mall Gazette*, both of which weeklies were aimed at a more distinctly elite audience. The *Saturday Review* has been noted as appealing to "middle to upper-class highly educated people", and was, furthermore, a respected periodical in terms of its views on literary matters: "This journal became the period's main resource for advanced literary opinion, taking over from the *Athenaeum*".⁴⁰ The *Pall Mall Gazette* was somewhat similarly oriented; "The paper reported 'news, analysed it, created causes, and exposed injustices' (Knelman, p.37). It was 'written by a corps of intellectuals for an elite audience' (Knelman p.139)".⁴¹ Tellingly, both reviews, in their commentary on the literary merits of Sorabji's work, conflate this literariness with a sense of an essential India or an intrinsic quality of the subcontinent. The *Saturday Review* observes: "This book testifies her literary skill. These stories are gracefully written and should be

³⁹ *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore, 31st December 1901.

⁴⁰ *The Waterloo Index of English Newspapers and Periodicals 1800-1900*, <http://www.victorianperiodicals.com>, accessed October 8th 2009

⁴¹ *The Waterloo Index of Newspapers and Periodicals 1800-1900*, www.victorianperiodicals.com accessed 8th October 2009.

read by all who wish to study the position of women in the life of native India. Through them all runs a tone of melancholy which is truly Indian and a simplicity which enhances the pathos”.⁴² *Pall Mall Gazette* continues this oeuvre in an article entitled ‘A Voice from the East’, and transfers literary qualities onto every aspect of the representation of Indian life, speaking of “customs which, moreover, are full of barbaric beauty and poetry”, continuing “For somehow the metallic clatter of civilisation has a harsh, unpleasant sound when brought into close contrast with the dreamy spirit of the East”.⁴³ In both of these respective comments different elements are, again, held in simultaneous relation: an intrinsically picturesque India which had dominated literary depictions of the subcontinent until a relatively recent historical moment, alongside the tangible concerns of the reformatory efforts of ‘civilisation’. Though both of these reviews are complimentary, albeit in an exoticised and limited mode, the often reformist or at least awareness-raising sentiments of Sorabji’s fiction are glossed over in these favourable reviews of the work’s literary merits. Thus the difficulty of reconciling a fiction with a large tendency toward a melodramatic and often exoticised fiction with a reformist purpose becomes apparent. Indeed, this rupture is one that continues to persist within commentaries on Sorabji’s work, signalling not only a discomfort with Sorabji’s writing continually shown flawed in comparison with other imperial writers, but also a more fundamental belief in the impossibility of mediation from Sorabji’s particular position.

Interestingly, the *Glasgow Weekly Mail*’s review of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* enacts yet another extreme position, in this case with a rebuff of typically respected sources of knowledge about life in the subcontinent, as both western missionaries and the continually revered Kipling are called into question as sources of authentic or truthful knowledge. Even with the newspaper’s generally liberal orientation and a readership that spanned all classes,⁴⁴ its blatant questioning of largely trusted sources is an anomalous occurrence within the body of reviews in Sorabji’s archive. The review is entitled ‘Book of the Week’ and begins:

That the average Eastern does not open his soul to the Western missionary, even when the latter has converted him and added him to his flock, may be a truism, but it is often forgotten

⁴² Mss Eur F165/197, *Saturday Review*, 28th December 1901.

⁴³ Mss Eur F165/197, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9th January 1902.

⁴⁴ *The Waterloo Index of English Newspapers and Periodicals 1800-1900*.

when reading some of the accounts of Indian social customs placed before us by comparatively young and inexperienced missionaries who cannot possibly know the facts from personal knowledge, but tacitly lead us to infer that they do so.⁴⁵

Critiqued from the outset are the often skewed channels through which depictions of aspects of life in India reach British readerships. In this case, the artifice at the core of a certain mode of documentary, or at least a purportedly non-fictional, writing is emphasised, extending such suspicion to the position of the western person in such a position of power, reading or interpreting another culture, tacitly interrogating such a position. Curiously, within the domain of fictional writing, literary writers, particularly Kipling, often appear excluded from such criticisms regarding authenticity or accuracy, or, even more fundamentally, ethical or moral questions surrounding such depictions. In this regard, the *Glasgow Weekly Mail's* review is quite radical, calling into question Kipling's unrivalled authority in presenting Indian life to a western audience:

Hence also the cocksure criticism levelled against Kipling's conception of the Indian character, every critic assuming that he and he alone has accurate knowledge thereof, the truth probably being that to each he has been vouchsafed partial, very partial, glimpses over the barrier that divides race from race, East from West.⁴⁶

Thus a critique of the partiality of the position of powerful, western figures in documenting Indian life is extended to the literary realm, extending this dilemma of authenticity across genres that have claimed centrality in the western imagination of the 'secrets' of the east. Within this comment on authority and authenticity, Sorabji's stories are placed in a distinctly positive light, as the review observes: "It will be possible to present to our readers a more faithful picture of the Indian woman's lot than any mere description could give."⁴⁷ However, even within this overtly complimentary remark, is a kind of essentialising impulse in the desire to locate the singular 'Indian woman'. Furthermore, the tone of the review is more palpably altered in its direct comment on the story "The Pestilence at Noonday"; a story which is markedly riven with numerous incongruent positions and the interweaving

⁴⁵ Mss Eur F165/197, *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, 17th May 1902.

⁴⁶ *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, 17th May 1902.

⁴⁷ *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, 17th May 1902.

of genre. The review's comment that "Everywhere, indeed is found invincible ignorance and an obstinate determination to baffle the intention of the English sanitary authorities, whose task can be partially realised from what we are told above",⁴⁸ marks a palpable return to the sanitising and civilising mission of imperial Britain. Though the review interrogates ideas of authorial bias to a certain extent, it still renders reformist issues broached by Sorabji in her stories with a heavy handedness and explicit bias that the stories themselves do not present.

This misfit between the form favoured by Sorabji and the content of these stories, which so often shun clear classification, becomes an apparently insurmountable rift when these stories are broached as an act of mediation on Sorabji's behalf. The reviews of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* all speak of the volume in terms of how it fails to translate eastern 'reality' into a supposedly western parlance; whether in terms of how the often melodramatic and melancholy mode of the stories results in the alienation of her British readers, the glossing of the frequently grim subject matter, or, as in the case of the following reviews, a critique of the stories' connection with reality. The claims to truth exerted on these stories by Sorabji's contemporary British press and readership offer a distinctive form of mediating Sorabji's work. In a more thoroughly exacting manner, the reviews call into question the relevance and good of Sorabji's work with women in purdah in terms of their property rights, as well as asserting the perhaps even more stinging claims that Sorabji has misread or provides misinformation on various aspects of Indian life.

Both of the following reviews emanate from the perception that the supposed nature of Sorabji's portrayals as melodramatic and grossly exaggerated works to create misconceptions of life in India. The first of these reviews, from the *Manchester Guardian*, purports that *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* may, rather than clarify the hidden, unknowable aspects of Indian life, "go to confirm misunderstanding".⁴⁹ The premise of this statement suggests that Sorabji had in fact created a work of non-fiction, rather than a collection of short stories simply based on the lives of Indian women in purdah. The review continues "After all, not every educated Indian is a firebrand, not are all the wives of all Indian princes poisoned or

⁴⁸ *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, 17th May 1902.

⁴⁹ Mss Eur F165/197, *The Manchester Guardian*, 8th January 1902.

expelled”, charging her with a formulaic construction of character and capitalisation on oriental intrigue. Conversely, the review extols the value of Lord Hobhouse’s opening letter, giving disproportionate weight to his letter by declaring “The value of the book is greatly increased by a letter in which Lord Hobhouse discusses of the disabilities of the *pardah-nashin*”;⁵⁰ a letter in which Lord Hobhouse himself highlights his “partial, incomplete, and hasty glimpses into the interior of Indian villages and domestic life.”⁵¹ This review is significant in terms of the manner in which it demonstrates the direction of the desires of a certain readership toward the ‘useful’ and documentary mode of writing, but is yet internally conflicted, as the partial nature of Lord Hobhouse is nonetheless favoured over a more intimate, albeit embellished mode of writing provided by Sorabji.

The second of these reviews, an article from *The Times Literary Supplement*, provides a sustained critique of the lack of verisimilitude in Sorabji’s fiction that extends to all aspects of her writing. Furthermore, through Sorabji’s personal responses to the particular positioning of her effected in this review, an insight into Sorabji’s self-positioning is formed. In her personal diary of 1902, Sorabji makes the note “Upset at the Times crit. of my book”.⁵² It is the only review she mentions during this year of the publication and review of her book in her personal diary and so stands as an anomaly in this respect. The review is also not included in the folder of reviews which Sorabji had a press cutting agency collect. Sorabji, in her personal correspondence, refers to a number of reviews of the book; for example, in letters to Harrison Faulkner Blair, a close friend of Sorabji’s, she sends a copy of *The Guardian* review, also mentioning “The ‘Saturday’ and ‘Pall Mall’ notices are v. nice”.⁵³ In such an instance, an implicit alignment of herself with the views expressed in these sources is put forth. The review from *The Guardian* covers key areas of contention in other reviews, such as Sorabji’s elite connections, which in this case are slighted without qualm: “Miss Sorabji’s labours on behalf of her country women are so well known that her book hardly needs the introductory note

⁵⁰ Mss Eur F165/197, *The Manchester Guardian*, 8th January 1902.

⁵¹ “Letter from Lord Hobhouse”, in Cornelia Sorabji, *Love and Life Behind the Pardah* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003) 10.

⁵² Mss Eur F165/63, Personal Diary 8th February 1902

⁵³ Mss Eur F165/22, Personal Correspondence between Sorabji and Harrison Faulkner Blair, 9th June 1902.

by Lady Dufferin, or the letter from Lord Hobhouse to the author, as a preface.”⁵⁴ Indeed, consideration and compliment are awarded to both Sorabji as an author and philanthropist, as well as recognition being given to the women in purdah: “The patient, unselfish lives of the women behind the veil are here lovingly and tenderly depicted by one who knows them intimately...May the reception given to this little book induce her to lift the veil again for us.”⁵⁵ Thereby, Sorabji’s noting of her distress at the article carried in *The Times Literary Supplement* provides a contrary stance and the implication of a personal dissociation from the particular views of this piece.

The review in *The Times Literary Supplement* begins by noting Sorabji’s desire to help women in purdah by offering legal advice or counsel, but immediately takes issue with this stance, stating that “Whether the intervention of a stranger of another race and religion into the sacred recesses of the Hindu and Mahomedan home, for the purpose in assisting women in their differences with their relations, would conduce to greater harmony and happiness is very doubtful.”⁵⁶ This explicit comment on the unsuitability of Sorabji’s geo-cultural location for the role of ‘translator’ of colony for metropole is consequently cemented by recourse to Sorabji’s close association with Britain; an association that curiously only works to further dismantle Sorabji’s credibility as mediator. There is, interestingly, no doubt cast upon the veracity of Sorabji’s knowledge of the English language or culture, but rather over her familiarity of other facets of Indian life:

These graphic and well-told tales exhibit Miss Sorabji’s command of English and knowledge of the customs of our own country. It does not, however, necessarily follow that the author is equally well-posted in Hindu and Mahomedan life, of which, at any rate, these tales offer by no means an accurate picture. A person born of Parsee or Parsee Christian parents or parent, is not, it must be remembered, necessarily possessed of more knowledge of Hindus and Mahomedans, their language and customs, than any other person of a different race and religion.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Mss Eur F165/197, *The Guardian*, 1st Jan 1902.

⁵⁵ *The Guardian*, 1st Jan 1902.

⁵⁶Sir John Rees, “Women in India: *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* by Cornelia Sorabji”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7th February 1902. *Times Literary Supplement Centenary Archive*.

⁵⁷ Sir John Rees, “Women in India: *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* by Cornelia Sorabji”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7th February 1902.

Though astute in its comment on the diversity of the population of the subcontinent, it also suggests that a fluency in English and other aspects of English culture, as well as being from a family of Parsee/Christian origin, necessitates a distance between these other communities in India, despite the fact of Sorabji's having worked with Indian women of Hindu and Muslim background before the writing of this volume. This perceived disjuncture in Sorabji's authorial position is further complicated by the fact that the review acknowledges that "The tales do not pretend to be narratives of facts", thus giving recognition to the overtly *literary* characteristics of Sorabji's work, yet expressing a deep unease with the juxtaposition of fact and fiction. Thus the reviewer continues,

as they [the stories] follow Lord Hobhouse's preface it is well that readers should be upon their guard in perusing "The Pestilence at Noonday" against inferring that the custom of purdah obtains among the Brahmins. Re-marriage among them is not any less rare – on the contrary, it is far more heinous in their eyes – than marriage with a deceased wife's sister, for instance, is among ourselves.⁵⁸

A list of Sorabji's supposed errors and impossibilities are thus catalogued, simultaneously etching a virulent critique of Sorabji's authority to represent lives of people within the subcontinent. In a somewhat contradictory manner, however, the review, while taking issue with what it sees as the liberal embellishment and falsification of Indian customs, practices and lives, also places a typical weight on the opinion expounded by Kipling's literary texts, noting:

There are, of course, zenanas among Mahomedans, and among rich Hindus, or Hindus whose country has been peculiarly subject to the influences of Court circles under Mahomedan rule, but the seclusion of women does not generally obtain among Hindus, and the fact is, as Mr. Rudyard Kipling lately testified in "Kim", that even purdah women "have always been in business touch with a thousand outside interests", and are by no means unable to take care of themselves.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Sir John Rees, "Women in India: *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* by Cornelia Sorabji", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7th February 1902.

⁵⁹ Sir John Rees, "Women in India: *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* by Cornelia Sorabji", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7th February 1902.

In addition to the charge of presenting false information levelled against Sorabji, the review takes issue with Sorabji's use of English, observing "The English spoken by Hindus is of superlative excellence, and no Brahmin would address a lady doctor as 'Your Monstrosity, Your Magniloquence, Learned in the English Esculapianisms, we, prince of the people, are your dusty slaves'".⁶⁰ Significantly, however, throughout the supercilious tone of the review, the chief point of reference given is to Kipling's fictional text, despite this seeming desire for factual accuracy. The review goes on to state that "It is necessary in justice to the Indian people and to modern India to point out that these tales do not, in Lord Hobhouse's phrase "hold up phases of Indian society to view".⁶¹ It is in this vein of attack that Sorabji issues her response; in a letter published in *The Times Literary Supplement* dated the 28th of February 1902, Sorabji defends each of the points made against her in the original review, on the grounds that all of these criticised elements of her stories, are rooted in possible, plausible circumstances.

Sorabji begins her letter to her reviewer by stating "The value of this criticism, as a criticism of Indian life and thought, lies naturally in the better knowledge of the writer",⁶² establishing a civil and composed response and allowing for readers' misinterpretation, in a way *The Times* reviewer did not permit in his critique of Sorabji's stories. Sorabji then suggests that her reviewer knows of one part of India only, observing

I have my suspicions that he writes of South India, and from his knowledge of South India. And yet, if there is one lesson which the better knowledge of the country teaches us who belong to the country, it is this – that it is never safe to make deductions of any unknown province from your knowledge of and acquaintance with one province.⁶³

Here, Sorabji establishes her specific position as belonging to the country, cementing this position with the warning that even natives of the country must exercise caution in carelessly applying knowledge of one region to another, thus underscoring the diversity of the subcontinent in a similar manner to the way in which her reviewer

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Cornelia Sorabji, "Women in India", (Letter to Editor) *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28th February 1902. *Times Literary Supplement Centenary Archive*.

⁶³ Sorabji, "Women in India".

emphasised the diverse nature of Indian life. However, in a contrary manner to her reviewer, Sorabji's assertion of India's diversity is rooted in her status as citizen and native of India, and such knowledge is imparted by India itself. Sorabji proceeds to number and catalogue each of the aspects her reviewer deems as false or impossible aspects of her stories; her second point is of particular interest as she refers to the reviewer's use of Kipling:

The later reference to the purdah system and to purdah-nashins ("in business touch with a thousand outside interests, and by no means unable to take care of themselves") is also misleading. The purdah system exists primarily among Mahomedans. Among Hindus it is an assumption. But though in the Western Presidency the families of Hindu rajahs and chiefs, and of such as consider themselves of this rank only, adopt the practice, in North West India all women (except your servants) live in a seclusion so strict that it excludes even other women.⁶⁴

Sorabji refutes Kipling's claim in this extract, contrasting two different contexts in India, and strengthening the impossibility of Kipling's access to such knowledge by stressing that women's separation from the world is often so great that it excludes other women. In response to the reviewer's note of Hindu abhorrence toward remarriage, and the contrary presentation of this in Sorabji's stories, Sorabji defies her critic's claims by raising the presence of "widow-remarriage committees", defiantly enquiring "Has my critic ever heard of this committee, or seen its annual reports?"⁶⁵ Thus Sorabji continually asserts the claims to a possible reality held by her stories, evidencing her claims to personal experience as a native of the country and to official documents, such as the one mentioned above. Sorabji accepts the charge of a melodramatic amplification in one of her stories, where a Parsee priest flogs his wife to death for having breached a ceremonial law through touching their deceased child, commenting "The Parsee story is painted in lurid colours, I own; but here again it was the spirit and principle that I sought to emphasise".⁶⁶ While acknowledging artistic embellishments within her stories, she continually stresses the dimensions of reality and the implicit principles of her story; yet her acute discomfort with being categorised as one who misrepresents the lives of Indian women is thus underlined. What becomes clear is that Sorabji wished to enlighten

⁶⁴ Sorabji, "Women in India".

⁶⁵ Sorabji, "Women in India".

⁶⁶ Sorabji, "Women in India".

her audience on the intricacies and intimacies of India's secluded women, while simultaneously being free to embellish and dramatise in order to emphasise a particular "spirit and principle". A telling struggle is enacted in this correspondence between Sorabji and her reviewer, as Sorabji resists the derision of her reviewer and the review's suspicion of Sorabji's access to knowledge, in addition to the contestation of the basis of her authority to represent Indian women. Sorabji's response to these allegations are largely based on her gender, but also on her specific and local knowledge, rather than the defence of her frequently excessive fiction as being within the genre of melodrama. The nature of her chosen defence again points to the difficulty of mediation which is coded in literary terms – both the mediation Sorabji's fictional work was expected to complete and the mediation of Sorabji herself effected by these reviews.

In an article entitled 'Western Stories of the East', published a year after the reviews of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* in the *Church Quarterly Review*, an oblique response to the critiques and comparisons to Kipling and Steele is effected through Sorabji's own review of Kipling and Steele's work. Though the article is without author's name, as articles in *The Church Quarterly Review* were strictly anonymous until 1907, it is contained within a section of Sorabji's archive entitled 'Proofs and cuttings of articles and letters by Cornelia Sorabji in other periodicals and newspapers c 1900-45'.⁶⁷ The review constitutes an oblique expression of Sorabji's own literary trajectory; promoting her interweaving of documentary or ethnographic form with a more sustained or informed imagination of the minds of those who populate her fiction. Relatedly, it constitutes a response from Sorabji on the matter of placement within literary genealogy or lineage; having been constantly compared to Kipling or Steele in the reviews of her fictional work, Sorabji here separates herself from these writers on the important basis of truthful representation.

Throughout, Sorabji emphasises the rupture between western vision and Indian life, questioning the superficiality of descriptive writing, whether picturesque or documentary, and the artifice and falsity concealed within such literary authority. In what appears to be a direct reference to the subject matter of her own work, she emphatically notes that throughout both Kipling and Steele's work "the life behind

⁶⁷ Mss Eur F165/196

closed doors (this with one glorious exception, in the case of Rudyard Kipling), the complexities of the innermost soul of the East – this neither of them really touches”.⁶⁸ Within this review Sorabji establishes most clearly her views on the position of the author, and alongside this, an assertion of her own authority most clearly emerges. Firstly, Sorabji takes issue with both Steele and Kipling’s modes of description, which though often replete with a brilliant vividness, in her view, only facilitates the emergence of an immediate and surface reality of everyday life, disseminating a partial and often skewed view. Sorabji’s comments on Steele and Kipling’s depictions suggest their generalising outward from the narrow strata of Indian society encountered by the British in India, and though these depictions are deemed valid, Sorabji tellingly notes that Kipling “knows, in fact, *the India that England has made*, as Mrs. Steele knows the Punjabi and his fields”.⁶⁹ Sorabji makes recourse throughout the review to *pardahnashins*, thus correcting the misconceptions of Steele and Kipling, and putting forth not only the need to broaden the manner in which Indian women are presented to a British audience, but also the need for accuracy in the material through which women are presented; thus Sorabji firmly establishes her own locus of authoritative knowledge.

Secondly, Sorabji critiques Kipling and Steele for their frequent presentation of India as monstrous, barbaric or sexualised, in a critique that is, in many ways, akin to more contemporary reviews of the preoccupations of imperial writers.⁷⁰ Though Sorabji disputes Steele’s preoccupation with the sexualisation of India, the zenana’s “unending suggestion of sex”,⁷¹ and Kipling’s repetition of singular, particular types of women (“When a man can write like that ‘tis a pity he should multiply bazaar women and Sitabais and Biseesas... that he should so constantly suggest the lewd or commonplace vulgar”) on first reading, this might not appear such a radical move within the context of the predominantly religious audience of this magazine. However, Sorabji’s critique of the essentialisation of India extends beyond the domain of the sensibilities of the audience of a religious magazine, to a critique of the representation of India as innately barbaric and, controversially, to the

⁶⁸ Mss Eur F165/196, “Western Stories of the East: An Eastern Criticism”, *Church Quarterly Review*, April 1903.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ For example see, Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries* (London & New York: Verso, 1998).

⁷¹ Flora Steele, quoted in “Western Stories of the East: An Eastern Criticism”, *Church Quarterly Review*, April 1903.

implication of the British presence in India with this current in society. Sorabji notes “In fact, there is not so much evil rampant in India as Mrs Steele and Rudyard Kipling would suggest, and for much that does exist the English soldier in cantonments is responsible, though it can hardly be wise to familiarise the public with these unpleasantness. To tell sinister stories no doubt attracts a public of a certain sort”. Here, she extends responsibility for such deviance partly to an imposed presence, rather than an innate quality. The levelling of such a criticism implicates not only sectors of the British population in India, but also a potential audience at home for whom these revered authors could be catering. By taking issue with elements of literary representation that are wrongly disguised as truth, be they essentialisations or over-simplifications, Sorabji positions herself within a particular definition of literary purpose: the responsibility of literature to further understanding in some way, to present an accurate and truthful depiction of Indian society. Interestingly, this involved placing at least some of the responsibility for interpretation on the audience, a move that perhaps goes some way to challenging the positions taken by her own early audiences.

Finally, Sorabji’s review of these widely respected authors ultimately contests the degree of understanding between the two nations, locating in the “hybrid flirtations” of both Kipling and Steele the inability to “focus East and West together, even though your lens covers this group”.⁷² A similar criticism was often levelled at Sorabji: that though she may have knowledge of both cultures, she was somehow lacking in the translation of one culture into the domains of familiarity of the other. Such a criticism is alluded toward in what Sorabji suggests is lacking in Steele and Kipling’s writing – access to different strata of Indian society, and a certain lack of “imagination”, seemingly based on reality but hinting toward an artistic license sanctioning certain embellishment; the convergence of both of these elements tellingly similar to the project Sorabji undertakes in her own fiction. Furthering her own authoritative position on Indian life, as well as recognising the limits of any one person’s depiction of such a wide and diverse subcontinent, Sorabji urges “every loyal member of the Empire, of Indian or English both, who yearns that the two races, linked in such strange destiny, may learn to know one another, must put down

⁷² “Western Stories of the East: An Eastern Criticism”.

the books of these two chroniclers of the Indian Empire”.⁷³ In this most authoritative assertion of the position of literary writing between the two countries, Sorabji marks her own certain degree of incompatibility, as ‘loyal member of the Empire’, but one who, nonetheless exercises powers of critique and highlights misunderstandings that persist between the nations.

The contemporary reviews published on *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* thus engender a clearly fraught debate; one centres largely on the difficulty of reconciling Sorabji’s literary style, form and genre with the gravity of the stories’ content. Though the struggle concerning the integration of these apparent incompatibilities is configured in terms of literary issues, a virulence pervades the terms of the debate that necessarily indicates the extension of conflict past the enclosures of literary circles. Throughout the reviews, the literary develops precedence, be it in the glaring absence of attention to the literary in certain reviews, the dismissal or derision of literary style in others, or the emphasising of the exotic literary qualities to the extent that this itself becomes a representation of India. However, what becomes increasingly evident is the conflict entangled within this furore over literary issues – namely, an outright unwillingness to award Sorabji more than a partial or fragmented authority and the persisting difficulty of effecting a mediation of Sorabji herself. Sorabji’s most fortified response to these disputations is, tellingly, rendered in a critique of revered literary authors in a review of Steele and Kipling’s work, forming a coded but robust response to her critics and detractors. In her critique of Steele and Kipling, Sorabji thus performs the reverse of the criticism heaped upon her own work in comparison with these imperial literary greats, undermining their esteemed work in various ways, yet pointing toward the characteristics of a literature that might allow more than an accurate but superficial depiction of India – the country Sorabji increasingly comes to align herself with in response to her critics.

⁷³“Western Stories of the East: An Eastern Criticism”.

1.4 Sorabji as Literary Author: Narratives of Reform

Modes of reading Sorabji's fictional literature, both at the beginning of the twentieth century and again, with a resurgence of interest at the beginning of the twenty-first century, have, to a large extent, been directed in a quite specific manner. The material that prefaces the volume *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*, both the formal preface from Lady Dufferin and the letter from Lord Hobhouse, gesture toward what was at least an elite public engagement with Sorabji's work in its contemporary moment; with Sorabji's work also receiving significant amounts of attention from sections of society holding religious or missionary influence. The introductory note from Lady Dufferin immediately cites a mode of reading Sorabji's work, commenting that the stories "exhibit to us from the inside, as it were, customs and ways of living and of thinking which we usually contemplate from the outside only, and which we are apt to consider and appraise through the mists of our own European prejudices".⁷⁴ Sorabji's role in a larger project presented as one of understanding and improvement was thus established by this framing text; her intimate knowledge of an unknown and unimaginable way of life utilised to its fullest potential, while simultaneously, clear divisions between India and Britain were also established.

Interestingly, there appear to have been no reissues of the 1901 edition of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*, until a newly edited and introduced edition by Chandani Lokugé appeared in 2003 – the scarcity of publication suggesting a renewed interest in Sorabji and her work at the beginning of twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such a resurgence of interest in Sorabji has been considered previously in this chapter, but what is more telling in this regard is the interest in Sorabji's literary career which still largely advocates a specific mode of reading. Lokugé's advocated mode of reading Sorabji, for example, suggests careful consideration of "Sorabji's own prejudices" which "constantly intrude on her objectivity", going on to note that "what her fiction ultimately renders is a highly

⁷⁴ Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, "Introductory Note" in Cornelia Sorabji, *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*. Chandani Lokugé, ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003) 7.

subjective view”,⁷⁵ comparable to Lady Dufferin’s suggestion that Sorabji’s unique position between both eastern and western modes accommodates a particular vision of the *pardah*. In many ways, Lokugé’s introductory analysis remains comparably informed by Sorabji’s biography in ways similar to the commentary Sorabji’s fiction attracted in its contemporary moment. Though Lokugé promulgates a literary analysis in some respects, through close readings of the stories in the volume and noting the various influences of text and genre on Sorabji’s work, a more widely and incisively considered literary approach is not implemented. The results of such a cursory literary analysis are heavily weighted conclusions where British government decisions are equated with rationality while it is presumed Sorabji’s intent to depict indigenous response as irrational,⁷⁶ or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, designating a young *pardahnashin* as a possible “impetuous feminist”;⁷⁷ in conclusions which miss many of the complex gradations of Sorabji’s literary work.

“The Pestilence at Noonday” offers the widest amalgam of characters in terms of national, religious, class and caste background and a similarly broad array of contesting and conflicting modes through which these characters are presented. As Sorabji’s longest piece in the collection, it is also a text which evidences the broadest scope of authorial positions, interestingly in a story which focuses on the intersections between a rural Indian community and the British presence. The story encompasses the minute detail of daily life and ritual of various castes of Hindu people, in the manner often favoured by Sorabji, in addition to resorting to ‘exotic’ descriptive modes, along with critique of the ‘hybrid’ productions of those who adopt both Indian and western habits, and a reflection on the dialogue between ‘east’ and ‘west’. Although ambitious in its scope and the issues which it considers, the story also attracted fierce critique of the veracity of its depictions of lives and customs, which is suggestive of the contemporary role assigned to Sorabji as literary author, discussed earlier. A possible reason for consternation regarding ‘The Pestilence at Noonday’ within the body of reviews is the story’s direct and unambiguous intervention into the reformist agenda; the story largely focusing on the events surrounding an outbreak of plague in a rural village, the British response to this event and local resistance to such impositions. As Jalal and Bose have noted,

⁷⁵ Lokugé, “Introduction”, xlii.

⁷⁶ Lokugé, “Introduction”, xxxviii.

⁷⁷ Lokugé, “Introduction”, xxxii.

the resistance to the efforts to impose western medicine during the plague epidemics of the 1890s “did not amount to a wholesale rejection of the potential benefits of western science, but represented an attitude of resistance to the intrusiveness of an authoritarian colonial state”.⁷⁸ Indeed, the idea of such an intrusiveness is borne out in a number of Sorabji’s character depictions; depictions that further complicate Sorabji’s position and the contentious issue of narrative endorsement throughout the story.

Sorabji’s use of ethnographic detail frequently forms a part of her stories to varying degrees and to various effects. Curiously, in this story, the use of such detail has distinctly contradictory effects; detail that is indicative of both a blunt, imperialistic tone and at a later stage in the story, conducive to opening up more nuanced meditations on the issues of reform. The descriptive narrative voice, in the early stages of the narrative, takes on a distinctly removed and imperial tone as it presents a procession of people making their way to the temple:

The street presented a whole spectrum of exquisite colour. There were the graceful draperies of the women and the brilliant turbans of the men – for the sterner sex is, in India, allowed the indulgence of primitive tastes for the attractive in dress; and indeed, to the seeing eye, the little procession was inarticulate history.⁷⁹

The inclusion of the “seeing eye” and its view on “inarticulate history” compounds the pan-optic and essentialising tendencies of such an imperial vision. However, this commentary is almost immediately contrasted with a critique of a character who is Indian but has taken on western traits and is presented as a figure of ridicule largely through this description of adopted traits. This character, Gopal, is presented in direct contrast with the more traditional and more respected local tailor, as Sorabji denigrates the tawdriness of Gopal’s adoption of western dress, suggesting only a superficial appreciation of such values, in addition to the suggestion of a merely surface adherence to his own religious values.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Sugata Bose & Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture and Political Economy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998) 110.

⁷⁹ Cornelia Sorabji, “The Pestilence at Noonday”, in *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*, 14-39, 16.

⁸⁰ Sorabji, “Pestilence”, 16.

Instances of what may be termed as positive, progressive or complexly considered elements, but that are yet tempered with aspects which speak of alliances with the imperialist mindset, pepper Sorabji's fiction; such instances are notable in "The Pestilence at Noonday", and continue with the depiction of a public meeting regarding the spreading of the plague. Here, Gopal assumes the role as agitator of what is depicted as a potentially hysterical crowd; the description of Gopal denotes a certain totalising 'type': "The inflammable young Indian...airing his budding eloquence".⁸¹ Emphasised in Gopal's fervent speech are issues central to the contemporary medical reform underway, as well as the perceived resistances of Indians to such reform; resistances which are carefully documented in this speech and used in the dramatic oratory to unsettle the crowd. Numerous discourses, perceived as threats to such efforts of colonial medical reform, are pointedly raised in Gopal's speech. Key among these are the traditions of the domestic sphere and the attendant domestic roles; women are called upon as mothers and wives, while men are called upon to uphold the honour and purity of their wives.⁸² Narrative condemnation of such perceived hysteria is discernable and coupled with Gopal's descriptions of merciless English soldiers and doctors, Sorabji composes a "firebrand" without nuance or complexity through use of dramatic narrative in this oratorical form, compounded by the interjection of the narrator.

Narrative condemnation is tangible in these ways through the character of Gopal, and this denunciation is extended to the listening crowd; the reaction of the crowd is, in many ways, typical of British depictions of Indians as resistant to their civilising, modernising and sanitising mission: "and the poor ignorant people, panic-stricken, ready to believe anything, uncertain how to fight this unrelenting foe, listened to him, little wotting that they listened to their worst enemy".⁸³ This narrative sequence of extended monologue, followed by the interjection of narrative judgement is repeated, albeit with a contrasting speech, from an old Qazi, who, though religious, is sympathetic to the British efforts and is presented as being more even-handed in his assessment of British aid. The Qazi's address to the crowd provides a version of British medical aid that is gendered as female through the model of the English nurse who selflessly tends others, and when stricken with the

⁸¹ Sorabji, "Pestilence", 25.

⁸² Sorabji, "Pestilence", 25.

⁸³ Sorabji, "Pestilence", 26.

plague refuses help so that others may avail of the care of this medical mission. Such depictions are indicative of the heavy-handed approach employed in the exploration of reform issues of interest to imperial Britain in this story; the lack of subtlety or nuance in these character depictions is, in turn, recognised by the reviews which mention “The Pestilence at Noonday”, notably *The Glasgow Weekly Mail* which comments on the “invincible ignorance and an obstinate determination to baffle the intention of the English sanitary authorities”.⁸⁴ However, Sorabji’s depictions of female characters in this story, though occasionally crudely or bluntly formulated, present a perspective which is largely at odds with that put forward through her depictions of agitated, hysterical crowds and over-zealous religious orators. Through more thoroughly integrated and more nuanced depictions, the female characters, to a certain extent, free the story from the heavy-handed imperialistic tone that permeates elsewhere. However, these ultimately more sophisticated portrayals of women are in turn tainted by the charge of recourse to the unfashionable genre of melodrama; such charges qualifying both Sorabji’s literary and extra-literary achievements considerably.

From the outset, Sorabji’s depictions of women in “The Pestilence at Noonday” are considerably progressive, though are not entirely radical. The story opens in a somewhat similar manner to other stories in the collection, within a Hindu household and with a dialogue between a husband and his wife, Sita. This opening exchange is dotted with references to Hindu marriage rites – gesturing toward Sorabji’s often detailed ethnographic style. In addition to this, Sita’s husband mentions the issues Sorabji was keen to address within her fiction, namely the complexities surrounding the education of women and their traditional role within the home: “I am sorry that I let them educate you. It has given you notions which patch clumsily on to the heritage of traditions into which you were born.”⁸⁵ Pitted against this ‘typical’ Hindu husband, one of the similar variations on this type that Sorabji portrays in her fiction, is another of Sorabji’s prototypical characters: the Hindu wife who is aware of her constricted position and alert to the limitations imposed upon her by her husband but who can only resist them in a passive way, in this case by walking away: “she drew herself up to her full height, and seemed about

⁸⁴ Mss Eur F165/197, *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, 17th May 1902.

⁸⁵ Sorabji, “Pestilence”, 14.

to speak; but changing her mind, she walked rapidly away. ‘Sita!’ called her husband; but for once no little caressing creature came to rub a gentle cheek against his extended hand.”⁸⁶ This moment marks one of the more positive and sympathetic aspects of this story, and indeed is in some ways a radical approach to the depiction of women – as strong-minded and competent but still working within a system that did not allow for action that would transgress that system.

Narrative sympathies are further aligned with Sita’s plight through the dramatic preparations to evade the suspicions of the search party by hiding both the old Shastri and her young son in a tree in their garden. Such sympathies are additionally strengthened by the doubt cast over whether the sufferings of the old man and the illness of the young boy are plague related; the Shastri himself admits to suffering from “old age...and the planter sahib”,⁸⁷ in a direct implication of the ill-effects of the British presence, while Sita’s young son has been depicted as sickly throughout, but his illness has not been ostensibly linked with the ravages of the plague. Furthermore, Sita’s hopes to escape the grips of the plague search party, through her sagacious and scientifically informed purging of the house with phenyl and sulphur – knowledge gleaned from the previous day’s trailing of the search party – “to give the search party some confidence in her knowledge of preventive disinfection”,⁸⁸ present an informed and capable woman competent in modern and scientific methods of preventative measures against disease. Yet simultaneously this act casts her as a figure clearly attempting to deceive the kindly, modernising force of the British medics, thus entirely complicating the issue of narrative sympathy here. Medical reform that extends to the domain of the domestic is broached in Sita’s greeting of the party; that Sita recognises the lady doctor from her capacity in Sita’s “own mission school”⁸⁹ is indicative of the extension of reform to the inner realms of the home. The familiarity between Sita and the lady doctor established in this scene thus establishes an expectancy of benevolence from the British authorities, which is ultimately refuted as Sita is taken away by the authorities, in what is largely presented as an overly blunt implementation of procedure. However, even as narrative sympathies appear to rest with Sita and against the indiscriminate zeal of

⁸⁶ Sorabji, “Pestilence”, 16.

⁸⁷ Sorabji, “Pestilence”, 32.

⁸⁸ Sorabji, “Pestilence”, 33.

⁸⁹ Sorabji, “Pestilence”, 34.

the medics, it is abruptly unsettled again with the empathetic concern of the lady doctor who promises to make everything as comfortable as possible for Sita and allows Sita's servant to accompany her, further implementing Sorabji's conflicting stances with regard to the exigencies of medical reform.

Narrative sympathies thus oscillate almost constantly throughout the story, and with particular intricacy in this incident involving Sita and the medical authorities. Here, the domestic is invoked as both object of reform and one of the prime implementers, as the memsahib, connected to the realms of education and health, closely associated with women, is a decisive factor in the evacuation of Sita from her home. From her introduction at the beginning of the narrative, the character of Sita is allowed to resist the various gazes imposed upon her and it is revealing that such an admirably constructed character is used to undo some of the supposed virtues of a benevolent British domestic aid. The kind of dichotomy Sorabji sets up between Sita and the bearers of medical reform is powerful in the various intricacies that it imagines on both sides and furthers a narrative position that is fraught with both a patronising imperial bias and the recognition of the strong-willed and developed subjectivities of Indian women. However, Sorabji's depiction of the character Sita is also wrought with overtones of the melancholic and melodramatic, aspects of Sorabji's fiction which were frequently dismissed or criticised by the contemporary press. In the most cutting review of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah*, *The Times Literary Supplement* fixes its criticism on this melodramatic or unbelievable element of Sorabji's story, undercutting the relevance and nuance of Sorabji's comment on the intricacies of British medical intervention and reform in rural India.

The perceived presence of a certain implausibility or lack of verisimilitude is taken up within this review with a vehemence matched only by the contempt shown for Sorabji's geo-cultural position. For example, the author of the review casts attention upon the presence of the idea of remarriage within the story, citing this as a gross anomaly, "wholly erroneous"⁹⁰, rather than focusing on the nuances the introduction of such an idea afforded to the story: the assertion of Sita's educated

⁹⁰Sir John Rees, "Women in India: *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* by Cornelia Sorabji", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7th February 1902. *Times Literary Supplement Centenary Archive*.

individuality in her refusal of a second marriage and her trials at the hands of British medical intervention. Instead, the fact that “A ‘Brahmin of the Brahmins’ who urges his pious Hindu daughter to re-marry, because she has not heard from her husband in nine years”⁹¹ is given precedence in the review, allowing a possible aberration in the veracity of detail provided in the story to nullify its other more progressive elements. The perceived impossibility of such characters, associated with the implausibility of melodrama, prevents the reviewers from recognising a recurring element in Sorabji’s fiction: her use of such exaggerated or dramatic elements are inextricably entangled with depictions of her female characters, many of which are quietly progressive, subtly moving into individuality. Obscured from the narrow view upholding factuality are the female alliances forged through the use of melodrama, as will be seen in the following stories. Sorabji’s narrative technique, coupled with her intermittently heavy-handed approach to the implementation of medical reform, and her occasional assumption of an imperial vision, the result is that critical attention is directed to those typical features of reformist fiction which stress the ignorance of local people and the selfless aid given by British aid, while the crux of Sorabji’s intervention into such debates is to be found in the carefully crafted but critically undervalued narratology of her melodrama.

As Sorabji was frequently compared with her contemporary Rudyard Kipling, and often in unfavourable terms, as the earlier analysis of the reception of her work demonstrates, a comparison of Sorabji with Kipling here offers potential insights. Such a comparison is not to suggest that Sorabji is part of this particular Anglo-Indian lineage of which Kipling formed a part, or a collapsing of the various intricacies of production and reception of these literatures. Yet there are important lines of influences that can be traced across these categories and lineages, particularly in regard to what may be termed narratives of reform. In this regard, Kipling’s fiction which intervenes in issues of reform, takes a largely disparate approach to the quite similar issues broached in Sorabji’s fiction. In the story “William the Conqueror”, Kipling constructs what has been described as a “famine-

⁹¹Sir John Rees, “Women in India: *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* by Cornelia Sorabji”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7th February 1902. *Times Literary Supplement Centenary Archive*.

romance”;⁹² a depiction of a famine in south India, largely focusing on the lives and efforts of the British response. Though Kipling’s fascinating story notes the competency and determinacy of a female character, William, and elicits a complex and progressive swapping of gender roles, the story is completely wrought from an English perspective. Both “William the Conqueror” and “The Pestilence at Noonday” contribute nuanced perspectives in certain ways to the issue of British intervention in terms of aid, albeit in different contexts of aid; each story widening the dimension of what had perhaps been previously considered. “William the Conqueror” opens with two English men discussing the threat of famine, with one of the men, Scott, declaring that it could not be as destructive as “the Big Famine”, a reference to the controversial 1878 famine, as “Bombay and Bengal report more [crops] than they know what to do with. They’ll be able to check it before it gets out of hand. It will only be local.”⁹³ Reference to this controversial famine, its high mortality rates largely blamed on failures or inadequacies of British response,⁹⁴ strikes a critically considered note regarding British intervention from the outset. Furthermore, a seeming critique of Club life and its trappings establishes a narrative from the perspective of a somewhat reflexive British population.⁹⁵ In addition to this, descriptions of an unorthodox and strong-willed woman, William, whose name, characteristics and even physical traits and gait suggest a masculinity that is admired rather than maligned,⁹⁶ goes some way to challenging the norms of and the perspectives offered through this genre of imperial writing.

“The Pestilence at Noonday”, in comparison, cannot be categorised neatly within any genre – simultaneously a note on the lives of Indian women, in parts an ethnographic document, a commentary on the ravages of plague and both local and imperial response to it, held within a multifaceted and melodramatic plot structure. The narrative perspective in “The Pestilence at Noonday” flits from a heavy-handed imperialistic tone in portrayals of a local crowd’s fervour to one which is conservatively or quietly radical in its depictions of Sita, her capable individuality,

⁹² Alex Tickell, “Kipling’s Famine-Romance: Masculinity, Gender and Colonial Biopolitics in ‘William the Conqueror’”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 45.3(2009) 251-262.

⁹³ Rudyard Kipling, “William the Conqueror”, in Andrew Rutherford, ed., *Selected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2001) 320.

⁹⁴ Changes to government practices were implemented after the devastation of this famine, see John F. Riddick, *The History of British India: A Chronology* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006) 71-72.

⁹⁵ Kipling, “William the Conqueror”, 320.

⁹⁶ Kipling, “William the Conqueror”, 323, 327, 330.

education and empathy. Kipling's narrative, on the other hand, focuses solely on Britons in India, and despite the progressive and carefully wrought nature of these characterisations, his representations of local Indian people are typically blanched, reducing individuals to a macabre crowd of starving bodies, a "rush of wailing, walking skeletons".⁹⁷ Though the spectrum of perspectives espoused in Sorabji's story varies more widely in terms of both nuance and the vehemence with which the perspective is wrought, her story nonetheless encompasses and fleshes out a number of perspectives left unexplored by Kipling's narrative.

Though each story is to some extent progressive, offering depictions and characterisations that in certain ways defy norms of content or genre, their narrative endorsements work to drive these stories in ultimately more specific directions, in a manner that goes beyond the constraints of the conventions of literary fashions. "William the Conqueror", for example, though concentrating largely on famine relief efforts and the capabilities of women through this work, ultimately contains a deflection of the power of unorthodox female characters by depicting William's admiration of Scott as a kind of maternal demi-god;⁹⁸ an admiration that in due course ends in a suitable marriage which ties up the narrative. In contrast, admiration for the character Sita is secured through her reliance on female alliances as well as a sense of her individual subjectivity in the choices she makes; both her education and her desire to use her education to its best benefit are linked to positive female partnerships,⁹⁹ while Sita's respect and mutual relationship with the British female doctor is also evident.¹⁰⁰ While narrative sympathies vacillate constantly and diversely in "The Pestilence at Noonday", and despite the uncertainty of narrative sympathy at the story's culmination, Sorabji's narrative achieves something arguably as complex as Kipling's narrative, whose complexity is somewhat diluted with a neat conclusion which sanctifies marriage and "overwrites the momentous structural violence of colonial economics in the late 19th century in a narrative of companionate duty shared by colonial men and women alike."¹⁰¹ However, Sorabji's version of a perhaps more assiduous female subjectivity is in turn undone to a certain extent by a

⁹⁷ Kipling, "William the Conqueror", 329.

⁹⁸ Kipling, "William the Conqueror", 334: "...a young man, beautiful as Paris, a god in a halo of golden dust, walking slowly at the head of his flocks, while at his knee ran small naked Cupids."

⁹⁹ Sorabji, "Pestilence", 20.

¹⁰⁰ Sorabji, "Pestilence", 34.

¹⁰¹ Tickell, 261.

narrative that, in places, attempts a social realism yet is shrouded in melodramatics that culminates in Sita's dramatic death from a broken heart. This ending, rather than Kipling's conclusion which sees his female character directed into the 'correct' channel of marriage, shapes crucially the larger way in which the story was received, most notably by *The Times Literary Supplement*: as a narrative with no basis in reality, the nuance of Sorabji's content lost in the unfashionable nature of her register and the relative instability of her position.

In a comparable manner, the story "Behind the Purdah" enacts many of the issues close to the heart of Sorabji's fiction: from concerns of the reformist agenda to tales of Oriental intrigue,¹⁰² mysticism and a certain barbarism, to the minute detail that catches the lens of the documenter. Entangled with what may be termed quotidian elements of Sorabji's fiction are the upheavals caused by an inversion of narrative perspective to include a female British character and the juxtaposition of Indian and British locations, compelling a change in formation and presentation of content. Considering the story's double perspectives, in terms of both spatial location and narrative persona, Sorabji's own unique location as both familiar with and 'in-between' both locations should have cemented the approval of her readership who frequently drew upon the multiplicity of Sorabji's locations. However, the story was not allocated any particular or individual attention within the body of reviews from contemporary newspapers or periodicals, apart from a derisory remark from *The Times Literary Supplement* regarding the unlikely English used by a local Brahmin. Nonetheless, "Behind the Purdah", in terms of its foray into complex issues of representation, ideals of 'truthfulness' or verisimilitude and their knotted relations with issues of reform constitutes, in many ways, one of Sorabji's most explicitly self-aware pieces of fiction in this volume.

Section I of the story is coloured with a voice imposed from without, as explanations and translations of the scene dominate and the voice of the third person narrator distinctly cites instances of "non-Western"¹⁰³ practice. The scene portrayed

¹⁰² Bart Moore-Gilbert in *Kipling and "Orientalism"* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), differentiates "metropolitan orientalism", which produced the kind of stability of representation that Said discusses, and an Anglo-Indian tradition, which destabilised this "metropolitan orientalism" in various ways; this kind of distinction is useful to keep in mind terms of Sorabji's use of orientalist tropes, which were used in ways at variance from a "metropolitan orientalism", though Sorabji was not wholly identifiable with an Anglo-Indian tradition either.

¹⁰³ Sorabji, "Behind the Purdah", 71.

is one of a former glory now in a state of crumbling decrepitude; descriptions of a dilapidated royal court which “did its best to be imposing”,¹⁰⁴ compound this sense of decline. In contrast to this opening scene, and with the subsequent scenes within the zenana, is the British character Rebecca Yeastman. Sorabji’s British invention is brisk, efficient and thorough, with little time for the apparent wiles of the zenana or its stifling atmosphere, and she quickly detects a plotted deception within the zenana. The languid, stultifying atmosphere of the zenana interior pervades: it is dark, with windows “barred against all use as ventilation”¹⁰⁵, decorated with “gaudy Western carpet”, while mosquitoes “buzzed” with “appreciative contentment”.¹⁰⁶ This particular space is contrasted with the space of Englishwoman Marion Mainwaring’s home in London, recipient of Rebecca Yeastman’s letters: Marion’s home is “a great block of modern brick”, and the temporary narrative relocation to this space signals a return to “the haunts of civilisation”, with the “unmistakeable cleanliness of English soap and water”.¹⁰⁷ The space in which Marion Mainwaring receives Rebecca’s letters is cultured and learned, while possessing a respect for scientific modernity, as “One end of the room is lined with deep-brownd tomes, of a scientific and medical aspect”.¹⁰⁸ Yet this space possesses a domesticity that also compounds narrative approval. Both Indian and British spaces are rendered in such close succession within the narrative – with the same omniscient narrative voice that denounces the torpid atmosphere of the zenana while revering the clean domesticity of the London apartment – that narrative endorsement appears to lie with this instance of British domestic imperialism. Though this description of contrasting interiors appears to indicate a narrative sympathy based on these dichotomous locations, this is unsettled to some degree through the intricacies of inhabiting such locations.

Rebecca’s journey into the interior of the zenana is marked by various obstacles, including a temporary denial of entry because of a lengthy religious ceremony and “The practical soul of the woman of business abhorred the long vacuity”.¹⁰⁹ The English woman’s prowess is further curtailed as her senses are disabled as one of the zenana women “led her through such dark, intentionally

¹⁰⁴ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 70.

¹⁰⁵ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 73.

¹⁰⁶ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 73.

¹⁰⁷ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 75.

¹⁰⁸ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 75.

¹⁰⁹ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 72.

devious passages, that Rebecca, though excellent at locality, could never tell whether or not the room she finally entered was in the same building as the one she had left.”¹¹⁰ This entanglement of location is furthered by the blurring of narrative perspective that emerges when the narrative temporarily suggests the presence of a counter-view within the narrative, allowing one of the women behind the *purdah* to study Rebecca, in a manner that suggests a lack of complete control. Although Rebecca is aware she is being studied, she is ignorant of the fact that she is being studied with a view to being chosen as object of deception:

The old harridan who directed affairs behind the *purdah* carried back a favourable verdict. “She’ll do,” she said. “She’s as ugly as the toad which croaks in the pond yonder; and she can keep a secret, or may the gods for ever silence my lying tongue!”¹¹¹

Positions of observer and observed are not clearly defined, and this sense of double-edged commentary is continued throughout the narrative; even though Rebecca remains in sole control of the narrative perspective, she continues to be duped by various parties and events continue to remain outside her view. Through this doubly presented narrative, however brief, narrative critique is extended to both the subject and implementer of reform, while the conclusions of this critique are similarly entangled. In this manner, Sorabji’s narrative establishes a distinctly binary account of physical location, only to be entirely complicated by incisive characterisations; characterisations which simultaneously suggest instances of a reflexivity on Sorabji’s part.

Issues of truthfulness or a sense of veracity are registered through the parallel perspectives of what Rebecca sees pitted against actual happenings in the *zenana*, but also in terms of form, as the layered narrative includes various modes of documentation or retelling. Rebecca Yeastman’s musings within her letters span numerous modes of writing which bear the hallmarks of contemporary British interest in the subcontinent, from the hope of “collecting useful *data*”¹¹², in addition to documenting local industry, agriculture and people, and including detail of

¹¹⁰ Sorabji, “Behind the *Purdah*”, 72.

¹¹¹ Sorabji, “Behind the *Purdah*”, 72.

¹¹² Sorabji, “Behind the *Purdah*”, 76.

“picturesque” ceremonies, “so strange and Oriental”.¹¹³ The modes of writing encompassed within Rebecca’s letters, in many ways, mimic some of the chosen modes of representation that are employed elsewhere by Sorabji in this volume of short stories. The effect of Rebecca’s employment of typically utilised modes of discussing the subcontinent registers a moment of self-consciousness or awareness from Sorabji as author. Sorabji’s impersonation of an English voice thus facilitates an explicit rendering of the author’s idea of British feeling in relation to zenana life, but also, in light of this imagining of British perspective, a cataloguing of its modes of representation, in a manner that appears to recognise their ineffectiveness in capturing a comprehensive sense of life behind the purdah. Furthermore, the invocation of the intertext of a play performed by “a strolling company”¹¹⁴ for Rebecca’s amusement raises issues of truthfulness and concealment and, crucially, the attempted deception of a British figure of authority by the interpreter on whom he relies. The deception is uncovered by the implausibility of the lies, but yet draws attention to the perils of a removed interpretation without knowledge of language or custom. Rebecca’s ignorance of her own deception is underlined through this intertext, while her letter compounds this sense of blindness, returning to oblivious ethnographic description.

Rebecca’s subsequent letter invokes themes of explicit interest to a British, and particularly, reformist audience, by drawing attention to issues of female self-sacrifice and the larger trope of the zenana as unyielding to the west’s conception of knowledge. Rebecca cites the thakrani’s indifference to the self-sacrifice she has accepted, noting that the elderly lady “takes things with a large equanimity, however, saying, as they all say in this country, ‘It is my fate!’”.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the thakrani’s forcible removal from the palace by palanquin highlights once more the pervasive trope of the impenetrable zenana, bolstered by Rebecca’s impassioned rendering of the scene:

The breathless dark night; the swift stealthy steps of the harridan as she comes to bind her victim, preventing all possible outcry by a tent-peg wedged in between the poor toothless jaws; the noiseless race (tyranny against helplessness!) through the deserted streets; the

¹¹³ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 78.

¹¹⁴ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 77.

¹¹⁵ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 79.

secretive palanquin revealing nothing concerning its burden; and, finally, the ruthless desertion outside the city gates!¹¹⁶

Through the articulation of these themes and tropes by her British character, Sorabji indexes a certain awareness or anticipation of British interest, and crucially, British response to such issues. Although many of the contemporary comments on Sorabji's fiction in general suggest a blind rendering of these contentious issues, particularly of self-sacrifice that is simply accepting of this fate the author's consciousness of these issues in this story suggest otherwise. Indeed, Sorabji's awareness extends to the realm of form valued and implemented in a perusal of items on the reformist agenda; strikingly, Rebecca's final expression abandons these modes and resorts to a short despairing letter and adopts a melancholia more akin to the tone used by Sorabji's powerless *pardahnashins*, finalising the rupture between content and form to be found in Sorabji's work.

1.5 “Greater Love” and “Love and Life”: Sorabji's Melodramatic Mode

As argued earlier, the failure of Sorabji's literary aesthetic to fit into the contemporary mould resulted in a kind of politicisation of the aesthetic in contemporary reviews of her work, particularly in stories such as “The Pestilence at Noonday”, which explicitly address issues of a reformist agenda. In stories such as “Greater Love” and “Love and Life”, where the blunt reformist agenda is sacrificed for what is, in many ways, a more complex exploration of women's subjectivities, the effects of these stories were again cloaked in disdain for Sorabji's depiction of perpetual self-sacrifice in contemporary commentary.¹¹⁷ The melancholic and frequently melodramatic tone of these particular stories is often cited as responsible for such judgements, which amount to conclusions regarding Sorabji's ‘defective’ representation,¹¹⁸ and finally end in a meditation on the unsuitability of Sorabji's particular position or location. However, a different reading of these stories, with the

¹¹⁶ Sorabji, “Behind the Purdah”, 80.

¹¹⁷ For example, see comments made by *The Daily Chronicle* in section 2.3 of this chapter.

¹¹⁸ See Mss Eur F165/197 *Daily Chronicle* (London), 16th January 1902.

perspective altered from the currency of genre, reveal melodrama that is both carefully crafted in terms of narrative technique and effective in elucidating the powerful presence of the individuality of women's subjectivities.

“Greater Love” tells the story of two Hindu women, Kamala and Matha Shri, separated by age and caste, but similarly joined in their constriction by the traditional conventions of Hinduism. Even in this shared experience of the constrictions of religion that extend to all facets of women's lives, Kamala and Matha Shri's respective experiences are disparate, thus gesturing toward the widening of the domain within which Indian women were portrayed. The separate but intertwined depiction of the lives of these women works toward expressing the many complexities, intricacies and anomalies in the everyday lives of women, while not yet forcing these incompatibilities toward a resolution or implementing them in search of a particularly driven ideology. Kamala, the first of the women to be introduced in this story, is a young and recently wed wife, preparing for the “*kunkun* party” of “the newly married”.¹¹⁹ The description of Kamala at the beginning of the story merges with her exuberant preparation for the party, the fertility and abundance of her natural surroundings referenced in the tending of the revered tulsi plant and the richness and abundance of fruit for the party.¹²⁰ Tied to this concoction of energetic youth and growth is the efficiency and productiveness of Kamala's ordered work; the ability to give order to physical surroundings and to create visible changes within their particular environment is emphasised and is one to which Sorabji returns in descriptions some of her progressive women characters and is suggestive of feminine traits she wishes to promote.

From the outset, Kamala simultaneously appears to be part of a number of intersecting traditions, values and ideas, but is not claimed wholly or simply by just one of these overlapping and often opposing domains. A relentless tugging of ‘old’ and ‘new’ dominates the series of oppositions central to Kamala's existence and for the most part constitutes a struggle between the constraints of religion and tradition and the simultaneously large and more intimate realities of the external world and inner selfhood. This conflict is continued as Kamala waits to greet her guests, in a position of partial control as hostess and ruler of this domain in

¹¹⁹ Sorabji, “Greater Love”, 61.

¹²⁰ Sorabji, “Greater Love”, 25.

some respects, yet from a particular location that, for women in purdah, is normative but that is drawn attention to and made strange in some respects in this depiction. Sorabji presents Kamala as standing “at the door near the outer quadrangle, but well hidden from the road by a great gateway”,¹²¹ the double invocation of ‘door’ and ‘gateway’ reinforcing the divided nature of Kamala’s life, as well as its separateness. Sorabji gives due attention to these concepts of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, though significantly at odds to the manner which Lady Dufferin advocates in the quotation cited at the beginning of this section. The clash of religion with the individuality and multiplicity of selfhood is underlined as Kamala’s emphatic concern for and kindness toward Matha Shri, who is marginalised by her inability to bear children, and jars against the imposition of a tightly sealed religious practice by the elder women who deem such concern and contact with such an unlucky figure as Matha Shri as harbinger of ill-luck.

Though these are, in many ways, the well-rehearsed oppositions and symbolic representation of discordances that recur in different literary representations of women during this time of “representational crisis”,¹²² in this story they are extended further through the connection of women in their individual crises of self with larger forces of society in variant ways. Thus, the inseparability of these domains is emphasised, as well as the impossibility of a clear-cut or unilateral resolution. The passage which follows the elders’ discussion of the dangers of associating too closely with a woman such as Matha Shri, and with Matha Shri’s own self-abnegating retreat from the party, is one which suggests some sense of resistance against such intolerant constraints on Kamala’s behalf. Kamala obeys convention, and despite her covert disagreement with the attitudes of the elder women,

was silent, as became a well-mannered Hindu maiden in the presence of her seniors. But there was a viciousness in the jerk with which she anointed each virtuous forehead. ‘Daub,

¹²¹ Sorabji, “Greater Love”, 62.

¹²² Joshi refers to the nineteenth century in colonial India “as a century punctuated by calls for reform on a number of social and political issues...not necessarily who represented the contradictions and transformations of Indian society amidst a colonial presence, but how; not which representations were the best, but which were better and why. This was a period when issues of gender had become an especially critical locus of debate and were a crucial site of contestation between various Indian and British groups committed to reform in the name of both modernity and tradition”. Joshi, 172.

daub,' she went, with the slimy red stuff out of the silver pot, till each guest bore her stigma of wifehood at the hands of her hostess.¹²³

Chandani Lokugé has noted that this passage is redolent with “the anger which accompanies Kamala’s compliance with Matha Shri’s submission to orthodoxy” and “foretells future ideological conflicts which would end differently, should the impetuous feminist inherent in Kamala actually struggle free.”¹²⁴ While the discontent and notable, if somewhat passive, resistance to the ministrations of the elder women is evident in this passage, designating Kamala, in Lokugé’s words, as an inherently “impetuous feminist” would cast the character in a role that Sorabji herself would most likely have rejected.

Instead of placing emphasis solely on Kamala’s act of passive resistance against the judgements of the elders, Sorabji effects a removal of narrative intimacy in various ways. The vocabulary which Sorabji uses to describe this particular ritual of anointing with kunkun is an anomaly in terms of the familiar language Sorabji usually employs when describing religious or other rituals. The red pigment becomes “the red slimy stuff”, suggesting a new sense of distance from the ritual on the narrator’s part, as well as a certain unease or removal from the situation; the place of the third-person narrator no longer intimately contained or poised within the narrative, ready to offer elucidation on the intricacies of the situation. The strangeness or removal of narrative intimacy is continued with the line which directly follows Kamala’s vicious rendition of the auspicious anointing ritual: “A *kunkun* party is a good old custom, and picturesque withal.”¹²⁵ This statement, while breaking the intensity of Kamala’s somewhat passive rebellion, also reinserts the narrator into a position of a kind of knowledge which is ethnographic in its authority. Thus, the introduction of this narrative strangeness breaks any clear-cut sense of narrative direction or progression, while this restating of authoritative narrative voice in the ironic assertion of the picturesque nature of such rituals avoids judgement on the more complex and conflicted aspects of the character. Authoritative position of the narrator is reassumed but in a manner which does not direct the means or resolution of the fate of the young woman.

¹²³ Sorabji, “Greater Love”, 64.

¹²⁴ Lokugé, “Introduction”, xxxii.

¹²⁵ Sorabji, “Greater Love”, 64.

The latter part of the story focuses on Matha Shri, a woman who is a number of generations older than Kamala and whose story centres on the most pressing concerns of Hindu wifedom – the inability to provide a male heir. These concerns ultimately fall within what Lokugé notes are “the sacred principles of *pativrata*dharma”, the ideal of “the traditional ‘worshipful wife’”.¹²⁶ Furthermore, with the introduction of the character of Matha Shri, Sorabji also introduces an element of intertextuality; Lokugé notes that Matha Shri takes inspiration from “the self-sacrifice expected of the traditional Hindu wife, like Malanchamala of folk tradition”,¹²⁷ in addition to commenting that this character’s trajectory “projects the essence of the Sanskrit play as summarized by Sorabji in *India Calling*”.¹²⁸ Through the referencing of folk tale, Sorabji emphasises the continuing force of the self-sacrifices made by Hindu wives for their husbands and the cultural weight placed on such sacrifice through the invocation of folk tale depicting this sacrifice. Moreover, Sorabji’s invocation of folk tale simultaneously works toward cementing her position as knowledgeable and authoritative; her knowledge of such traditional tales acting as a claiming of access to a specialised, localised knowledge: “in Sudhir Chandra’s telling phrase, folklore was thought to represent a repository of ‘the vernacular mind’”.¹²⁹ The invocation of folk tale reinstates the claim to knowledge that this story, as one of the more explicitly literary stories in the volume might otherwise be lacking. Yet the allusion to folktale and the particular ethnographic authority this might invoke in terms of presentation to a foreign audience does not confine the narrative position to a similarly authoritative or edifying stance in other aspects of the story. Conversely, this assumption of a knowledgeable and authoritative position is set up only to be met with the distinct uncertainty of narrative endorsement which echoes all the more jarringly in contrast.

Though the character of Matha Shri is subject to multiple inner conflicts, an exact narrative position, in terms of either approval or the expression of censure, remains elusive. Rather, a certain intimacy is constructed with the character of Matha Shri through Sorabji’s utilisation of dramatic narrative techniques. The dramatic nature of these passages distinguishes them from other types of narrative strategies

¹²⁶Lokugé, “Introduction”, xxxiii.

¹²⁷ Lokugé, “Introduction”, xxxiii.

¹²⁸ Lokugé, “Introduction”, xxxii.

¹²⁹ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) 3.

employed which do not tend to offer such a probing account of a character's inner workings. Such techniques, most often a form of dramatic monologue or soliloquy given by Matha Shri, forward the internal conflicts of this woman who at times appears voluntarily bound to the duties of self-sacrifice; techniques that also advance the story's plot, thus subverting control of the third-person narrator in yet another way. Though Matha Shri's monologues constitute a large part of the text of the story, they are nonetheless episodic, fragmented with ellipsis and question marks, marking both palpable transitions within the text as well as within the mind of the character. The greater proportion of the story progresses through the dramatic rendition of Matha Shri's dilemma, occasionally punctuated with exchange of dialogue between Matha Shri and her husband Nano; such exchange, in turn, expounding the sense of melodrama within the story, as each exchange or internal revelation work as short scenes, propelling the story to its pathos-filled conclusion.

The final moment of the story also takes a similarly dramatic form, in an exchange between Matha Shri, in her place of exile, and nameless pilgrims whom she encounters in the remote mountain pass where she now resides. However, the final dramatic input comes from a new and unknown perspective, ultimately allowing Matha Shri the peculiar position of knowing her own legend as the pilgrims divulge how Matha Shri is talked of amongst the people of the village. The final scene of the story is replete with a similar sense of drama, ellipses and an evasion of any kind of direct narrative sanction, and warrants quotation in full:

“And what say they of – her? Is there no talk of – her who was lost?”

“No! none! Except – that people wonder at the great love which Nano bestowed upon her, in refraining from using, through the long empty years, his privilege as a sonless Hindu. That was her only glory, this love of Nano's. And her name shines in the glow of it, as the western sky when the sun is in the east. Yes! Nano sought her on the mountains, and even grieved for her awhile; but when she came not, why, there was Sahai so handy. And they even say the old wife wished it. Chimini, the village shrew, suggested things sinister about the visits to the island temple: but no one heeds Chimini.”

Nor did the devotee.... “So,” she said in contemplation, “Nano's great love for her is her sole right to remembrance.... You have laid hold on a great truth, oh pilgrim. May the gods bless you with the blessing reserved for the truth-finder! Peace be with you!”

“And with you dwell peace!” came the voice of the pilgrim through the gathering shadows.¹³⁰

This final passage undoubtedly heightens the dramatic force of the story in another exchange where the omniscient third-person narrator is absent and where the question of narrative endorsement is still evaded. Matha Shri appears content to be remembered through “Nano’s great love”, and the story’s title, “Greater Love”, references Matha Shri’s act of love, and is perhaps the closest endorsement of the great self-sacrifice that runs through the story – an act on which judgement is never openly expressed within the story.

Ultimately, this story gives quite full expression to the constriction experienced by two different women in disparate circumstances, thus not effecting a levelling of experience of what was contemporarily the much commented upon ‘Indian woman’. The weight of tradition falls heavily on both women characters in different ways, and in the cases of both women, quite controversial acts are performed. In Kamala’s case, this is an act of passive resistance toward uncompromising tradition, this act containing a proclivity toward categorisation in terms of ‘impetuous feminist’, while Matha Shri’s self-imposed exile is at the opposite end of the spectrum, in an act which succumbs to the most widely respected tradition of female self-sacrifice; yet neither act is given narrative endorsement or explicit comment. Instead, narrative intimacy is furthered with both characters, most compellingly through the melancholic drama of Matha Shri’s turmoil, yet narrative judgement remains absent or removed in both cases. The effect is a subtle attraction of attention toward the plight of women through a narrative technique, which is itself cleverly wrought, and which highlights the beginnings of subtle reproach by the young Kamala for systems in place. To support this, established traditions of self-sacrifice are coloured in garishly melodramatic hues, producing a depiction of women’s lives that is especially effective in the disparity of tone in which it is rendered.

In a manner similar to “Greater Love”, the focus of the story “Love and Life” is also unevenly split between the narratives of women from both sides of a

¹³⁰ Sorabji, “Greater Love”, 69.

generational divide; in this case, the story focuses largely on Piari, a young wife of the Raja, but oscillates between Piari and the narrative of Sandal Kuar, an older wife of the same Raja. The concentration on Piari's narrative allows for a greater exploration of female subjectivity not accessible in Matha Shri's narrative in "Greater Love"; an embellishment of Piari's story all the more noticeable in the similarity of the issues that dominate, namely the subsuming of personal desire by the dictates of tradition and duty. Similarly, intertextual references throughout "Love and Life" mark this story as more explicitly literary and it consequently lacks the often stilted ethnographic detail of some of the other pieces in the collection. Again, the literary allows a momentary freedom from the position of cultural translator, that is often both designated to Sorabji and assumed by her. This slight remove from the documentary framework allows both the navigation of different issues and the narrative space which facilitates the emergence of a variant perspective; the emergence of this perspective given complex voice through the particular and primarily literary techniques employed by Sorabji.

The issue of narrative voice is an integral part of the working of the story, contributing to the plural but partial perspectives invoked throughout. These incomplete modes of narrative voice, particularly the section breaks and extended use of dialogue, provides a means of exposing the gaps between women's subjectivities and material reality, through the multivocal expression given to both of these entities. The first and second sections are dominated by the exchange of dialogue between the wives Piari and Sandal Kuar, and between Piari and the Raja, allowing a flow of dialogue which is only broken by the narrative gaps provided by the story's sections; such a constant current of conversational exchange undercuts the possibility of a clear narrative didacticism. The complex presentation of the women characters – Sandal Kuar who is shown in many ways as a 'typical' woman in purdah, not concerned with the progressions offered by education, and who is yet acutely aware of her constricted position, and Piari, who is depicted as representative of a 'new' type of zenana woman, interested in the outside world and the opportunities of education, yet ultimately immature and equally unable to effect the position afforded to her – compound the lack of narrative judgement to be found within the text.

The descriptive style adapted by Sorabji prevails at the beginning of the story and focuses specifically on a description of setting and of the women who occupy the particular setting. However, the story is prefaced by the quotation of four lines of poetry, which Lokugé notes is taken from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* translated by Edward Fitzgerald:¹³¹

As thought elusive on a summer's day,
As full-choired music in the murmuring pine,
As rainbow'd beauty in the sunset ray,
As Love imprisoned in a heart like thine!¹³²

The inclusion of these poetic lines forms an alternative narrative voice drawn upon in various ways as the story progresses – a voice which can also not be neatly tacked on to one specific discourse. The descriptions of the zenana and the women within it immediately follow and in many ways echo the lines from Khayyam's poetry; the Orientalist intrigue and aesthetic continued in the descriptions. Sorabji's tendency toward ethnographic style is present in the description of the space of the zenana, "bounded by high walls bristling with the spiky anger of the gaoler against all intruders";¹³³ while her description of the women in the zenana takes on the Orientalist inflection typical of Sorabji's tone when describing the *pardahnashins'* physicality. As she notes of the women, "There were two of them. Spring, and late Summer in apparent age", commenting on the younger wife: "There was the elusive attractiveness of budding womanhood in her face and figure; and the sign of unmistakable budding love about the curve of sweet lip and droop of long-lashed eye. She sat contemplative, one little bare foot moving to and fro across the award, sufficient pendulum".¹³⁴ Opposing this vision of exotic, sensual youth which is yet 'contemplative', is the other, older wife of the Raja, a 'study in discontent and dyspepsia',¹³⁵ a description which suggests a clear generational divide, as well as an indicator of division in narrative sympathy. Notable in these descriptions is the

¹³¹ Lokugé, "Introduction", xx.

¹³² Sorabji, "Love and Life", 40.

¹³³ Sorabji, "Love and Life", 40.

¹³⁴ Sorabji, "Love and Life", 40.

¹³⁵ Sorabji, "Love and Life", 40.

distinct lack of busy or efficient movement, such traits of efficiency appearing to be held in some reverence by Sorabji. However, despite the enforced stagnation that resides in the zenana, a surprising and contrary traversal of the subjectivities of the women within the zenana is promulgated, particularly that of the young wife Piari.

Sorabji's use of dramatic narrative technique asserts its presence forcefully throughout the story, from the distinctly elite forms of literary reference found in the invocation of Edward Fitzgibbon's translation of Omar Khayyam to a more informal mode of intertext in Sandal Kuar's retelling of Piari's arrival at the palace as an infant eighteen years ago. This tale constitutes both a flashback to an earlier moment in the zenana, as well as a moment that has itself been turned into a kind of fairytale or folklore through its retelling to the young Piari throughout her childhood. This story within a story provides an interesting deepening of the depiction of life in this particular zenana, one that has proceeded in the same manner for many years, noted in Sandal Kuar's comment that the event occurred

just eighteen years ago – and yes! it's strange, this very day, we sate, the three wives of us, of whom I was then the last and youngest – we sate, those two who have died, I say, and I, in this same garden quarrelling or gossiping – who can tell which at this date? – but certainly bored with the monotony of life, and longing for diversion – when over that wall there – see! – beyond the white-starred jasmine bush, was thrown – a small ball! How we trembled! What enemy was working to ruin us? seeking to speak through closed doors!¹³⁶

The tale, which relies heavily on invocations of the mother figure, both the Raja's mother – Sandal Kuar and Piari's mother-in-law – and Piari's own mother, proceeds by linking both of these women; Sandal Kuar rushing to her mother-in-law to tell of this perceived attack on the zenana. The story also relates an instance of female camaraderie and inseparable alliance which echoes an earlier part of Sandal Kuar's story where she tells of the tales the Raja's mother would recount: “of the lands she had seen, and the *darbars* of the olden days; of kings who were gods, and women whose friendship was victorious over every accident”,¹³⁷ and is an element that is

¹³⁶ Sorabji, “Love and Life”, 42. This ball thrown over the garden wall is subsequently found to have an amulet inside which Sandal Kuar's mother-in-law recognises as belonging to a friend of her youth on which they “swore eternal friendship, and she promised me this. Her messenger should even now be without the gate” Waiting outside the gate is a messenger with the infant Piari, whom her mother sent away as bearing a child so late in life had provoked the jealousy of the other wives.

¹³⁷ Sorabji. “Love and Life”, 41.

continued in the women of the zenana taking in the young Piari. The dramatic use of flashback and the intertext of Sandal Kuar's story create a layered sense of women's narrative while also removing the need for a removed or omniscient narrator at this stage, fostering a familiarity with the characters which extends past the immediate scene in the zenana garden.

Throughout the narrative, Piari uses her own intertext to give voice to various issues which interpose her existence, largely relating to the emergence of an individual and female subjectivity. For example, Omar Khayyam's lines are first uttered by Piari as she contemplates what Chandani Lokugé describes as "universal desires and expectations of the human soul":¹³⁸

"There was the Door, to which I found no key;
There was the Veil, through which I could not see:
Some little talk awhile of *Me* and *Thee*
There was – and then no more of *Thee* and *Me!*"¹³⁹

The Raja overhears Piari's utterance and as Piari enthusiastically renders her feelings regarding the lines, she is gently but patronisingly dismissed. Piari's next invocation of these lines facilitates contemplations of an entirely different nature: her pregnancy, which occurs in the narrative break between sections. In the immediately preceding section Piari had expressed her desire for the love bestowed on her as a child by the Raja, and in the section before this break, Piari's immaturity is again referenced in her childlike delight in learning. The desire to provide the Raja with a male heir is given voice through the lines: " 'There was the Door to which I found no key.' *This* was it! The Door shut close, the Veil drawn tight. Would it be opened for her? *Would* it? Would the Veil be rent?"¹⁴⁰ The invocation and reworking of these poetic lines works to endow Piari's emerging subjectivity, her progression into womanhood and the reality circumscribed by convention, with a new complexity; a complexity which, conversely, extends to the quoted poem, as its reach is extended

¹³⁸ Lokugé, "Introduction", xxi.

¹³⁹ Sorabji, "Love and Life", 44.

¹⁴⁰ Sorabji, "Love and Life", 46.

past the inflections of the orientalist exoticism of Omar Khayyam's *Rubiyat* in its invocation of the contemplation of female subjectivity. Thus, in a certain manner, the informal intertext introduced by Sandal Kuar's retelling of Piari's history and Piari's use of poetic lines both advance the construction or emergence of a female subjectivity. Although the presence of these separate intertexts appears to achieve comparably separate aims in terms of the construction of a female subjectivity – Sandal Kuar's oral tale of the procession of communal zenana life in marked contrast to Piari's learned invocation of poetic lines in a mediation on constrictions on individuality – both rely heavily on issues of pregnancy, motherhood and more traditional aspects of a certain construction of womanhood. Sorabji's explorations of these conventional, almost conservative tropes of womanhood are yet employed in a quietly radical way, emphasising both the positivity of a collective female alliance as well as an individual female subjectivity which still attributes value and respect to issues relating to mother and child. Sorabji's literary technique – the construction of narratology, use of intertextuality and the melodramatic genre that allows the emergence of issues central to female experience – thus furthers an exploration of these traditionally considered aspects of womanhood. Furthermore, an imagination of female subjectivity is effected which neither completely diminishes woman to the figure of mother yet affords attention, value and respect to this domain, effecting the construction of a female subjectivity in an enlightened, complex and multifarious manner.

1.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has constructed a two-fold analysis in its study of Cornelia Sorabji; it analyses modes of commentary on Sorabji's work in its contemporary moment, and, significantly, returns attention to the literary in an analysis of Sorabji's fictional work. Through its detailed case study, the chapter has also sought to facilitate reflections on the configuration of the literary in both contemporary postcolonial theoretics and the difficulties and challenges this field of study continually faces, in addition to analysing the specific qualities the literariness of Sorabji's work was endowed with in her contemporary moment. What initially

appear as potentially separated fields of interest – present theoretical difficulties or critical oversights, a specific and historically situated body of commentary on a work of fiction, and a literary analysis of this work – emerge as areas that are complexly intertwined.

Theoretical challenges in the present moment centre on methods of reading a text from other zones of the world, as well as the way in which these texts are inevitably mediated through various channels, which, in turn, present potential dangers of contextual, historical and methodological flattening. Critiques of *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* in its contemporary moment index similar intricacies of reception, presenting a case where the literary has been, to a certain extent and in various specific ways, politicised. Sorabji's text reinforces such a political entanglement; her conservative but melodramatic text apparently accepting such staid conclusions regarding India's ultimate barbarity and cementing the drive to implement a uniform and blanketed mode of reform. Yet Sorabji's literary short stories attest to a more complex and various narrative dynamic continually at work.

My introductory explication of ongoing debates in the field of postcolonial studies in the previous chapter, specifically debates of a materialist leaning, has documented analogous deficiencies in approach, particularly with regard to a work whose content and form spans multiple fractured discourses. Such deficiencies have been particularly notable in regard to the multiplicitous nature of the role of the cultural, and specifically the literary, but also the contradictions within these cultural or literary forms. Consequently, the issues of mediation and the potential appropriation of texts from certain zones of the world are intensified. Sorabji's work offers a revealing case study in this regard and, significantly, the analysis of her literature reifies the continual difficulties facing the culturally and historically removed critic. What this reading of Sorabji has highlighted are the problems associated with the dehistoricising of the literary and the practicing of a purely textual endeavour, which in turn may result in a potential radicalisation of a work that is still largely conservative. Yet, conversely, her work is often largely restricted to a reading which favours a biographical or pre-formed notion of her role, in the present and Sorabji's own historical moment respectively. In Sorabji's contemporary moment, as has been shown above, the literary aspects of the story tend to work against other agendas, essentialising and reducing her multidirectional and

complexly layered oeuvre. Recent critical analyses seem to underline Sorabji's Anglophilia and imperialist leanings, undermining the complexity of the vision the very literariness of Sorabji's short stories invoke.

Ideas of the literary and other issues involved in the politics of locating Sorabji in the early twentieth-century reception of her work thus become entangled in Sorabji's various acceptances and refusals of the role assigned to her. This role, fundamentally of mediator between east and west, was largely deflated through Sorabji's melodramatic literary trajectory, with its focus on difference and the difficulty of reconciling the disparate world-views of her characters. Coupled with what was continually deemed as a mode of writing not conducive to a closer understanding between the two countries, Sorabji's reputation was diminished because of an outmoded literary style, or the perceived lack of an empathetic subtlety, in what was deemed the mode of the contemporary imperialist greats. However, what Sorabji's short stories emphasise from the outset is a sense of plurality: in narrative voice, perspective and the often cryptic and crucially elusive issue of narrative endorsement, resounding through to the level of form, which flits from ethnography to melodrama, exoticism to reformist log. In the early reception of her work, critics' extra-literary assumptions were based, tellingly, not on Sorabji's previous and still burgeoning experience, legal and personal, with women practicing purdah, but on evidence which refuted capability to elucidate the intricacies of these lives. Conversely, comments on Sorabji's initially perceived suitability for such a role are based on the approval of Lord Hobhouse and Lady Dufferin, or Sorabji's prominent presence in highly-regarded Oxford, striking in her much commented upon Indian dress; an image that seems to have captured the imagination of a number of periodicals, embodying a picturesque co-existence, albeit one on essentially British terms.¹⁴¹ Such judgements are suggestive of a reluctance to allow a treatise on issues that, in many ways, were at the heart of the imperial mission of the 'betterment' of the colony, from Sorabji's particular geo-cultural location. Uneasiness with the potential prominence held by Sorabji is instead displaced by judgements regarding the literary qualities of Sorabji's work and its perceived lapses, as she is continually compared with the largesse of Kipling and Steele.

¹⁴¹ See *The Spectator* and *The Daily Chronicle* reviews.

Sorabji's self-alignment, in her response to critiques and in her own appraisal of imperial literati, reveal what is, at first, a worrying insistence on the plausibility and indeed, realism of her dramatically sated stories. In her response to her most vehement critic from the *Times Literary Supplement*, Sorabji maintains the, at least, possible veracity of her fictional material, if not outright factuality, citing numerous extra-literary sources in her effort to prove their validity. Tellingly, in this drive to confirm her authority as rooted in fact, Sorabji establishes her position firmly as native of India, eschewing the mediatory position that secured much contemporary eminence. Furthermore, an abhorrence at the suggestion she misrepresents these women underlines the impulse within her fiction to provide at least accurate commentary. Yet, Sorabji's comments on the pervasive falsity and artifice within the realm of established documentary writing and her more implicit analysis of her own mode of dramatic fiction suggest not only the need for a new mode of speaking about the subcontinent, but may be seen to offer tentatively her own imaginative vision, sealed by what her fiction hints at but does not embellish. The stirrings of such a vision are present within a fiction that presses some of the well-worn issues of reform regarding women, but that simultaneously facilitates the emergence of individual female subjectivities, moving this particular strand of reform fiction into a different realm; a realm which imagines a somewhat different readership, one equally concerned with the individuality and generational complexity of the *pardahnashin*, as with the more generalised programmes charged with implementing reform.

SECTION TWO: CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Chapter Two

Textual and Material Politics of 'Things' in Kiran
Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

2.1 Introduction

Kiran Desai's 2006 novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, in many ways, dispels any crude or indiscriminately formed notions of a new generation of south Asian writers merely capitalising on what often appears to be a Western preoccupation with a kind of 'postcolonial exotic' novel. The novels most frequently branded thus are often those dealing with the private, personal realm of the home; novels whose preoccupations are these 'familiar' issues of the personal world, while supposedly exploiting an exotic inflection. Recent criticism on Desai's novel has tended to reflect the novel's nuance, drawing on ideas of transnationalism, globalization and ideas of 'space', 'place', and environment.¹ However, other critiques remain focused on the suggestion that Desai's narrative is bound up with tired issues of a cynical postcolonialism, or, on the other hand a politics of identity creation.² In the former category of criticism, Ronit Frenkel's article "The Politics of Loss: Post-Colonial pathos and current Booker Prize-nominated texts from India and South Africa", is intermittently complimentary of Desai's novel, yet returns to an overarching scepticism which designates Booker Prize-winning novels as conforming to a convention of "postcolonial pathos". Frenkel comments "As astute as Desai's delineation of colonialism and globalization may be, the unrelenting pathos of her novel enforces the idea of 'third world' victimhood whether through her characters' interaction with the west, with one another or with fate in general".³ In another recent, and perhaps more attuned perspective, Paul Jay's essay "Globalization and Nationalism in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*", draws on ideas of transnationalism. Productively linking a "*simultaneous* acceleration of globalization and nationalism"⁴ apparent in the novel, which is advanced by the narrative structure's continual transnational intersection and movement, Jay argues that this narrative

¹ See for example John Masterson "Travel and/as Travail: Diasporic Dislocations in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 45.3 (Sept 2010) 409-427, and Jill Didur, "Cultivating Community: Counterlandscaping in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*", in Elizabeth DeLoughrey & George B. Handley, eds., *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 43-62.

² See for example Margarida Martins, "Landscape and Identity in Contemporary South Asian Women Writers", *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, 5.5 (2010) 439-445.

³ Ronit Frenkel, "The Politics of Loss: Post-Colonial pathos and current Booker Prize-nominated texts from India and South Africa", *Scrutiny* 2 13.2 (2008) 77-88, 81.

⁴ Paul Jay, "Globalization and Nationalism in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*", in *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2010), 118.

dynamism in Desai's novel complicates relations with both globalization and nationalism. Jay is also alert to the intricate personal histories wrought in the novel; however, in his reading, these tend to be configured in terms more 'traditional' to such analyses of personal history in postcolonial novels, as when he comments that "personal experience becomes transformed through the lens of history".⁵

Though it can be argued that Desai's narrative deftly works on the premise that larger issues of the world are often refracted and fractured again through the intimately personal lens of the home, this analysis will complicate this in various ways. It is in this capacity that Desai's recurring attention to material culture becomes significant; material culture, in this manner, occupies ground somewhere between the human reality of the everyday – the things that structure and punctuate daily lives – and the author's attempt to convey or explore these lives at a necessary level of removal. This method of drawing attention to what lies between the polarities of subject and object becomes an important device for both author and reader: by drawing focus toward inanimate objects that intersperse our existence, gaps in understanding or experience, on the author's part, can be accommodated, avoiding the assumption of subject position, a kind of 'speaking for' which could diminish the experience of others. Furthermore, the analysis of material culture forms a significant interpretational tool for the critic as well; on a fundamental level, allowing readers a means of entry into the social, cultural and political lives outside our own narrow parameters, but also offering an oblique approach to the dense terrain navigated by Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

2.2 Material Culture and "Thing Theory"

The study of material culture has received burgeoning attention in recent decades, particularly in anthropological circles. Arjun Appadurai's intervention in this area of study marks a distinctly new direction for the course of material culture studies, one which privileges the actual object in question. Though this may seem like an unnecessary specification in the realm of object studies, the study of objects often

⁵ Jay, 130.

appears to locate its 'real' centre away from or outside the object itself, as something whose significance merely points to another larger significance, whether it be something the object can tell us about the larger social, political or cultural dimensions that surround it. Appadurai seeks to restore focus to the things which are exchanged and which accumulate what he terms "social lives", rather than focusing solely on the "forms or functions of exchange".⁶ From this vantage point, Appadurai seeks to reverse the typical order of the way in which objects, and particularly *commodities*, in the material world are considered: instead of beginning with the human subjects that endow objects with significance, he suggests that "from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context".⁷ This reversal of position is further complicated by considering these things as commodities only from certain vantage points and at certain times in their lives, by adding the complexities of intra and inter-cultural exchange, and by Appadurai's persistent refusal to occupy oppositional modes of thought which situate things as governed either by sociality or by the equally restricting impositions that categorisations of production and consumption provide.

One of Appadurai's main objectives is to dismantle the absolute categorisations that surround objects in various ways, a breaking down of categories which requires a relinquishing of "the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things".⁸ Instead, Appadurai proposes that we regard each thing as having a commodity phase, and thus open up the way in which objects are considered, in terms of their history, temporality, and the social, moral and economic factors that govern their circulation. This primary objective immediately suggests the manner in which objects can most fruitfully be examined: by not limiting the categories under which objects are grouped, such as commodities versus gifts, another important dimension of Appadurai's analysis is revealed, that of the social significance of exchange. These two aspects of objects, regardless of their classification, are indicative of perhaps the most outstanding feature of objects understood in this manner: namely, their refusal to occupy a singular and continuous category, and also, their refusal to be bounded by social and cultural

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 3.

⁷ Appadurai, 5.

⁸ Appadurai, 13.

frameworks. Central to Appadurai's argument is that the power contained in the exchangeability and value of objects is linked by politics, a politics that is governed, but not constrained by, social and cultural systems, and not solely economic gains.

The direction taken by Appadurai in relation to the study and the importance of objects, or as in Appadurai's specific project, *commodities*, allows a break with the Marxist tradition of focusing on aspects of production, and of the commodity forming the basis for capitalism, and also a move beyond classic anthropological analyses of things in gift-giving and bartering. Instead, Appadurai aims to analyse the entire trajectory of the thing, a trajectory which often encompasses many of these states, such as its gift status, so often rigidly separated in studies of objects. By regarding things as occupying many of these states throughout their history, the possibility of tracing the object's importance through its own lifetime, rather than just its connection with its human subjects, is made possible. The ultimate advantage of this methodological reversal is that attention can be restored to the things in question, rather than simply the transaction they are involved in.⁹

This innovative approach to commodities, and to things in general, widens the spectrum in which material culture can be considered, and has particular relevance in the literary realm, specifically the area of 'world literature', an area that has been subject to increasing attention in recent times. Appadurai's analysis of commodities is useful to this specific area of literature on two different levels: firstly, it can potentially provide a way into the cultural, social and political lives outside our own narrow parameters, in a manner which approaches subjects in a suitably oblique way so as to avoid the perils of presuming to offer direct representation; and secondly, and on a broader level, such literary works may be considered as commodities in themselves. In another manner that is significant to the study of literature, Appadurai problematises the existence of a cultural framework around things, recognising that such a "gloss conceals a variety of complexities".¹⁰ This becomes particularly important when an exchange of commodities begins, regardless of whether this exchange is of an intra or inter-cultural nature, where values are not always equally shared. These are often unequal exchanges

⁹ Appadurai, 5.

¹⁰ Appadurai, 14.

and Appadurai so prefers to use the term “*regimes of value*”,¹¹ which does not presuppose that cultural assumptions regarding the exchange are shared, but recognises that they sometimes operate under different sets of values. In terms of *intra*-cultural exchange, Appadurai cites the way in which value and price can become completely unhinged in “situations of extreme hardship (such as famine or warfare), when exchanges are made whose logic has little to do with the commensuration of sacrifices”.¹² Instances of *inter*-cultural exchange carry an inevitable air of additional complexity, “where all that is agreed upon is price (whether monetary or not) and a minimum set of conventions regarding the transaction itself”;¹³ the potential perils of such a transaction are multiplied when the thing under the rigours of exchange is a creative work, in this instance, a literary work carrying all the prolific possibility, and attendant difficulties and miscomprehensions of such a conceptual work. This becomes a particularly useful way of approaching another culture from the outside, and indeed, helps set the methodological parameters of such a study, in a similar manner to the way in which Appadurai envisages a fresh perspective on the study of commodities. By incorporating both Appadurai’s explicitly stated methodology of a thing-centred study of material items, in addition to his consideration of the different regimes of value in operation within any kind of exchange, the basis for an examination of another culture through the materiality present in the literary world can be made possible.

Though Appadurai’s explication of commodities is nuanced and complicated by consideration of all stages in the commodity’s life, coupled with the particular issues raised by both cultural frameworks and regimes of value, the prolific possibilities contained within commodities, and in things more generally, are pointed to in the commodities’ transcendence of cultural boundaries. The way in which commodities frequently flout these cultural boundaries is testament to their significance in the lives of both the collective and the individual. However, this cultural transcendence often offered by commodities is complicated by the social context in which commodities are exchanged: though cultural boundaries may be opened and transgressed in an exchange of commodities, the social context may still show the rigid demarcations between opposing systems of value, uncovering what is sometimes a “minimal fit between the

¹¹ Appadurai, 15.

¹² Appadurai, 14.

¹³ Appadurai, 14.

cultural and social dimensions of commodity exchange”.¹⁴ The implication of this statement is that though people and objects from differing cultural systems often meet in the trade of commodities, only certain terms of trade, primarily economic, are agreed upon, resulting in lack of understanding of a possible social or symbolic role of the thing in question. The point to which this builds is that commoditization, and indeed, the constraints under which things in a more general sense circulate, occurs at “the complex intersection of temporal, cultural and social factors”.¹⁵ By recognising that these key junctures, and significantly, disjunctures, can converge in a particular thing or commodity, the complex nature of the material world can be realised. Furthermore, the way in which these objects and commodities circulate, the lines in which they flow or are hindered,¹⁶ consequently point to dimensions of convergence and divergence between different sets of values. This recognition could potentially offer an original insight into not only the respective cultures, but also the way in which they interact, what is mutually or dissimilarly respected or devalued. By focusing on the ‘thing’ in question, and not solely the forms of exchange – an issue which has rightly become central to postcolonial discourse in terms of the unequal terms of all types of exchange which persist today, be they cultural, academic or political and social – a reordering of the way in which ‘things’ are looked at can be attempted. By extension, this reordering constitutes an attempt at a kind of reordering of the way in which the world is viewed, potentially providing a vantage point which endeavours to oppose restrictive oppositional polarities in all their forms. Appadurai’s important recognition that things and objects of all kinds often refuse to occupy a singular, linear or continuous category, coupled with their refusal to be bounded by social or cultural frameworks, signals a way out of the seeming inevitably reductive categories invoked in discussions of exchange. Such a focus on the ‘thing’ in question – in this case, the literary text, but also the various ‘things’ invoked within a literary text – offers the possibility of complicating the situation that the exchange and reception of South Asian texts are often subject to in western contexts.

If Appadurai is interested in dismantling rigid categorisations of things, Bill Brown, whose study of ‘things’ advances the realm of studies in material culture in yet

¹⁴ Appadurai, 15.

¹⁵ Appadurai, 15.

¹⁶ Appadurai, 56.

further ways, conversely wishes to mark the distinctions between ‘things’ and other kinds of objects. Brown’s ‘Thing Theory’ asks important questions of ‘things’ and an idea of ‘thingness’, questions which situate the significance of things while also not relegating the importance of the subject; in other words, which foreground things but do not neglect issues of the unspecificity of things, the liminality they often encompass, and issues of temporality which surround things. The inclination to focus on ‘things’, on those objects which often demarcate aspects of the external world and lives of people, could seem a measure of distancing oneself from central aspects of the larger issues of life, from broader social and political struggles, and from the pressing issues that govern lives, be it the daily struggle with poverty or the feelings of foreignness and alienation experienced in the attempt to create home. However, the very issues Brown raises converge on issues such as relationships with others, problematic boundaries encountered in everyday life, and the role things play in the struggle against society’s imposition on the “*corporeal imagination*”,¹⁷ situating the central significance of seemingly marginal or minor ‘things’. Focusing on the world of ‘things’ also marks, as Brown notes, a troubling of materialism,¹⁸ and more generally, then, a troubling of literary theory, rather than a move away from theoretical complications that a more intense concentration on the material world might seem to offer.

Questions surrounding the elements that define a ‘thing’ or a state of ‘thingness’ are some of the most important and significant matters which Brown raises. One of the primary ways in which things are distinguished is through the distinction between things and objects. This distinction may seem somewhat pedantically subtle, but such subtleties actually form part of things, are part of the “specific unspecificity”¹⁹ that things encompass. Immediately, things herald a blurring of boundaries that may appear rigorously defined, between things and objects, things and people, things and society, and these transgressed boundaries work to form the central importance of things. Though things possess the ability to transgress or deride boundaries, the distinction between things and objects exists, although constituting a somewhat precarious divide. Indeed these problematics of definition are also part of what constitutes ‘things’: they carry the weight of “the semantic *reducibility* of *things* to *objects*, coupled with the

17 Quoted in Bill Brown, “Thing Theory”, *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn, 2001) 1-22, 9.

18 Brown, 3.

19 Brown, 3.

semantic *irreducibility of things to objects*”,²⁰ denoting a murkiness that a simple object does not. An object appears to allow clear definition, as something which exists simply in its physicality, something which is distinct from the human subject, whereas a thing constitutes something other – it is both the object it refers to while simultaneously referring to and incorporating something other.

Brown goes on to say that we treat the objects that surround us as facts, as items around which we have constructed codes of interpretation that will reveal various facts and characteristics about us, about culture, society and history. Things, on the other hand, project an uncertainty that objects do not; they cannot be looked through in order to disclose some historical or cultural ‘fact’, although they do partly uphold their object status. It is through upholding this partly object status, or more precisely, through a break in upholding their status as a useful object, that things assert their ‘thingness’: “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us...when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.”²¹ This becomes an important aspect of the thing, in that things occupy this liminal ground between something knowable and unknowable, nameable and unnameable, as something which is useful but which renders itself visible through its sudden uselessness. Each of these particular contexts conveys more about a relationship between a human subject and an object, than the more one-dimensional view that accompanies objects in other instances, such as an object being able to simply tell us something *about* the individual, or the collective culture or society.

This quality of things as being one particular thing even as it is something else, or names something else, also marks a distinction between objects and things. Objects exist within a singular functionality; they are used for a particular function, or a particular number of functions. Of course, objects acquire meaning and significance through their placement in chains of significance; the distinction between objects and ‘things’ is not as clear-cut as one endowed with meaning whereas the other simply exists. Brown succinctly suggests that “the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” or that it tells “the story of a changed relation to the

²⁰ Brown, 3.

²¹ Brown, 4.

human subject”,²² and what is most interesting here is that a ‘thing’ can mark change, be it in the way something is thought about or seen, rather than its simply being a ‘particular subject-object relation’. This idea of a ‘thing’ as being somehow created through a moment of change or flux becomes particularly significant in situations where a stable point of reference is not available. In such instances, and particularly in thinking about seemingly stable concepts such as the home, the urge to locate something clearly definable is somehow deferred. Instead, through focusing on things, often of seeming insignificance, values of the home, intersections between the apparently opposing realms of public and private, and experiences of displacement can be considered and explored without the perils of being anchored to a rigorously defined, and often incomprehensive or incompatible concept.

In the effort to differentiate things from objects, the issues of temporality that surround things also foreground their contradictory tendency, of this state of encompassing a number of positions simultaneously. Things could be construed as the physical representation of a meaningful occurrence between subject and object, “a retroprojection”, while on the other hand, things could be imagined “as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects”, a somewhat misleading distinction, and one that is rendered particularly significant when ‘things’ are required to mark their position as either preceding or following human thought. However, as Brown notes, this compulsion to divide things neatly into a ‘before’ and ‘after’ ignores the “simultaneity, of the object/thing dialectic and the fact that, all at once, *the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names something else*”.²³ Here, it may seem that ‘things’ are in danger of shifting into the elusive territory of the unnameable and that which is unaccountable; however, a more fruitful way of approaching a study of things is to recognise the peculiar absence that the presence of a thing can signify, as something which plainly exists, but, for whatever reason, lies beyond the limit of full intelligibility. This idea of things somehow lying beyond what is fully knowable intersects with other issues of temporality – whether or not things come before or after ideas and thoughts. Things mark the site of another disjuncture, where, as Brown notes, things seem to vindicate this “human condition in which things inevitably seem too late

²² Brown, 4.

²³ Brown, 5.

– belated, in fact, because we want things to come before ideas, before theory, before the word, whereas they seem to persist in coming after: as the alternative to ideas, the limit to theory, victims of the word.”²⁴ The way in which things work to discredit presumed chains of action, such as the thing following the thought, or the idea of the human, social world illuminating the material world, works to confuse processes of action and blur lines between past and present. In particular reference to Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, ‘things’ also further this sense of instability, accentuating the continually shifting grounds of home, memory and loss. Though the manner in which such a study of things is conducted, by beginning with things rather than those to whom the things belong, may seem to skew the focus from the subject to the object, questions raised by things do not “abandon the subject, even when they do not begin there”.²⁵ This reorganisation of modes of thought serves to allow a reconsideration of issues that often form the most significant aspects of lives everywhere.

However, things make their presence felt in the social and personal lives of people in a far more striking way than encouraging such a shift in perspective; Bruno Latour has insisted that “things do not exist without being full of people”,²⁶ essentially that one cannot be considered without the other. Examining things and people, objects and subjects, in such a dichotomous manner has obscured much of what is to be found in the relationship between the two. This point reinforces the way in which things signal the value of exploring what resides between distinctly defined boundaries, and the way in which such rigidly marked out categories actually overlap and interact, in this case, forming “quasi-objects” and “quasi-subjects”,²⁷ as objects that are informed by their subjects and vice versa. Similarly, questioning the value that things hold within a given society can illuminate far more than just what particular objects are valued and why they are valued; they can also signify attitudes and structures of power, otherwise hidden, of “what claims on your attention and on your action are made on behalf of things”.²⁸ As Brown also notes, the role that things play in struggles against society’s imposition on the imagination is also crucial, and, as we shall see, a sense of this is continually conveyed throughout Desai’s text, as a myriad of seemingly prosaic things

²⁴ Brown, 16.

²⁵ Brown, 7.

²⁶ Quoted in Brown, 12.

²⁷ Quoted in Brown, 12.

²⁸ Brown, 9.

mark a range of attitudes and values, from cultural snobbery to internal structures of power and stereotypes.

From this, it becomes clear that the respective projects of Appadurai and Brown are not as contrary as an initial comparison may suggest: both wish to locate the particular object or thing as the immediate focal point, and both arguments are compelled by the peculiar power of objects or things to blur lines that have seemingly already been demarcated. Furthermore, Appadurai's and Brown's contentions regarding the role of the surrounding cultural framework, and the intersections of the cultural, social and temporal, also concur. Having noted these concurrences, their claims also diverge at various points; where Appadurai's version of commodities centres around the larger social collective, Brown's 'things' are more closely related to the individual subject, and indeed are differentiated as 'things' because of this relation to the individual. Where Appadurai works toward obtaining a larger, fuller picture of commodities in all their stages, Brown wishes to complicate the view of things on a theoretical level, delving into the unknowable or indefinable aspects of things, and the continually shifting and unstable ground which surround things. Appadurai's aim is to document the different life stages of a commodity, how its status and conceptual features change in accordance with various factors, while Brown wishes to open up and explore the boundless characteristics of things which make them reducible yet irreducible to other categories of objects, their ability to be one thing and yet something other, a simultaneity that is also applicable to their temporality and history.

2.3 Structures of Power and the Individual: Material Culture in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, 'things', journeys and homes are closely, if not inextricably, linked, connecting characters, as well as issues which govern their lives, and so the concerns at the novel's centre. The materiality of life, the 'things' that connect or, conversely, distance, various aspects of lives, whether public or private, personal or related to a larger cultural, social or political sphere, form the heart

of Desai's complex portrayal of the multi-faceted nature of meanings assigned to the notion of home. However, journeys, whether physical journeys across continents or countries, or those which occupy the smaller, yet often more intense confines of the mind, also play an indispensable role in the exploration of the seemingly ineffable 'home'. Adding to the knotted relation of these three concepts, is the way in which 'things', throughout the narrative, possess the ability to not only incite journeys made through a character's memory, acting as a trigger to the remembrance, but also to render these journeys made through memory in a manner that is almost physical, lending the characters a palpable, visceral sense of displacement, as will be shown. This can be particularly noted in journeys involving massive cultural and social upheaval – such as the journey to England to study law made by the judge in his youth, in the period when his home country is on the cusp of independence. A comparable sense of separation and displacement is felt in the relationship between the cook, hired help at Cho Oyu, the now retired judge's home, and the cook's son Biju, as Biju travels to New York in search of a better life in the 1980s. Both the young judge and Biju experience this upheaval in a physical manner, perpetuated by the presence and interposition of certain 'things'.

'Things' are also connected to journeys, and so to the home, in perhaps a more obvious sense: in the very 'things' that the respective characters push to the forefront of their journeys home. These 'things' are frequently reflective of aspiration, be it Biju's chosen 'things' connected to an infallible and luxurious ideal of western modernity, or the judge's 'things' of English refinement. However, these 'things' often not only point to the systems of power which marginalise the characters, but also contain the possibility of *creating* meaning. Sai, the judge's estranged granddaughter, who also lives in Cho Oyu, similarly experiences a life fraught by the notion of a home that seems constantly in motion and out of reach. Sai's story is linked through her own journey to Cho Oyu, and is juxtaposed with the judge's experience through the pairing of their suitcases, which sit side by side. In Sai's case, 'things' and the journeys embarked upon serve to reiterate the sense of instability and flux at the fore of her experience, one marked by the intersection of myriad lifestyles and worlds.

In a manner that befits such a complex overlapping of oppositional spheres, both journeys and things are connected and intersect in the exploration of the home; both of

these concepts are somewhat uncertain, by virtue of not occupying a particular position, and both are in motion, constantly changing, refusing to be contained within just one mode of thinking, justifying their centrality in the examination of notions of the home. Though both things and journeys separately contribute to an analysis of the home, they also contribute to the exploration of a broader set of social issues. For instance, material ‘things’ further delineate and detail a connection with a broader social collective, often assigning a ‘place’ within larger systems of power, this allocation of position itself becoming contentious as the provocative issues of representation continually surface. Journeys, throughout the narrative, also deal with a cultural and social displacement which extends profoundly beyond the home, whether this migration is economically or socially and culturally motivated. However, both the trope of journeys and the continuous and significant presence of ‘things’ throughout, carefully build and reiterate the overwhelming and mutual intersection of the home and the world.

The complications of both the complex interweaving of different realms, influences and attitudes, often converging in the materiality of daily existence, and then the perils of representation, on the author’s behalf, can be noted in the depiction of the cook and his son Biju. In the ‘things’ that make their presence felt in the cook and Biju’s lives there is a convergence of the daily exigencies of lives constrained by poverty with the intimately personal domain of relationships. The relationship between the cook and Biju is constrained by the long distance which separates them, and as a result of years of only a strained and formal correspondence through letters, the cook’s relationship with his son increasingly comes to signify a source of hope that is somehow distanced from a real relationship. Here, tangible ‘things’ become the sites through which their lives are connected, and this intangible relationship begins to manifest itself, often horrifically, in the ‘things’ that interrupt their lives. As their lives become more distanced and unknowable, to the point where even the meagre letters exchanged between them become physically unreadable due to the whims of the unpredictable and tempestuous monsoon weather,²⁹ specific ‘things’ come to occupy this ground between the intimately personal and the constraining uncontrollability of the everyday. This occurs most notably in the image that besieges the cook as he unwraps some buffalo meat; “suddenly he had the overwhelming feeling that he held

²⁹ Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (London: Penguin Books, 2007) 120. Hereafter will be referred to as *TIOL*.

two kilos of his son's body there, dead like that".³⁰ This bloody sight triggers a wave of remembrance of tragic events that have marred the cook's life, beginning with his wife's accidental death and the subsequent threat posed by her disturbed ghost, seeking settlement in the form of Biju's life. The meticulous and constant meaning that surrounds food throughout the novel slowly builds and is carefully crafted, leading to instances such as this, where the item of food is not only of significance in itself, but marks the site of convergence of a myriad of influences. In this case, the piece of buffalo meat is the trigger which makes the contradictory elements of the cook's life become blatant and visible. He remembers being forced to choose between returning to his home village to perform a sacrifice to sate a malevolent spirit's appetite for his son's life and his employer's demand that he stay in his workplace in Kalimpong, with its trappings of a more secular modernity. The item of food that this scene centres around is, fittingly, a piece of meat in a time of scarcity being prepared for a dog that the cook still only regards as an animal. This itself a marker of difference between classes; of those who can afford to treat animals with the same consideration as family members. It also simultaneously delves into the cook's private family life and his relationship with his son Biju. From this core 'thing' grows an insight into familial life marked by the constraints of poverty, clashes of cultures, classes and ideals. The intricate winding of realms of the private and the public thus begins to unravel from the citation of a singular 'thing'.

The prolific effect of the piece of buffalo meat is carried through to Biju's story: through his struggle with immigration officials, to the moment three years later when Biju, who is both working and living in Gandhi Cafe in New York, slips and injures his leg. This incident forces Biju to face the grim realities of immigrant life in its entirety, as again, a life caught between many looming and paradoxical totalities: between the desperate desire for a green card and the necessity to avoid immigration officials, between the polarities of the merciful and then uncaring moods of his employer, even between the shades of light and darkness in a city congested with skyscrapers. It is a life caught between the destitution, humiliation and hatred that Biju faces in his life in America, and yet the paradoxical fact that he still remained. Chapter thirty details a shared, yet separate and mutually unknowable torture of a father and son, building upon

³⁰ Desai, *TIOL*, 178.

the struggles of trying to obtain a passage to the U.S., and then the battle to remain once there is conveyed. The crowded, lonely poverty of illegal immigrant New York and the cook's notion of this new world of which his son was a part is incompatible with Biju's reality, and it is at this juncture that another 'thing', full of metaphorical power asserts itself. Here, Biju looks at

a dead insect in the sack of basmati that had come all the way from Dehra Dun, he almost wept in sorrow and marvel at its journey, which was tenderness for his own journey. In India almost nobody would be able to afford this rice, and you had to travel around the world to be able to eat such things where they were cheap enough that you could gobble them down without being rich; and when you got home to the place where they grew, you couldn't afford them anymore.³¹

This moment is linked back to his father's horrific apparition, provoked by a flank of meat. This small thing, which has made a similar journey to Biju, evokes a torrent of emotion: the insect is a specimen of having fallen through the cracks of bureaucratic rigour, but is also one that has been crushed by the weight of its journey. The brief mention of this insect, imbued with the 'specific unspecificity' of a thing, both reifies an already deeply felt longing for home, making the abstract concrete, and manages indirectly to connect father and son. It links their respective thoughts on the journeys taken, encapsulated in these two things which denote horror and loneliness, simultaneously exposing boundaries of private emotion and the faultlines of public lives structured by poverty. The ability contained in things to overflow stringently defined boundaries, here, boundaries of the public and private, is reiterated in the things that encroach on both men's psyches.

This manner of linking the cook and Biju through the evocation provided by a simple, everyday item is echoed in a number of instances throughout the novel. In Biju's case, these things are often interposed in the midst of periods of palpable loneliness, a loneliness so profound it has the effect of advancing a poignantly self-conscious and painfully aware loneliness. It is in the depths of a chapter detailing such self-aware isolation, and contradictorily, the intersection of a bustling city, heaving with

³¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 191.

many others “making a start on miniature lives”,³² with Biju’s solitude, that another example of the internal provocation offered by a particular thing occurs. Again, it is an incident poignantly centred on an unremarkable occurrence – Biju attempting to find a peaceful space one morning outside the bakery where he works, in order to eat his bread – but one which culminates in his contemplation of the extremities of loss and death.³³ Once more, a prosaic item of food, coupled with the frenetic backdrop of a city rattled by sirens and subways, carries within it the potential to unearth the most catastrophic scenarios, of his father, possibly “Ill. Dead. Maimed.”³⁴ A palpable sense of panic is present as the moment changes from Biju simply eating his bread, to these insistent thoughts that continue to rise. In an attempt to dispel these thoughts, Biju searches “for the bread in his mouth, but it had parted like an ethereal cloud about his tongue and disappeared”.³⁵ In this instant, a simple food of comfort and sustenance suddenly morphs into the unknown, the unreachable, the unattainable and seems to slip from grasp in the manner of more elusive entities of memory, love and home.

Boundaries of home and the world continue to be blurred throughout Biju’s experience in kitchens throughout New York, an experience made particularly poignant as he cycles around the city, engulfed in a bitter winter, delivering Chinese food to the homes of others. Broaching the thresholds of the homes of others makes this experience of division all the more stark and immediate. In a small, fleeting moment, standing at the doorway of the home of a group of female Indian students, Biju experiences a multitude of emotions, divisions and contradictions: simultaneously longing for the home they had made amongst themselves, one “suffused with Indian femininity”,³⁶ while recognising the duplicitous nature of these upper-class, English speaking women, expertly straddling two cultures, and of the divisions present in “this meeting between Indians abroad of different classes and languages, rich and poor, north and south, top caste bottom caste.”³⁷ Through the things they exchange – Biju handing over Chinese food, chopsticks and plastic forks, knives and spoons to the girls, and the Indian girl’s offering advice on buying “topi-muffler-gloves”³⁸ for winter accompanied

³² Desai, *TIOL*, 75.

³³ Desai, *TIOL*, 79-80.

³⁴ Desai, *TIOL*, 80.

³⁵ Desai, *TIOL*, 80.

³⁶ Desai, *TIOL*, 49.

³⁷ Desai, *TIOL*, 50.

³⁸ Desai, *TIOL*, 50.

by an extra tip – the differences in their lives are partially marked out. Biju’s proffering food neither from their native culture nor the one presently lived in is a luxury seemingly only available to those who fit comfortably within any culture, while the Indian girl who answers the door gives Biju words of advice on wrapping up for winter, repeating ‘thank you’ in different ways to encompass the differences between them, both in their respective situations now and in India.

The things in question here carry the peculiarity of the ‘thing’: carrying in its name the “semantic *reducibility* of *things* to *objects*, coupled with the semantic *irreducibility* of *things* to *objects*”³⁹ it clearly refers to certain objects, yet these objects become more when invoked in the particular space of the threshold of a New York apartment in an exchange between two Indian immigrants of disparate backgrounds. The thing referred to in this instance reveals a kind of murkiness that a simple object does not; the absolute spilt between subject and object is not quite made here because of what it invokes, because of the nod made to a presumed shared knowledge through the invocation of these things. This exchange carries within it the power to stir conflicting emotions in Biju, “hunger, respect, loathing”,⁴⁰ but despite the tumultuous feelings elicited by the meeting, it induces a spontaneous, giddy gesture from Biju, as he whistles loudly at the girls through their apartment window and then pedals off as fast as he can, singing a song from a Hindi movie at the top of his voice.

The listing of ‘things’, and the power contained in ‘things’, further asserts its prominence in Biju’s final decision to return home to India. Here, the narrative simultaneously connects ‘things’ to journeys, both literal, like the journey across continents that Biju is about to embark on, and those contained in memory, as in the previously discussed journeys transgressing space and time, made by the cook and Biju. However, the underlying significance of the things Biju buys in preparation for his journey, begins *before* he acquires the material goods that he hopes will solidify this ideal of home. Following a desperate and snatched telephone call to his father, Biju experiences a growing visceral unease, it was “no longer something in the pit of his stomach; it had grown so big, *he was in its stomach*.”⁴¹ Biju finds himself experiencing a self-conscious loneliness; “in a space that should have included family, friends, he

³⁹ Brown, 3.

⁴⁰ Desai, *TIOL*, 50.

⁴¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 266.

was the only one displacing the air”.⁴² Though Biju realises he does not want a manufactured version of home, he still endeavours, as will be shown below, to encapsulate the ineffable notion of home within the clean lines of consumable modernity. But in his seeking to materialise his deeply entrenched longing, an even greater realisation about the nature of home is acquired, one which navigates processes of memory as well as future hopes.

The things that Biju chooses as he prepares to make his journey home, build on the transient, somewhat indefinable concepts of home. These carefully chosen things from the impersonality of “a store like a hangar”,⁴³ are designed to contribute to the creation of a home, a family, both yet unknown. In accordance with the unstable notion of home and its creation presented throughout Desai’s novel, the things chosen by Biju are suitably miscellaneous, some almost irrelevant, coupled with the comfort-giving, the luxurious and the poignant. From the list of things around which Biju appears to construct an ideal of home, there are items which, again, cross and blur various boundaries. Among them is the brazen, unabashed presence of a vociferous American identity in the form of “baseball caps that said ‘NYC’ and ‘Yankees’ and ‘I Like My Beer Cold and My Women Hot’... T-shirts with ‘I love NY’ and ‘Born in the USA’ picked out in shiny stones”, and then a combination of modernity and the personal, the homely, seen in “an electric razor, a toaster oven, a winter coat, nylon sweaters, polyester-cotton-blend shirts, a polyurethane quilt...a Japanese-made heater”.⁴⁴ These things at once, bring a sense of the latest, and very specific technology to the home, in addition to being chosen in a manner that suggests a carefully considered recipient. The attempt to bring forth a materialisation of a notion of home wrapped in a luxurious modernity culminates in Biju’s hesitant selecting of “a bottle of perfume called Windsong... Who was that for? He didn’t yet know her face.” Here, the most outwardly and intensely personal expression of the homely is also the most ethereal and ungraspable, bound up with a femininity not yet fully realised or experienced, and which may not be experienced, as this idea remains elusive, in a manner akin to the

⁴² Desai, *TIOL*, 268.

⁴³ Desai, *TIOL*, 270.

⁴⁴ Desai, *TIOL*, 270.

perfume's name. Yet, the tone is one of hopeful expectation, of confidence in these little luxuries which will procure the desired home life.

The items included on this list have the effect of asserting the simultaneity that Brown associates with 'things'; their ability to transgress spatial and temporal boundaries, the boundaries which regulate everyday life as well as those that lie dormant in memory. The purchasing of these items elicits Biju's memories of childhood, of a time centred on family and the community of his village. The images conjured up in Biju's mind are those celebrating kinship and community, connected with images of traditional food, a kind of implied abundance, not explicitly material, and the well-meaning spontaneity of "A place where he could never be the only one in a photograph".⁴⁵ So while Biju's choosing of digital clocks and toasters appears to create one sense of the word home – the white, bright, empty prosperity that other Indian immigrants in America had secured –⁴⁶ it also simultaneously affirms its opposite, perhaps a home where these 'things' are not required. The jolt provided by these things, in their tangible materiality, simultaneously and yet paradoxically appears to induce an altered perception of what home means on a conceptual level. Encountering the material thus facilitates a transition in the way in which the home is thought about, from the enforced and perpetually distanced notion of 'home' encountered in Biju's time in New York, to the realisation which provokes Biju's decision to return home: a snatched, emergency telephone call with his father, which reinforces the fact that "They were no longer relevant to each other's lives except for the hope that they *would be* relevant".⁴⁷ It is, perhaps, this space between father and son that Biju wishes to fill with material things, yet they are things which are ultimately shown to be superfluous. Here, these physical, material things, bought with an idea of home in mind, are affirmed as being productive of meaning, in the sense of creating a meaning of deeper significance, and not just reflective of aspiration.

This conceptual change is fully compounded a number of chapters later as Biju's journey home comes to an end. Toward the end of his long journey, Biju is stripped of his possessions by the Gorkha National Liberation Front men who have been carrying him in their truck on the final stretch of his passage. The stripping of all

⁴⁵ Desai, *TIOL*, 270.

⁴⁶ Desai, *TIOL*, 149.

⁴⁷ Desai, *TIOL*, 232.

the materiality Biju has accrued holds clear symbolic weight: he is returning home stripped of everything he had left to acquire – wealth, stature, the material ‘things’ that embody the benefits of the west. Following the stripping of his clothes and his newly accumulated certainty, Biju’s emasculation is compounded when he is given a woman’s nightgown to wear for his triumphant arrival home. A journey that has been mapped out with reference to various ‘things’, now significantly ends with one, which accumulates a strange importance itself. Even this woman’s nightgown, representative of Biju’s lost pride, carries within it the potent significance of a thing: “It had large, faded pink flowers and yellow, puffy sleeves, ruffles at the neck and hem. It must have been carefully picked from a pile at the bazaar.”⁴⁸ Although forming a metaphorical significance in Biju’s story, this nightgown also clearly carries its own import, reasserting the validity in beginning by considering the ‘thing’, rather than with those to whom the thing belongs. This nightgown has evidently had other significances and its life as a ‘thing’ does not merely begin with Biju’s degradation, thus reaffirming the way in which ‘things’ incorporate numerous timelines and histories, and reiterating Brown’s conjecture that while things do not start with the subject, they also do not abandon questions of the subject. It simultaneously asserts the small banalities of the situation – a “toothless crone”⁴⁹ robbed of her carefully chosen nightgown – alongside Biju’s tumultuous feelings and almost epic voyage towards an ever-elusive ‘home’. Again, it is a ‘thing’ which creates a moment of altered consciousness; as Biju stands alone in a darkened forest, naked except for the nightgown, he suddenly “felt an old throbbing of the knee that he had hurt slipping on Harish-Harry’s floor”.⁵⁰ The longings felt for home and the weight of his journey that were first induced by an accident in Gandhi Cafe in New York, now returns as a physical force as he is now, once again, emptied of materiality but still harbouring a deep, physical ache.

Throughout the exploration of ‘things’ in the cook and Biju’s lives, it can be seen that public and private worlds not only overlap but mutually inform and constitute the other; a convergence that makes its presence palpably, physically present in various ‘things’. An understanding of what ‘home’ might mean appears to elude these characters in a way that is closely linked to material existence, most clearly notable in

⁴⁸ Desai, *TIOL*, 318.

⁴⁹ Desai, *TIOL*, 317.

⁵⁰ Desai, *TIOL*, 318.

Biju's attempts to create home in consumable items of modernity he purchases before his return to Kalimpong. Ineffable notions of the home also distance themselves in the material existence of both the cook and Biju through the blurring of the public and private in their lives; their position in their respective societies mean these usually distinct realms slide into one – in the cook's case, he is the hired help who maintains another's home; in Biju's case, this most strikingly occurs when his workplace in Gandhi cafe also becomes his home. The impossibility of separating the wider world and the home is illustrated through the things that interpose their lives: from the economic hold over trade evident in the sack of basmati rice from India but which could not be afforded there, to the cultural hold evident, which convinces Biju of his need for t-shirts exalting American culture to bring forth a materialisation of 'home'.

In a manner that is dissimilar in terms of economic, social and cultural motivation, yet comparable in the intensity of the sense of upheaval and displacement, the judge's journey to England in the 1940s explores notions of home and belonging, in terms of both private and public worlds. In the passages dealing with the young judge's lonely, partly self-imposed exile in Cambridge, and his later, similarly interstitial and exilic retired years in Kalimpong, which are interwoven throughout the narrative, the affective power of 'things' is revealed in new ways. Through both an examination of 'things' and the journeys taken to and from centres and peripheries of aspiration, this sense of the unsettling power of the crossovers between the home and the world again becomes apparent, although in ways that are shaded differently by the author.

2.4 The Judge: Home and Belonging

What is striking in the depiction of the largely reclusive and emotionally sequestered judge is the emotive power contained in the objects which dot his story; not only do these things have the power to rouse moments of heart-rending separation or biting loneliness, they also contain the ability to rouse a plethora of other occurrences, similar in their emotional intensity, and similarly initiated by things. Desai's creation of the judge, as with other characters, is largely depicted through the things which impose

themselves in the characters' psyches, yet the way in which emotions are drawn out from 'things' in the judge's story is pursued in a manner dissimilar to the altogether more cloistered manner that emotions are unleashed in the interwoven narratives of the cook and Biju. Desai appears altogether more surefooted with the particular intricacies of the judge's story; a point that can be noted most clearly through the subtle yet powerful shifts in her narrative technique. Though the character of the judge bears the burden of an unsympathetic characterisation, the reader is, arguably, brought deeper into his consciousness than any other character. Desai continually employs 'things' as a means of probing the judge's consciousness, and does not hold back from the potentially consuming consequences of delving into such inner recesses – a restraint that appears to more closely shape her development of the cook and Biju.

The judge's story begins with an undertone of the affective power of journeys; an undercurrent which yet seems suffused by the cloud and shadow laden atmosphere of Cho Oyu. In a manner akin to the delineation of the other characters' stories wrought by tumultuous voyages, the judge's journey, too, is recounted through the effable nature of 'things'; indeed, it is the sight of two suitcases, one with the title "Miss S. Mistry, St. Augustine's Convent" written on it, the other carrying the name "Mr. J.P. Patel, SS *Strathnaver*",⁵¹ belonging to his granddaughter Sai and himself, respectively, which elicits painful memories of dislocation from home and homeland. These seemingly ordinary items incite a journey through a past marred by complex contradictory emotions, a journey that can in turn be traced through other 'things', various inanimate, seemingly innocuous things, which hold the power to unleash a whole array of feelings. The suitcases, which the band of intruders into his home in Kalimpong use to pack up their loot, do not rouse worries for the present or future but send him plunging back into his dreaded past, and see him pushed back to the beginning of his journey made with these suitcases. The journey to England that the judge had embarked on years ago with that very case is both continued and relived now, forming both the beginning and the continuation of a life shaped by oppositions, and the complications and contradictions brought about by a life lived between such poles.

The suitcases which educe memories of a voyage that would forever taint the judge's psychological landscape, rendering him incapable of not knowing "love for a

⁵¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 8, 37.

human being that wasn't adulterated by another, contradictory emotion",⁵² launch a narrative through other things that also recall mixed and unsure feelings, emotions that invade the senses as well as the psyche. The judge's first journey away from home is retrospectively relived in the early scenes of the novel due to the arrival of his estranged, recently orphaned granddaughter at his home and the effect of seeing his own suitcase aligned with hers, also inducing memories similarly tagged with 'things'. Here, in these relived introspections, the presence of a banana, packed by a well-meaning mother, but that had been "slain by heat"⁵³ on its travels, permeates the judge's senses now as it did in his small cabin on the SS *Strathnaver* all those years ago. That the pervading smell of this dying fruit caused his cabinmate's nose to twitch disdainfully, making this intensely private degradation public, hints at the complex intersection of realms contained within the banality of the everyday. This item, having been packed in preparation for a whole array of contingencies, including one that seems to sting the younger Jemu's pride the most – that he might not have had the courage to go to the ship's dining room as he could not properly use a knife and fork – only serves to pre-empt Jemu's humiliation. It situates the domain of 'things' in the area of borders and divisions, in the intermediate realm of the interstitial, residing somewhere between what is public and private. In addition to this, 'things' are marked as created in a moment of change or flux, as expounded by Brown; this particular 'thing' marking the change from young Jemu's trusting of the "foolish faith with which he had lived in Piphit",⁵⁴ and by extension, the way he had loved within his home, to being disgusted and ashamed of what he terms "Undignified love, Indian love, stinking, unaesthetic love",⁵⁵ contaminated by the messy and confused ties of the home. Conversely, once the banana is hastily removed and flung into the ocean, the absence of the potent smell takes on an intensity in itself, and what is left is "the stink of fear and loneliness perfectly exposed",⁵⁶ serving only to compound the contradictoriness of this moment of change.

A similarly insignificant item, but weighted with the immensity of Jemu's quelled emotion, is made prominent a number of pages later. In this instance, a shaving

⁵²Desai, *TIOL*, 37.

⁵³Desai, *TIOL*, 37.

⁵⁴Desai, *TIOL*, 36.

⁵⁵Desai, *TIOL*, 38.

⁵⁶Desai, *TIOL*, 38.

brush forms the point of contact between two people, two worlds, and the intersection of these disparate points of contact. Seeking to avoid the tiny familiarities involved in buying goods from his local shop, Jemu treks to shops further away. In one of these anonymous shops, the attendant flippantly comments that the shaving brush Jemu is buying is identical to the one her husband owns. For an instant, Jemu's suffocatingly small world almost touches the world of another through this small object and, again, a thing without any large significance in itself manages to carry within it all that Jemu both desired and wished to erase; the astounding intimacy of the connection made between the woman's husband and Jemu through their similar objects, the intimacies of family and home, the intimacies of daily routine. In this moment, the things of the 'home world' are made strange, de-familiarised in the context of the immigrant experience, and in Jemu's particular, somewhat self-imposed exile; this kind of easy familiarity is "unbearable" in its closeness, as the suggestion of his likeness to another man contains connotations of "boldness",⁵⁷ so strange is this possible similarity. Through the medium of things, the destabilising of the familiar is established, and is a trend which is continued throughout the judge's story. The effect of bringing the supposed familiarity of the home into relation with the often jarring nature of the world, in particular, the world of the 'unhomed' colonial or postcolonial subject, is to underline a narrative position which continually exposes the interstitial zones of the crevices between the home and the world for consideration, whilst further complicating these categories; a topic which runs through the collective narrative of *The Inheritance of Loss*.

This journey through memory continues as Gyan, his granddaughter Sai's Nepali tutor, shows his unease with foreign food and cutlery at the dinner table in Cho Oyu, while his further awkwardness with poetry catapults the judge back forty years to when he had been a student of poetry.⁵⁸ The way in which this unfamiliar food and rudimentary knowledge of poetry sit uneasily in Gyan's mouth acts as a trigger to the judge's memory, and recollections of the remainder of his time spent in England flood his mind. These memories are similarly dotted with an array of 'things', documenting his status of social and cultural misfit. Just as Gyan exemplifies someone who is caught between numerous world views, cultural and political ideologies, young Jemu seems to

⁵⁷ Desai, *TIOL*, 38.

⁵⁸ Desai, *TIOL*, 110.

exhibit a comparable marginal status. However, these recollections offer a view of a young man who occupies more than simply a marginal position: he is marginal on both sides of the opposition of Indian and English. This is most clearly detailed through the misplacement of ‘things’ within the judge’s worldview. The ill-fit between the two worlds of which Jemu was both forcibly and reluctantly made a part, is made apparent in a manner comparable to Gyan’s unease with the poetry of Tagore: as Jemu trawls the university library, the degree of nonconformity between representations of the ‘other’ country, and its actuality becomes apparent. Rankled by Gyan’s ineffectuality in the realm of poetry, this brief scene from the library in the judge’s youth is uncovered:

The library had never been open long enough.

He arrived as it opened, departed when it closed, for it was the rescuer of foreign students, proffered privacy and a lack of thugs.

He read a book entitled *Expedition to Goozerat*: ‘The Malabar coast undulates in the shape of a wave up the western flank of India, and then, in a graceful motion, gestures toward the Arabian sea. This is Goozerat. At the river deltas and along the malarial coasts lie towns configured for trade...’

What on earth was all of this? It had nothing to do with what he remembered of his home, of the Patels and their life in the Patel warren, and yet, when he unfolded the map he found Piphit. There it was – a mosquito speck by the side of a sulky river.⁵⁹

Through the things Jemu reads about in this fanciful book lauding British imperialism, itself a ‘thing’, the intersection of history, temporality, and the social and cultural factors that govern the circulation of objects becomes apparent. Following Appadurai, who stresses the need to break with the customary searching for the “magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things”,⁶⁰ the desirability of relinquishing such oppositional categorisation in the realm of objects becomes apparent in this specific moment. Lines of past conquests and the present complexity of migration to the hub of the Empire are blurred through the position this book occupies; the imbalanced ‘exchange’ across cultural lines becomes clear, as a native of this place, subject of the book, does not even appear to own his homeland on a conceptual level, so unrecognisable is the land he reads of.

⁵⁹ Desai, *TIOL*, 110.

⁶⁰ Appadurai, 13.

The things within this book entitled *Expedition to Goozerat*, the commodities imported in to “rice and dal country”,⁶¹ also carry social and cultural colourations; the book tells the story of objects acquiring different values as they travel between what Appadurai notes as different “commodity contexts”, which “as a social matter, may bring together actors from quite different cultural systems who share only the most minimal understandings (from the conceptual point of view) about the objects in question and agree *only* about the terms of trade”.⁶² Appadurai’s statement is evinced by the way in which the book *Jemu* reads lauds the fact that “An Englishman might sit against a tropical background, yellow yolk of sun, shine spun into the palms, and consume a Yarmouth herring, a Breton oyster”;⁶³ an image which suggests a sense of cultural dominance in the controlled juxtaposition of the ‘exotic’ backdrop coupled with the familiar home-based commodities. The paths of these items, sea food in this case, are “both reflective and constitutive of social partnerships and struggles of preeminence”;⁶⁴ in other words, the fact that these perishable items were exported from England, probably in the mid nineteenth to early twentieth century when so many of these types of voyages were carried out, brings forth the sense of a created hierarchy of cultures, and the fact of its inclusion within *Expedition to Goozerat* reflects this value. *Jemu*’s lack of recognition of the worldview presented in this book, a position of conceptual incompatibility, begins to hint at what Appadurai has previously termed the “misfit” between cultural and social spheres in the exchange of commodities. Coupled with the ‘social arena’ in which the meeting of these “cultural units”⁶⁵ takes place – specifically, a library ironically offering itself as, so the young *Jemu* terms it, a “safe haven for foreigners”, despite housing the remnants of an aggressive imperial mindset – and considered alongside the larger setting of Britain in the 1940s – the items invoked in this short passage certainly begin to suggest the complex juncture which ‘things’, both the commodities detailed in *Expedition to Goozerat*, and this book as a ‘thing’ itself, occupy.

⁶¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 110.

⁶² Appadurai, 15.

⁶³ Desai, *TIOL*, 110.

⁶⁴ Appadurai, 19.

⁶⁵ Appadurai, 15.

Tellingly, this encounter with these ‘things’ also details an emotional distance between Jemu and his home, the book thus occupying both categories of commodity and the ever-elusive ‘thing’, forcing a breakdown of these categorisations, which become futile in this instance. This moment in the novel also hints at issues centring on internal structures of power and divisions *within* an independent India – most strikingly suggested in the trigger that restarts the judge’s memory: Gyan, who occupies a controversial position, ethnically and politically, in this new India of the 1980s. Gyan’s unease with the values and ‘things’ the judge worked so hard to attain – the civility of cutlery, an ease with the refinement and beauty of the language of English poetry – provokes the judge’s memory, linking both the shame of an anticipated unease with cutlery aboard the SS *Srathnaver* and the later derision shown to the young judge in his Indian Civil Service examination in England, as he recited poetry in English which “still had the rhythm and form of Gujarati”,⁶⁶ with Gyan’s contemporary marginal status. Thus the young Jemu’s musings acquire new life; preparing for his final examinations in Cambridge, the thought assaults Jemu that

A journey once begun, has no end. The memory of his ocean trip shone between the words. Below and beyond, the monsters of his unconscious prowled, awaiting the time when they would rise and be proven real and he wondered if he’d dreamt of the drowning power of the sea before his first sight of the ocean.⁶⁷

Here, the public realm of segregation of the world into colonial power and colonial subject converges with Jemu’s world of personal loneliness; it is a convergence which further marks the emotional distance perpetuated by a book in an English library documenting his home, unfamiliar to him, and which is continued into the judge’s public world decades later as he condemns Gyan’s ignorance of poetry. Traced through the remainder of the judge’s story, and the ‘things’ invoked, is a comparable exploration of internal structures of power that continue to divide and demarcate; but this also marks the constant struggle to maintain division and structure within the judge’s own mind, terrified that all he “had worked so hard to separate would soften

⁶⁶ Desai, *TIOL*, 112.

⁶⁷ Desai, *TIOL*, 110.

and envelop him in its nightmare, and the barrier between this life and eternity would in the end, no doubt, be just another such failing construct”.⁶⁸

Jemu’s memory of his sojourn in England is continued through this map of things that crosscut realms of home and the wider social and cultural world. Following Jemu’s acceptance by the Indian Civil Service, the two years of his probation were accompanied by increased pay, this rise allowing him to ascend economically, moving to more expensive lodgings closer to the university, but not buying him affluence in social circles. The effort to be accepted into the culture of their coloniser is similarly conducted through material goods and begins to show what Appadurai hints at when he notes the “often minimal fit between the cultural and the social dimensions of commodity exchange.”⁶⁹ Jemu and his friend Bose

avoided the other Indian students at Veeraswamy’s, ate shepherd’s pie instead...read *A Brief History of Western Art*, *A Brief History of Philosophy*, *A Brief History of France*, etc., a whole series. An essay on how a sonnet was constructed, the variations on form. A book on china and glass: Waterford, Salviati, Spode, Meissen, and Limoges. Crumpets they investigated and scones, jams, and preserves.⁷⁰

Despite participating in such small, vital rituals, still they found that this participation and appreciation did not authorise their acceptance; although various criteria of an essential ‘Englishness’ are conscientiously filled, the social distance still remains. These things, commodities, become the disturbing site of separation and delineation, particularly when considered against the items deemed necessary for experiencing India:

circulars giving up-to-date information on snakebites and tents...the list of supplies they were required to purchase: breeches, riding boots, tennis racket, twelve-bore gun. It made them feel as if they were embarking on a giant Boy Scout expedition.⁷¹

⁶⁸Desai, *TIOL*, 113.

⁶⁹Appadurai, 15.

⁷⁰Desai, *TIOL*, 119.

⁷¹Desai, *TIOL*, 119.

In this short passage, an opposition is set up between the materiality of each country: one cultured, learned, refined; the other backward, blank, wild. Through the oppositional positioning alone, structures of power and influence can be unearthed.

The social distance constantly imposed on Jemu as a young student in England, largely effected, or at least portrayed, through ‘things’, becomes particularly apparent in these moments so stringently demarcated by ‘things’. In these moments, a distance between Jemu’s home country and his ‘adopted’ country is maintained; indeed, this distance from any notion of an anchor or tie of any sort is compounded by the relinquishment of his name by the narrator-focalizer, Jemu, for the anonymity of ‘the judge’, and from that point in the novel, in chronological terms, he is largely referred to only by this title. Thus it appears that through these ‘things’ a distance is both imposed on the judge, and enforced by him: as when the judge, on his return journey home, sits on the *Strathnaver*, sipping beef tea and reading *How to Speak Hindustani*, yet sitting apart from the English people on board.⁷² The judge’s experience can be situated within Appadurai’s notion of the misfit of social and cultural spheres in the consumption and exchange of things, whether these things occupy the “commodity phase” or not. However, the young judge’s experience of materiality can also be located within Brown’s more elusive notion of things; verifying the possibility of ‘things’ to contain, or at least intimate, the sheer depth of suppressed emotion. Here, in the very manner of interpreting Desai’s meticulously layered stories, characters and shifting narrative techniques and notions of ‘home’ through ‘things’, an overlapping, mutually compatible or comparable territory between the deeply personal and the overwhelming expanse of the widely public is found. ‘Things’ here have the capacity to occupy the faultline of the temporal and the spatial, the social and cultural, and the splintered facets of the home life, refusing to be divided or limited to one category.

His triumphant return home to Piphit as “the first son of the community to join the ICS”⁷³ is, in the manner of all journeys he has undertaken, marked by a traumatic event, seemingly perpetuated by yet another ‘thing’. This scene centring on a powder puff, innocently stolen from his toilet case by his curious wife, marks the beginning of a deterioration of their relationship, not yet begun, and also, the beginning of a relentless

⁷² Desai, *TIOL*, 119.

⁷³ Desai, *TIOL*, 165.

structuring of division, seemingly effected in an effort to maintain the facade which had become a point of obsession. Nimi innocently browses through Jemubhai's possessions, finding "a pom-pom with a loop of silk in a round container of powder – and, coming at her exquisitely, her first whiff of lavender".⁷⁴ Through the things she finds in her husband's toiletry case, she explores this foreign land of "crisp light scents",⁷⁵ of which she knew very little, only comic, culturally distorted reports regarding Englishwomen's clothing preferences while playing tennis. The moment Nimi decides to take the powder puff seems to be fuelled by a feeling of inferiority, of how she would measure up to such Englishwomen;

She picked up the judge's powder puff, unbuttoned her blouse, and powdered her breasts. She hooked up her blouse again and that puff, so foreign, so silken, she stuffed inside; she was too grown-up for childish thieving, she knew, but she was filled with greed.⁷⁶

The structure of this sentence is interesting in itself; the arrangement of words is somewhat jumbled, the verb following the object, in the manner of 'things' belatedly following their idea;⁷⁷ but its construction also hints at a kind of poetry, a childlike rhyme mimicking the innocence of the action. The greed experienced, like the experience of the foreign land it hails from, can only be known through this foreign, unfamiliar thing.

In a similar manner, the judge attempts to access a form of Englishness desired – clean, white, offering a kind of mask – through this powder puff. Indeed, the desire for the clean, pink and white mask the powder puff can provide him suggests a tangible manifestation of the "mask of quiet"⁷⁸ he cultivated during his lonely sojourn in Cambridge. However, instead of the powder puff allowing him to preserve a refined, civilised air, it only provoked the scorn of his family, who deride his feminised ways epitomised in this ludicrous item, with the attending newly acquired and unfathomable notions of privacy and private property, upset in the theft of this object. In the search for this missing thing, the powder puff comes to occupy, once more, this middle ground

⁷⁴ Desai, *TIOL*, 166.

⁷⁵ Desai, *TIOL*, 166.

⁷⁶ Desai, *TIOL*, 166.

⁷⁷ Brown, 16.

⁷⁸ Desai, *TIOL*, 119.

between the wider social, cultural realm, and the private, the personal, disobeying possible divisions imposed by such categorisations. As well as symbolising a difference in the reception of a particular thing in differing cultures, it also symbolises, and signals, an irreparable relationship, damaged by the category of impossible Englishness the judge wishes to occupy; the powder puff “from between her sad breasts, pulled forth, like a ridiculous flower, or else a bursting ruined heart – *His dandy puff*.”⁷⁹ The word ‘dandy’ reiterates effectively the judge’s concern with appearance, physical and moral, cultivated in England.

Ultimately, this mask the judge works so hard to create becomes a measure of all he despises, yet all he strives to maintain. It becomes a mask of his hatred in the moment that Nimi, in a desperate attempt to deter him from consummating the marriage fuelled by the anger of his missing powder puff, throws his precious lavender scented powder into his face. This sexual act is performed for the first time under a shower of powder, “as more of that perfect rose complexion, blasted into a million motes, came filtering down, in a dense frustration of lust and fury”,⁸⁰ and this deed is forever after doomed to such a repetition, under the distortion of just such a mask. However, just as his efforts to develop and sustain a quintessential Englishness are futilely repeated, bringing only unhappiness and derision, so too does he repeat this

gutter act again and again. Even in tedium, on and on, a habit he could not stand in himself. This distaste and his persistence made him angrier than ever and any cruelty to her became irresistible. He would teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself. In public, he never spoke to or looked in her direction.⁸¹

Here, just as the use of the powder puff signalled a deep self-hatred, his relations with his wife become similarly infected; any exchange with his wife becomes an act of self-hatred, but also a hatred adeptly channelled outwards. From his interstitial position between two cultures grows a deeply rooted distaste for the comparably entangled domain of the home. This ‘thing’, an innocent powder puff, gathers, occasions and

⁷⁹ Desai, *TIOL*, 168.

⁸⁰ Desai, *TIOL*, 169.

⁸¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 170.

contains his indiscriminate hate, becoming more than just a physical item, or even a marker of cultural difference.

The judge's dog Mutt occupies the ultimate interstitial category: she is both somewhere between human and non-human, subject and object, giving the most explicit sense of a 'thing' in this regard. Both the way in which Mutt is depicted, and the feelings she rouses in the judge, continually edge toward the human; from Sai's perspective she is "Dog more human than dog", while her "*Grandfather more lizard than human*":⁸² "It had an elegant snout, a bump of nobility at the top of its head, ruffly pantaloons, elaborately fringed tail – Sai had never seen such a good looking dog".⁸³ Mutt seems capable of feeling or mimicking human feelings, as she plays the role of both the judge's wife and child, who "gazed at him like an adoring spouse"⁸⁴ and "leaned against him with the ease that children have when leaning against their parents".⁸⁵ The dog is also capable of invoking feelings akin to human empathy: during the break-in at Cho Oyu Mutt did

what she always did when she met strangers: she turned a furiously wagging bottom to the intruders and looked around from behind, smiling, conveying both shyness and hope.

Hating to see her degrade herself thus, the judge reached for her, whereupon she buried her nose in his arms.⁸⁶

Tellingly, his relationship with dogs can be traced back to an earlier time:

Not long after the results were declared, Jemubhai with his trunk that read 'Mr. J.P. Patel, SS *Srathnaver*', drove in a hired cab away from the house on Thornton Road and turned back to wave for the sake of the dog with pork pies in its eyes. It was watching him out of a window and he felt an echo of the old heartbreak of leaving Piphit.⁸⁷

Significant here is the juxtaposition of these recurring suitcases marked 'Mr. J.P. Patel, SS *Srathnaver*' and the dog he had formed a hesitant connection with during his self-

⁸² Desai, *TIOL*, 32.

⁸³ Desai, *TIOL*, 33.

⁸⁴ Desai, *TIOL*, 34.

⁸⁵ Desai, *TIOL*, 113.

⁸⁶ Desai, *TIOL*, 4.

⁸⁷ Desai, *TIOL*, 118.

imposed exile at the house in Thornton Road; the first occupies a solid, physical presence in the judge's mind, documenting distressing journeys, forming the physical trigger for retracing traumatic memory. This dog, on the other hand, suggests another category, or as some 'thing' which occupies a space that is more fluid – as somewhere between other human beings, most of whom shunned Jemu or were shunned by him, and not yet containing the capacity for unrelenting distress as other 'things' have.

This interstitial position occupied by dogs, namely Mutt, is continued throughout the judge's story, as she seems to be the only recipient of the judge's unadulterated love. The position occupied by Mutt in the judge's narrative strengthens the claim made by Latour, one which Brown follows in his treatise on 'things', that "modernity artificially made an ontological distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects, whereas in fact the world is full of 'quasi-subjects' and 'quasi-objects'".⁸⁸ Though Mutt cannot be said to occupy a category of 'inanimate objects', she certainly occupies a position which is caught between subject and object. Following a series of events, themselves linked in a complex chain of action where justice is misdealt, Mutt is stolen by two desperate, poverty-stricken villagers. Mutt's disappearance has a devastating effect on the judge, ironically forcing him to express the unrelenting and intense emotion which he had so avoided. Indeed, Mutt can be regarded as, in some ways, interchangeable with the judge's psyche, his capacity for feeling, a furthering of what Brown notes as the way in which "things do not exist without being full of people".⁸⁹ The judge protects and preserves this dog with a similar vigilance to the manner in which he protected himself from others, cultivating a facade of 'dignity', he took pains to protect her from all the danger that surrounded her, "Bhutia hill dogs...the cobras...rabid, hallucinating jackals,"⁹⁰ even vaccinating her against rabies during an epidemic when whole families, too poor to afford the vaccine, died. Amid all of this chaos and danger, much of it arbitrary, "He had thought his vigilance would protect his dog from all possible harm. The price of such arrogance had been great."⁹¹ Mutt's disappearance forces the judge to reassess his life and the world which surrounded him, a world that

⁸⁸ Brown, 12.

⁸⁹ Brown, 12.

⁹⁰ Desai, *TIOL*, 290.

⁹¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 290.

had failed Mutt. It had failed beauty; it had failed grace. But by having forsaken this world, for having held himself apart, Mutt would suffer.

The judge had lost his clout... A bit of “sir sahib *huzoor*” for politeness’ sake, but that was just residual veneer now; he knew what they really thought of him.⁹²

This passage, and Mutt herself, signals this important, but ultimately unattainable construct between the public and the private, between the personal world of the home and the larger outside world; the loss of Mutt a sign of the inevitable doom to which these constructs were consigned. Through the loss of Mutt, what Brown terms the thing’s manner of evidencing “less an object than a particular subject-object relation”⁹³ can be noted. Mutt not only occupies a position somewhere between the narrowly defined subject and object, but through a changed relationship to his dog, the judge is forced to face the complicated, interstitial nature of his existence, one which cannot be compartmentalised, neither in terms of public and private, or past and present worlds.⁹⁴

In addition to providing a jolt to the judge’s guilt-ridden sins of the past, Mutt, or more precisely, Mutt’s disappearance, provides a metaphorical presence for what is perhaps inexpressible. Those responsible for Mutt’s theft are described as viewing her as “just a concept. They were striving toward an idea of something, toward what it meant to have a fancy dog. She disappointed them just as modern life did, and they tied her to a tree, kicked her...”⁹⁵ However, at this retrospective moment towards the end of the novel, it appears that Mutt is symbolic of a notion internally held by the judge also, but quite contrary to the concept she held for the poverty-stricken thieves; a concept as elusive and ungraspable as a notion of ‘modern life’ was for those at the fringes of society – the notion of home, as a place of stability and safety, one not marred by traumatic voyages and cultural and social dislocation, increasingly turned inward to a self-conscious and destructive loneliness.

⁹²Desai, *TIOL*, 292.

⁹³ Brown, 4.

⁹⁴ David Wallace Spielman, in his article “ ‘Solid Knowledge’ and Contradictions in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 51.1 (2010), reads this episode as more straightforwardly redemptive for the judge, whose loss here “causes him to reconsider whether he made the right choices in life”, 78.

⁹⁵ Desai, *TIOL*, 321.

In summary, the journey which the judge's mind compels him to take is both instigated and propelled forward by 'things'. These 'things' encompass journeys actually taken, given an air of tangibility through the recurring suitcases; also journeys made by objects in the complex and irreversible relationship between two countries, bound by an imperial imposition of values; and, perhaps most provocatively, voyages of memory, which, often provoked by the consideration of a 'thing', allow a reappraisal and upheaval of apparently settled and received ideas, stories, and histories. This disruption of accepted 'truths' simultaneously undoes the primacy of personal memory and conjecture, probing the murky relationships between individuals, and between the world and the personal realm, what is often considered 'home'. Through the banal things of the everyday, the world of the 'home' is de-familiarised and made peculiar, drawing attention to the inherent strangeness of this notion of home that too often escapes examination.

Within this strange world of the home, the complications of social and cultural difference and distance become all too apparent. In a similar manner, inter and intra-cultural structures of power often converge and are unearthed in the presence of 'things'. Notably, this occurs in the way in which Gyan's unease with unfamiliar cutlery and food manages to juxtapose past and present structures of power – those between an imperial nation and its claimed and conquered land to which Jemu was subjected, with the comparable marginalisation that Gyan, as a member of the Gorkha community, feels in the judge's present. Ultimately, even the division the judge tries to maintain between the world and the home collapses, significantly through the loss of the one 'thing' – Mutt – that resided in the cracks between personal relationships with others, and a relationship with the world, revealing the capacity of such things to topple or undermine division.

2.5 The Liminal Potential of ‘things’.

The closely linked concepts of journeys of various kinds, the making and unmaking of notions of home, and material ‘things’, again converge in the story of the judge’s estranged granddaughter, Sai. As with the characters previously discussed, the cook, Biju, and the judge, the trope of journeys, in addition to the fluid concept of ‘things’, is employed in the exploration of Sai’s story. What differs most strikingly in Sai’s case is the way in which the inherent volatility and mutability of journeys and things are exploited, brought to the fore, in order to underline the uncertainty and instability which forms a determining facet of Sai’s existence; a liminality that becomes permanent. Sai’s arrival in Cho Oyu is riddled with uncertainty, soon to be compounded in the material things that structure her new life and relationships in her new home in Cho Oyu, and also particularly in comparison to her stringently demarcated existence in a convent in Dehra Dun. This part of her life was marked by a delineation and ranking of cultures and religions: “cake was better than *laddoos*, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilised than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds”;⁹⁶ the rigidity of “uniforms so heavy for a little girl; manly shouldered blazer and tie, black cow-hoof shoes”;⁹⁷ and the contrary yet perfectly balanced iconography of “the sweet sweet pastel angels and the bloodied Christ.”⁹⁸ Above all, it is a life structured by oppositions of ‘things’; the certitude these things offer in the construction of identity consequently disparaging ‘other’ identities.

From this life structured by oppositions, Sai enters the wide open space of life in Kalimpong, “with a fearful feeling of having entered a space so big it reached both backward and forward”.⁹⁹ Though this stage of her life takes place in wide expanses, it is no less informed by the insistent intrusion of things, now interposed with a materiality of a different kind, one which is altogether more fluid and uncertain. This fluidity or uncertainty of things seems to echo the liminality and interstitial status this new home offers; it is a home where she is at once ‘unhomed’, to draw on Bhabha’s

⁹⁶ Desai, *TIOL*, 30.

⁹⁷ Desai, *TIOL*, 29.

⁹⁸ Desai, *TIOL*, 29.

⁹⁹ Desai, *TIOL*, 34.

phrase, where “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the-home-in-the world”¹⁰⁰ becomes apparent. Sai’s previous life in the convent was structured by rigidly controlled materiality and binary oppositions, where as the life she enters now is disturbingly unanchored, emptied of close affiliation, her closest relationship being that with the cook,¹⁰¹ in a house which is itself “just a husk”,¹⁰² powerless against the enormity that surrounds it. This mingling of realms of the home and the world is reflected in its typically oppositional binary; Sai’s status as “a westernized Indian brought up by English nuns, an estranged Indian living in India”¹⁰³ and her new home, Cho Oyu, become particularly resonant in relation to what Bhabha terms the “ ‘freak displacements’... that have been caused within the cultural lives of postcolonial societies”.¹⁰⁴ Sai’s own particular displacement is increasingly embodied in various material things that are interposed in her life; things of a non-permanent nature, primarily food, yet inextricably connected with the home.

Sai’s most significant relationship, that with her Nepali tutor Gyan, is also one demarcated by minor detail – through the things that connect or separate them – but these seemingly minor material details accumulate, structuring and compacting division. However, this relationship with Gyan also compels Sai to delve into the complexities of her own existence: it is following her first meeting with Gyan that she becomes, for a time, obsessed with her own image, reflected in various things. She becomes aware of the transitory nature of beauty, and consequently, life, for what appears to be the first time, and begins her search for ‘herself’, her image, in an array of artefacts, “in the stainless-steel pots, in the polished gumpa butter lamps, in the merchants’ vessels in the bazaar, in the images proffered by spoons and knives on the dining table, in the green surface of the pond.”¹⁰⁵ As fleeting and ungraspable aspects of life are once again searched for within the material banality of every day existence, Sai is met with the realisation that each of these ‘things’ only offers a different distortion of her face. Even the mirror, in its reliable provision of likeness, refuses to reflect a

¹⁰⁰ Homi Bhabha, “The World and the Home”, in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti & Ella Shohat, eds., *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 445.

¹⁰¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 67.

¹⁰² Desai, *TIOL*, 34.

¹⁰³ Desai, *TIOL*, 210.

¹⁰⁴ Bhabha, 1997, 449.

¹⁰⁵ Desai, *TIOL*, 74.

constant and reachable ‘thing’. Sai’s encounters with the mirror prove interesting as a manifestation of the borders constantly being redrawn in her life; the mirror and the image it offers becomes a temporary obsession, reflective of the indescribable, constantly changing relationships in her life, embedded within similarly inconstant structures of power. The way in which Sai’s relationship with the mirror is played out embodies both the desire for stability and structure and the wide expanses of free flexibility, as she tries to grasp her image but also could “not refrain from exploiting its flexibility”.¹⁰⁶ This relationship becomes a comment on a transient “beauty, so brief she could barely hold it steady” and that “would fade and expire, unsung, unrescued, and unrescuable”,¹⁰⁷ and the simultaneous desire for an answer more permanent than a passing beauty, “but the mirror, fickle as ever, showed one thing, and then another and left her, as usual, without an answer.”

The uncertainty that Sai encounters while searching for her ‘true’ reflection seems to approach a permanent state of liminality for Sai, who appears continually caught between the polarities of her existence. This uncertain, liminal state also ties materiality with the creation or structuring of identity, but an identity that cannot be accessed through the transient and distortive ‘things’ found in her life. In these moments, Sai is in search of what seems to be an already formed ideal of herself, or at least what she *wishes* was an already present self; the searching for herself in these physically present everyday ‘things’ rendering a concrete notion of the self even more distorted and unreliable. Here, the notion of a personal identity is bound up with the larger world – of culture, of position within that culture – but largely with how that cultural identity is refracted through the home: just as Sai’s search for a steady and unchanging self is conducted through these containing items, themselves often reflective of the home’s position within the world.

Sai’s situation here may reflect some of the attributes of Victor Turner’s *liminial personae* or “threshold people”, those occupying liminal space in a ritual process, who are “necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in

¹⁰⁶Desai, *TIOL*, 74.

¹⁰⁷Desai, *TIOL*, 74.

cultural space.”¹⁰⁸ Sai has clearly eluded any stable network of classifications in her life thus far, rendering her almost position-less in cultural space, and, tellingly, without an established state in domestic space. Unlike Turner’s conception of *liminal personae*, however, who pass from one stable state to another, via a phase where one is stripped of one’s status, and are “betwixt and between the positions arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial”,¹⁰⁹ Sai’s ‘unhomed’ state appears to offer no such relief. These passages dealing with Sai’s search for her reflection set up her liminal position, and simultaneously bind her to Bhabha’s conception of the home as reflective of the marginal, ‘in-between’ status of the postcolonial subject, and the “narrative limits of the knowable, the margins of the meaningful”, from which such an experience can begin to be narrated.

What is interesting here is the mixing of realms found in these moments where Sai endeavours to tie a realisation of herself to the material ‘things’ of the everyday. Just as Turner’s conception of social life is marked by oppositional entities, with the liminal period constituting a time of statuslessness, “a ‘moment in and out of time’, and in and out of secular social structure”,¹¹⁰ so too is Sai’s own ‘limbo’ status. However, Sai’s position continues to be marked by the opposition of the social realm to varying degrees; what is a temporary state of liminality in Turner’s model becomes a permanent state of liminality for Sai as the fractured nature of her social and cultural world continues to make its presence felt in the personal and private, even as she simultaneously occupies a phase marked by statuslessness. Sai’s own self image is distorted when seen through the ‘things’ of the home, a skewed reflection which mirrors her position in the intersections and interstices of the world and the home.

An echo of this foggy uncertainty is found at the beginning of the novel, though this episode actually falls in with part of a later timeline, as Sai, wandering around Cho Oyu, engulfed in shadows and fog, catches “a glimpse of herself being smothered”, and in a seeming attempt to make her image seem real, or more reachable, reaches “forward to imprint her lips upon the surface, a perfectly formed film star kiss”.¹¹¹ The fact that

¹⁰⁸ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977) 95.

¹⁰⁹ Turner, 1997, 95.

¹¹⁰ Turner, 1997, 96.

¹¹¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 2.

this episode occurs at the beginning of the novel, although later in the sequence of the novel's story, is itself significant; the reader realises retrospectively that Desai establishes from the beginning that no clear-cut answers regarding the issues that her characters navigate can be obtained, the form of the novel itself echoing the disorientation and unanchored sense of being her characters experience. Sai's small, strange gesture is followed by a musing on the life of adult giant squid, whose solitude was "so profound they might never encounter another of their tribe".¹¹²

Sai's relationship with Gyan also provides insight into a larger representation of other classes, groups or communities, from people outside of the particular group, signalling a move from the individual to the collective; in this case Sai, and the position of both cultural and domestic dislocation she occupies, and Gyan, a poor Nepali living in West Bengal, estranged by ethnic, political and class lines. The budding relationship between Sai and Gyan is aptly marked by tentative noting of the crossovers and differences in the ephemeral minutiae of their lives: particularly the food consumed, and the way in which it is eaten. A delineation of the ostensibly superficial commodities and cosmetics that outline daily routine will form the outward reason for the eventual collapse of this relationship.¹¹³ However, the relationship starts in earnest in a similarly prosaic manner, over an exchange centring on the types of cosmetics Sai used to bathe: in order to break the unbearably intimate, but impeding silence between them, Gyan intrepidly asks which kind of shampoo Sai uses. This oblique means of delving into the more intimate recesses of Sai's life is met with a reply which summons the names of these mundane intimacies:

Their eyes read on industriously, but their thoughts didn't cleave to such discipline, and finally Gyan, unable to bear this any longer, this tightrope tension between them, put his paper down with a crashing sound, turned abruptly toward her, and blurted:

"Do you put oil in your hair?"

"No," she said, startled. "I never do."

After a bit of silence, "Why?" she asked. Was there something wrong with her hair?

"I can't hear you – the rain is so loud," he said, moving closer. "What?"

"Why?"

¹¹³ See Desai, *TIOL*, 259: this final altercation between Sai and Gyan is again configured in terms of food, though the underlying reasons – class and ethnic difference, Gyan's participation in the Gorkhaland movement – run deeper.

“It looks so shiny I thought you might.”

“No.”

“It looks very soft,” he observed. “Do you wash it with shampoo?”

“Yes”.

“What kind?”

“Sunsilk.”

Oh, the unbearable intimacy of brand names, the boldness of the questions.

“What soap?”

“Lux.”

“Beauty bar of the film stars?”

But they were too scared to laugh.

More silence.

“You?”

“Whatever is in the house. It doesn’t matter for boys.”

He couldn’t admit that his mother bought the homemade brown soap that was sold cheap in large rectangles in the market, blocks sliced off and sold cheap.¹¹⁴

The conversation becomes so bound up with commodities that even the slogans are invoked. However, citation of this slogan, meant to diffuse the intensely intimate conversation, serves to bring an awareness of the infiltration of a western-influenced consumer culture, in addition to a demarcation of difference, as Gyan cannot confess that his own routine of personal hygiene lacks the glamour and prestige of brand names and slogans. Presented here is an image that simultaneously cuts Gyan off from consumer culture and emasculates him by exposing this personal shopping as still being conducted by his mother. Perhaps more significantly, this conversation centring on the smallness of these commodities paves the way for still more intimate, yet measured and distanced exploration of the other, through the shared, non-materiality of the body.

The narrative techniques employed here by Desai merit closer analysis; in particular, as they contribute to this carefully layered perspective built most strikingly through the meticulous delineation of various material ‘things’. From the outset, what is striking about this passage is the shifting perspectives from which the scene is, to use

¹¹⁴ Desai, *TIOL*, 114.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's particular perspective on Gerard Genette's terminology, 'focalized'. There are multiple focalizations of the action occurring in this scene: parts appear presented through Gyan and Sai's vision, respectively, and at other times, the scene is focalized by an unnamed, not present 'character', yet one privy to internal feelings, in a manner somewhat akin to what Rimmon-Kenan describes as when the "inner life" of a character is revealed by "granting an external focalizer (a narrator-focalizer) the privilege of penetrating the consciousness of the focalized."¹¹⁵ Yet even this description is an over-simplification, as Desai's narrative technique continually eludes such categorisation.

The passage begins with what appears to be a simple third-person perspective: "In the drawing room, sitting with the newspapers, Sai and Gyan were left alone, quite alone, for the first time."¹¹⁶ The silently present focalizer has access to the externally visible things of the scene, such as the contents of the newspaper they read, yet this invisible focalizer also appears to have a bird's eye view of the scene, with the vantage of being able to state that "Their eyes read on industriously."¹¹⁷ This suggests an external focalizer, "located at a point far above the object(s) of his perception."¹¹⁸ This description itself invokes an idea of a detached, yet omnipresent 'voice', coolly documenting the lives of those beneath its view. However, the focalizer Desai employs continually shifts between this kind of observance, and the role of a "narrator-focalizer" who "presents the focalized from within, penetrating his feelings and thoughts."¹¹⁹ Yet Desai's focalizer also refuses to occupy this position of penetrating omnipotence; instead, the position of the focalizer is left intentionally vague, specifically in instances of particular uncertainty, as in these moments of the exchange of mundane intimacies between Sai and Gyan:

"Do you put oil in your hair?"

"No," she said startled. "I never do."

¹¹⁵ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 81.

¹¹⁶ Desai, 114.

¹¹⁷ Desai, 114.

¹¹⁸ Rimmon-Kenan, 76.

¹¹⁹ Rimmon-Kenan, 76.

After a bit of silence, “Why?” she asked. *Was there something wrong with her hair?*¹²⁰ (my emphasis).

Here, it is uncertain who speaks or voices this feeling that is not a part of the direct speech; by all accounts, this is Sai’s thought given voice, yet this is not committed directly to Sai’s character, and appears to linger in the murky realm of conjecture. The absence of prefixes such as ‘Sai wondered’, results in a switch in subjectivity from this external focalizer to a position closer to Sai’s own subjectivity. Through her distinctive narrative technique, Desai draws attention to this complex layering of subjectivities and positions at work, forming a kind of meta-discourse on the navigation of these issues.

Desai continues to craft this multilayered and polyphonic narrative throughout this passage, choosing to present the focalized – here, Gyan – from within, but in a manner which is altogether more direct: “ ‘It looks very soft,’ he observed. ‘Do you wash it with shampoo?’”¹²¹ Here, Desai seems to resort to a more conventional and direct approach to making the thoughts of the focalized known through an external focalizer/narrator, as Rimmon-Kenan notes is common in most nineteenth-century novels. However, Desai’s continual shifting between modes of presenting the focalized serves to counteract such a presumption; indeed, this instability in the ‘voice’ of both focalizer and focalized serves to draw attention to imbalances in such a presentation.

The most significant moment in the varying focalizations actually occurs around the hygiene products being discussed, rather than centring directly on the characters’ consciousness. An important aspect of focalization is the fact that “focalization has both a subject and an object”.¹²² In this short passage, Desai uses inanimate objects in order to focalize the characters’ internal feelings, imbuing them with emotive and ideological facets, her narrative technique actually contributing to the transformation of mere objects into Brown’s notion of ‘things’. The destabilisation of subject and object is most strikingly visible when lines of subject, object and emotion are blurred: “Oh the unbearable intimacy of brand names, the boldness of the questions.”¹²³ It is unclear, firstly, who is speaking, or who sees: this utterance could be attributed to either Sai or

¹²⁰ Desai, *TIOL*, 114.

¹²¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 114.

¹²² Rimmon-Kenan, 74.

¹²³ Desai, *TIOL*, 114.

Gyan, yet both possibilities are refused. Secondly, and also unclear is *what* exactly is being focalized; the attention of the focalizer is split between the ‘things’ being discussed, an intimate moment between the young couple, in addition to the respective positions and subjectivities of both characters. Not only does Desai evocatively divert full attention from an intensely intimate situation by having her characters conduct this scene through the apparent banality of soaps and shampoos, another layer of deflection is added through this oblique focalization. The ‘things’ invoked in this passage are clearly given an emotive component, but even the source or direction of emotiveness is somewhat muffled by the fact that the focalizer is not specified. Tellingly, Desai blurs the lines between ‘who’ is focalizing and ‘what’ is being focalized in instances such as this; thus her narrative technique endeavours to probe the grey areas of existence and exchange, as she subverts even the dichotomies of internal and external focalization in her carefully crafted stylistics.

To return to the detail of the content of the text, Sai and Gyan embark on an exploration of the other’s person, their bodies in themselves becoming the focus of attention. Their bodies, in their respective, stringently measured and biological state, form a kind of liminal neutral ground, where differences brought up by the materiality of commodities, whether hygiene products or food, and the associated ritual, are somewhat abated. As they measure arms and legs, noting points of elbows and arches of eyebrows, the materiality of their existence again threatens to intrude as in order to measure their feet against each other, Gyan takes off his own shoe “and then the threadbare sock of which he immediately felt ashamed and which he bundled into his pocket.”¹²⁴ Once free of this interruption from their segregated worlds, they resume their investigation of the specificities of their bodies, all the while sticking to an almost anatomical approach, carefully measured and avoidant of the overly intimate gestures of eye contact, an approach which could not interrupt the newly discovered equality, nor threaten to overwhelm with the intense intimacy of the situation.

However, the external, imposed categories continue to intrude in small ways. In the continuation of this scene of exploration, suspended for a number of pages and then revisited, the form itself seeming to mimic the delay and deferral between the couple, the intrusion of instances which seem to resituate the body as a ‘thing’, as a particular

¹²⁴ Desai, *TIOL*, 115.

constructed category, again makes its presence evident. The manner in which the lovers showcase the particular feats their respective bodies can perform – Sai’s ability to touch her nose with her tongue, Gyan’s ability to “slide his head off his neck from left to right to left like a Bharat Natyam dancer”¹²⁵ – foreground the different places and categories from which these skills are learned: Sai’s from a friend in the convent she attended, Gyan’s an adjunct of classical Indian dance. This both reinforces Brown’s invocation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the “body is a thing among things”,¹²⁶ while also suggesting that the body and its particular learned skills are not, then, as neutral as it might first seem. Between the lovers, even these discoveries take on a similar effect as the other more intrusive, external influences of commodities; as Brown stresses: “They are occasions of contingency – the chance interruption – that disclose a physicality of things.”¹²⁷ The body, in these moments, asserts itself as a ‘thing’, fulfilling two contrary positions at once: seeming to form a point of shared, uncomplicated ground for the couple, while also achieving just its opposite. In a somewhat similar manner, parts of the body undergo a kind of restriction to categories of ‘things’ and consumption, made apparent as Sai draws attention to parts of her body that Gyan may have missed on previous occasions, and in the manner of the marketplace, “proffered her hair with the zeal of a shawl merchant: ‘See – feel. Like silk?’”, then displaying her ears “like items taken from under the counter, and put before a discerning customer in one of the town’s curio shops”.¹²⁸ The body here is made ambiguous, a mixture of the cultural, the sociological and the commercial, itself echoing the way in which categories are constructed, and lines drawn up within and between communities. This exploration of bodies also turns into a game between this young couple; a naming of body part, followed by a kissing of it:

They linked word, object, and affection in a recovery of childhood, a confirmation of wholeness, as at the beginning –

Arms legs heart –

All their parts, they reassured each other, were where they should be.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Desai, *TIOL*, 124.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Brown, 4.

¹²⁷ Brown, 4.

¹²⁸ Desai, *TIOL*, 125.

¹²⁹ Desai, *TIOL*, 126.

Through this game, and through the linking of word, object and affection, the body truly becomes a means of surpassing the restrictive categories that govern their existence by a realisation and amalgamation of these separate categories. In addition to this, the mention of childhood, wholeness, beginnings, is suggestive of an overcoming of the liminality, fragmentation and uncertainty that divides their personal and collective lives and identities. This state offers a return to the unity and innocence of childhood, albeit impossible, before the larger imposition of the external categories of politics, class and culture re-impose their subsuming ferocity.

This careful avoidance – or deferral – of the intrusion of outside worlds mirrors, in some respects, Turner’s idea of *communitas*, a form of community which alternates with, or forms an antithesis of normative, structured society. Though both Sai and Gyan are aware of the different backgrounds and positions to which they respectively belong, seen in the continual intrusions from these respective circumstances, they nonetheless occupy this ‘other world’ of spontaneous, unstructured equality. The fact that they hail from oppositional backgrounds actually contributes to this moment of *communitas*, as, according to Turner, “for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality... In such a process, the opposites as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable.”¹³⁰ This also echoes the sentiment of the game played by the lovers. Here, the linking and naming of parts, a recovering of wholeness, mimics Turner’s idea of mutually constituting opposites: the sense that oppositional, fragmented entities are necessary for this almost blissful moment, a type of *communitas*, out of the regular structure of life. In this moment, a return to childhood is offered, free from the taint of external categories, but provoked by them nonetheless.

However, this state of *communitas* offered by their relationship outside the structure of class and ethnic difference only offers the chance of a temporary regression to an idyllic, unattainable childhood, rather than a progression to an adulthood free from such division. The fact that this period in Sai and Gyan’s lives marks liminality in some

¹³⁰ Turner, 1977, 97.

way – Sai’s a permanent type of liminality of postcolonial displacement, and the particular liminality Gyan experiences as he hovers between youth and manhood, coupled with the interstitial status of his fellow Nepalis in West Bengal – adds to the experience of *communitas* of this time. Furthermore, the way in which this moment in Sai and Gyan’s lives is coloured by references of childhood – in the game attempting to recover childhood, in the simple cosiness and comfort of childhood resonant in the foods eaten, the touristic day trips and picnics, and, when this idyllic period finally culminates, Gyan’s wish for a reprieve into childhood – tellingly reflects the attributes Turner often associates with the liminal period: “Liminality is full of potency and potentiality. It may also be full of experiment and play. There may be a play of ideas, a play of words, a play of symbols, a play of metaphors. In it, play’s the thing.”¹³¹ Turner’s description of liminality implies notions of childhood: it is playful, yet not ludic; the carefree nature of this phase marks a potential for growth, for a similarly sustained ‘adulthood’, both in the maturation of Sai and Gyan’s love relationship and a growth of such a relationship of equality within a community fractured along class, ethnic, political and religious lines. However, like Sai’s continuing state of postcolonial liminality, and Gyan’s complex entrapment between numerous different ‘worlds’, this *communitas* cannot be realised beyond this enclosed moment.

For a time, these external categories continue to simply assert themselves in the banalities of the everyday; as Sai and Gyan ate together at Gompu’s restaurant, “Gyan had used his hands without a thought and Sai ate with the only implement on the table – a tablespoon, rolling her roti on the side and nudging the food onto the spoon with it”,¹³² and in the myriad of differences between Sai and Gyan that became apparent as the couple spent time together:

She who could not eat with her hands; could not squat down on the ground on her haunches to wait for a bus; who had never been to a temple but for architectural interest; never chewed a *paan* and had not tried most sweets in the *mithaishop*, for they made her retch; she who left a Bollywood film so exhausted from emotional wear and tear that she walked home like a sick person and lay in pieces on the sofa; she who thought it vulgar to put oil in your hair and used paper to clean her bottom; felt happier with so called English vegetables, snap peas, French

¹³¹ Victor Turner, ‘Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality’, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6.4 (December 1979) 465-499, 466.

¹³² Desai, *TIOL*, 140.

beans, spring onions, and feared – *feared* – *loki, tinda, kathal, kaddu, patrel*, and the local *saag* in the market.

Eating together they had always felt embarrassed – he, unsettled by her finickiness and her curbed enjoyment, and she, revolted by his energy and his fingers working the dal, his slurps and smacks.¹³³

These are the moments that define and restrict Sai and Gyan's relationship, and although they are brushed aside and left uncommented on at first, they build into something uncontrollable and subsuming, overwhelming what they had once noted as the individuality and specificity of their relationship. Their differences converge, on each respective side, in moments which take on the weight of their respective situations so crosscut by lines of class, culture, politics and dislocation. From Gyan's position, it is Sai's recounting of her Christmas celebrations which arouse his ire; from Sai's perspective, it is the sight of Gyan's home that incites contradictory emotions of pity and distaste – both of these reactions building roles that reached beyond the intimacies of their personal situation.

The importance and intricacies of both of these incidents are underlined by Desai's method of beginning a scene of crucial importance, scenes which are often wrought with the complexities of intersecting lines of the personal and the collective, then deferring the culmination of that moment by interspersing the narrative with the interjection of other characters' stories. Sai endeavours to cheer up Gyan, who has just previously experienced the fervour and collective anger of the Gorkhaland movement and now feels restless and suffocated by having to perform the task of teaching Sai for a negligible amount of money, by recounting the story of how the ladle of brandy that she was to pour over the Christmas pudding would not ignite.¹³⁴ What Gyan deems as Sai's prattling about trivial and alien things and the little ceremonies surrounding them, is far removed from the worldly concerns occupying his mind, and has the effect of irritating him to an extent far greater than the diminutive conversation calls for. Invocation of this small ritual in Sai's culturally fractured life rouses Gyan's discontent with his own ethnically and politically estranged situation, and Sai's celebration of Christmas is suddenly tagged with an embodiment of all Gyan's frustration, a frustration previously curtailed by the closeness and comfort of their relationship. The altercation is continued

¹³³ Desai, *TIOL*, 176.

¹³⁴ Desai, *TIOL*, 162-3.

a number of pages later, and apologies are exchanged, but Gyan “sullied by the romance”,¹³⁵ once again feels the need for the purity of an uncomplicated quest, one uncomplicated by the ever-changing boundaries of love.

Sai’s journey to Gyan’s home enacts a similar refraction of external categories into their relationship; suddenly, the class lines that were hidden as the couple enjoyed the shared and more neutral spaces of the body become glaringly apparent. Gyan’s home, “a small slime-slicked cube”,¹³⁶ bears the scars of lives marked by poverty; “Still, she could tell it was someone’s precious home. Marigolds and zinnias edged the veranda; the front door was ajar and she could see past its puckered veneer to a gilt clock and a poster of a bonneted golden-haired child against a mouldering wall, just the kind of thing that Lola and Noni made merciless fun of.”¹³⁷ The narration of these things enables what has previously been referred to as a “small slime-slicked cube” be a ‘home’, but also manages to infer indirect influence: here, the opinions of two elderly, upper-class Indian women, who, nonetheless, toy with nostalgic remnants of an imperial British identity. The flowers, the clock and the poster, simultaneously reflect aspiration and the homely comforts Gyan’s family have attempted to build, while also invoking a double and complex realisation of, again, “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the-home-in-the world”.¹³⁸ Sai’s recognition of part of her own world of the home in the things of Gyan’s home, here, specifically the input of Lola and Noni, compounds her unsettled, fragmented and constantly changing sense of home.

This complex unravelling of world and home continues, as both Sai and Gyan begin to play out the roles assigned to them, respectively, of upper-class, Westernised Indian, outraged at the perceived parasitic behaviour of the poor, and of the indignant voice of the poor, those wanting to establish their rightful place in independent India, infuriated by these ‘hybrid’ Indians, desiring a purity perhaps no longer possible. Yet they are positions which sit uneasily in the mouths of Sai and Gyan, as their enraged arguing continues to slide into the familiarity of close relationship, into the small things that had helped to build their relationship – cheese toast and chocolate cigars, tuna fish on toast and peanut butter biscuits. It is as if the very contradictions of the world, of the

¹³⁵ Desai, *TIOL*, 175.

¹³⁶ Desai, *TIOL*, 255.

¹³⁷ Desai, *TIOL*, 255.

¹³⁸ Bhabha, 1997, 445.

society in which they lived, fractured by the presence of a multitude of cultures and ethnicities, are embodied in the relationship:

Just ordinary humans in ordinary opaque boiled-egg light, without grace, without revelation, composite of contradictions, easy principles, arguing about what they half believed in or even what they didn't believe in at all, desiring comfort as much as raw austerity, authenticity as much as playacting, desiring coziness of family as much as to abandon it forever. Cheese and chocolate they wanted, but also to kick these bloody foreign things out. A wild daring love to bicycle them into the sky, but also a rice and dal love blessed by the unexciting feel of the everyday, its surprises safely enmeshed in something solidly familiar like marrying the daughter or son of your father's best friend and grumbling about the cost of potatoes, the cost of onions. Every single contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to, they desired. But only as much, of course, as they desired purity and a lack of contradiction.¹³⁹

Here again, with the mention of all these things which connote coziness and comfort, there is the desire to kick free of these cloying constraints. Yet also present is the simultaneous yearning to recover the wholeness lost in the oppositions and categorisations, as seen earlier in the game Sai and Gyan play in an attempt to recover an uncomplicated state of childhood. The very 'thingness' of the things that interject in their lives, be it their culturally inscribed bodies, the food eaten together, and importantly, the change induced in the relationship with these things, is, also significantly, tied with the home, be it love, childhood or comfort. Suggested here, additionally, is that a certain clarity may be found in the 'adulthood' of a quest for a larger ideal; in Gyan's history of occupying an interstitial place in the life of his country, his reprieve is more clear-cut. Sai's entanglement with estranged family members, homes where she is 'unhomed', and a relationship where the complicated crossovers of the world and the home are continually manifested, presents an altogether more complex alternative history. Though Gyan desires this pure adulthood, away from the uncertainty of the liminal phase he occupied during his relationship with Sai, he also cannot resist the simplicity of the "reprieve into childhood",¹⁴⁰ enforced by a matriarchal grandmother who refuses to allow Gyan to participate in the Gorkhaland parade.

¹³⁹ Desai, *TIOL*, 259.

¹⁴⁰ Desai, *TIOL*, 272.

Ultimately, and in keeping with the very nature of ‘things’, no easy resolution is offered up for this relationship enmeshed with cultural and social differences, in addition to the complications of the home. In fact, both appear to ‘opt out’ of the beleaguered situation: Gyan by hoping for a life where adulthood and the endlessly confusing domain of personal relationships will be mapped out for him, for “the day his mother would show him the photograph of the girl he was to marry, a charming girl, he hoped, with cheeks like two Simla apples, who hadn’t allowed her mind to traverse the gutters and gray areas, and he would adore her for the miracle she was”.¹⁴¹ Sai, on the other hand, makes the choice to feel the specificity of her own displacement even more keenly, succumbing to an endlessly fractured existence, with the realisation that

Life wasn’t single in its purpose...or even in its direction. The simplicity of what she’d been taught wouldn’t hold. Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it.¹⁴²

However, the relationship is not resolved in any manner, only a hint of reprieve offered at certain moments – glimmers of hope that these divisive losses can be recovered, which yet resist the urge to pinpoint how this resolution should be effected.

In the worlds of Sai and Gyan, worlds which intersect for a time, the full force of the inherent fluidity and constantly changing concepts of journeys and ‘things’ is explored; and the impact of such volatility deeply realised. Desai employs these concepts to penetrate the inner reaches of her characters’ minds, particularly Sai’s, and to explore in a more nuanced way the complexities of the creation of the individual self, and then, the self’s relation to and intersection with the larger world. In Sai, a displacement which is not economic, nor fully social or cultural, in the way Biju’s and the judge’s sense of dislocation is experienced, but one nonetheless profound, is unearthed. It suggests a permanent, constant type of displacement, similarly suggested in the focus on the permanent state of liminality which grips Sai. In particular, the grey areas of existence are probed through Desai’s narrative technique, specifically the manner in which she employs various aspects of focalization in the confusion of subject

¹⁴¹ Desai, *TIOL*, 262.

¹⁴² Desai, *TIOL*, 323.

and object, compounding the sense of blurred boundaries. ‘Things’ are brought to the fore in the exploration of Sai and Gyan: they document the contradictions of lives lived on the margins, and more significantly here, lives conducted in the cracks that such drawing up of lines creates. Through her use of ‘things’, Desai effectively documents the oppositional stances created through the material world, but also the manner in which these categorisations frequently slide into the other. It is largely through ‘things’ that Desai shows the impossibility of easily overcoming division; in Sai and Gyan’s relationship, this surmounting of division is portrayed as doomed to, at best, an idyllic, ultimately unattainable childhood. Rather, Desai brings to the fore the shades and nuances of such a process rather than concentrating solely on dichotomous divisions wrought or idealistic resolutions imagined through a love relationship. That the process of facing division is given more significance is shown in the way there are no firmly reached resolutions offered by the narrative, and in addition to this, the attention given to process rather than resolution is also underlined in the fact that Sai and Gyan’s is the only relationship occurring totally in the narrative present. Further strengthening this attention to process is the significance that the concept of liminality receives in the relationship of Sai and Gyan, a moment considered out of ‘conventional time’, and one dedicated to resolving and progressing past a particular stage. Sai and Gyan’s relationship does not, however, move past this period of liminality; instead, it becomes the burden of their respective, but differently, marginal experiences.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has brought together the domains of anthropology, literary close reading, and a cultural theoretical analysis to further a more complex analysis of Desai’s text. Such an approach is merited given that this is a novel which probes and examines notions of home, through ‘things’ in which not just the cultural, social, economic, political or personal can be noted, but often where *all* converge. However, as this chapter has shown, even though things are continually evoked as a

means of exploration of this fusion, their slipperiness continues to elide full definition, confirming the impossibility of the very notions Desai examines. These are the concepts that form the heart of Desai's analysis; her interest is not in attempting to understand such complex social, cultural or political issues by separating and delineating. Instead, the processual nature of 'things', which the analyses of both Appadurai and Brown stress, provides a way out of producing forced, crass conclusions on such entangled, convoluted issues.

As earlier close readings have demonstrated, Desai's narrative technique also contributes to this multi-layered and shifting perspective, furthering the instability and indistinctness formed by 'things'. The way in which the text is ordered, or not ordered, working through flashbacks, interruptions, creates the idea of stories and histories that are continually being reworked and reordered. The form of the narrative, and Desai's strategy of delay and deferral of significant episodes, followed by their eventual continuation following the interjection of another narrative, works to draw attention again to the shifting and interconnected nature of the issues being explored, while also stressing the inevitably fragmented nature of the world. The employment of indirect focalization again forces a comment on subjectivity to the fore, offering a vantage point which is often difficult or even impossible to pin down. Desai blurs lines between 'who' is focalizing and 'what' is being focalized in instances where her focus is centred on 'things', allowing even her narrative technique to continually open up issues of existence in an entangled world. This narrative strategy carries political implications, in a nuanced manner, particularly within a novel that is often deemed apolitical, or at best, politically naive or "patronizing".¹⁴³

By drawing attention to the problems of representation and the assumption of subject position through the craft of her writing, Desai begins to contribute to a realm of an engaged literature: one that is politically aware, and politically aware enough to weave this self-reflexivity and astuteness into the very form of her work. Through her narrative technique, and the focus on the material rather than the illusive subjective, Desai hints at the possibility of a recovery of what has been obscured between false categorisations and divisions. Though her novel is ultimately one of loss, the particular

¹⁴³ Ronit Frenkel, "The Politics of Loss: Post-Colonial Pathos and current Booker Prize-nominated texts from India and South Africa", *Scrutiny*2, 13.2 (2008)77-88, 83.

dispossessions of the novel have also been termed “the politics of loss”,¹⁴⁴ a kind of reworking of the expectations of Empire in the contemporary postcolonial text. I would argue that to render *The Inheritance of Loss* in such terms would be to reify the type of divisiveness the novel itself tries to eschew, one which effaces the carefully wrought, subtle politics of the narrative. Even a review of the novel which lauds the work as being “*intelligently postcolonial*”, largely because of its setting in “a part of the country in which the minority Indians are the imperialist bullies”,¹⁴⁵ seems to ignore the possibilities contained within Desai’s various narrative techniques. Instead, the way in which the Nepalese rebellion is deemed to be “seen largely through the eyes of baffled outsiders to whom it is mostly an annoyance”¹⁴⁶ is made central in this particular review. Such a reading of the novel implicitly fits Desai into a more constrained notion of political commitment: one which values only a direct, specific and suitably sympathetic account of political struggle in the Nepalese community in West Bengal. The somewhat reductive conclusions of such reviews foreclose the possibility of a political comment being made in a less explicit manner; suggested in this review is the preference for what would be deemed an appropriately balanced, explicit engagement with this particular political situation, which, by extension, attributes little attention to the difficulties this in turn could advance.

The manner in which Desai begins with the ‘thing’, rather than directly with the subject to which the ‘thing’ is connected, suggests that her work is more compatible with the ideas of Appadurai, who formulates a new methodological standpoint by endorsing the view that “it is things in motion that illuminate their human and social context”,¹⁴⁷ a view which is never far away from Desai’s treatment of her subject matter. Reading *The Inheritance of Loss* in relation to Appadurai’s theory brings certain advantages: namely, the refusal of ‘things’ to occupy a particular or continuous category throughout their history, and the convergence of different historical, social, political and temporal aspects in a particular ‘thing’. Both of these aspects of things are situated within Desai’s desire to overcome the rigidity of categorisation which still abounds. Though Appadurai wishes to dismantle the categorisation that exists between

¹⁴⁴ Frenkel, 83.

¹⁴⁵ Merritt Moseley, ‘Tidy and Untidy novels: The Booker Prizes 2006-2007’, *Sewanee Review*, 116.2 (Spring 2008) 289-303, 295.

¹⁴⁶ Moseley, 296.

¹⁴⁷ Appadurai, 3.

different types of ‘things’, he also places importance on the exchange and circulation of ‘things’, both intra and inter-culturally, therefore underling the distinction between finding productive parallels in ‘things’, and the dangerous futility of eliding difference.

Bill Brown’s ‘Thing Theory’, then, on first reading, perhaps seems less compatible with Desai’s political awareness and subtle political comment; his work appears wholly enmeshed within a highly theoretical realm, and one at a remove from the politics with which Desai aims to engage. Conversely, however, I would argue that the fluidity and flexibility of Brown’s work, its refusal to occupy a particular mode of thought, actually accommodates Desai’s project. Reading *The Inheritance Of Loss* with Brown’s ‘Thing Theory’ unleashes the possibility contained within ‘things’ as a means of exploring the wider political, social, cultural realm, as well as the smaller reaches of its intersection with the domain of the personal. Brown’s ‘Thing Theory’, with its heavy ties to a somewhat abstract cultural theory, would seem to run the risk of being deemed apolitical, in a similar manner to which Desai’s novel, with its focus on personal, familial or love relationships, and its sometimes hazy political detail, may be categorised. However, I would argue that Brown’s theory interacts with Desai’s novel in a similar manner to the way in which Desai offers political comment: by helping to bring out the subtleties and nuances of her work, showing her *engagement* with wider socio-political issues, even though her novel is not overtly political. It is precisely the fluidity of Brown’s theory, the way in which it is mostly unanchored from very specific concerns of the world, which provides the space needed when exploring issues of a political nature in a literary work. Through focusing on ‘things’, Desai’s novel avoids dogmatic stances which are at best, of little worth within the artistic world, and at worst, present over-simplified, ill-informed stances, which serve to reiterate and reify absolute categorisations. In Desai’s novel, ‘things’, particularly in Brown’s sense of them – of approaching ‘things’ less as a means of disclosing some particular social, political or historical ‘fact’ or position, and more as a means of opening up a multi-dimensional and interactive method of exploration – reveal the political situation rather than it being directly exposed. In this manner, Brown’s theory holds possibility for the realm of postcolonial theory in a wider sense; as one which wishes to be free of archaic, persisting, though often unintentional divisions, continually centred around the colonial divide, and one which contains the possibility to push forward and rejuvenate a

postcolonial theory, a theoretical body that in its most nuanced form “is designed to undo the ideological heritage of colonialism not only in the decolonised countries but also in the west itself.”¹⁴⁸

The fact that Desai offers no easy, worn solutions for the predicaments of the novel is sometimes termed as a reluctance to yield to her characters the “possibility of growth or redemption”,¹⁴⁹ yet such comments miss the subtlety that contributes so much to Desai’s work as a whole. The redemption the novel offers is more suitably tentative than the desire for such a surefooted response to many of the social, cultural and political issues of contemporary India and its diasporic community would elicit. Desai purposely avoids resolute conclusions in her continued bid to focus on the processes which perpetuate and structure these losses. Instead, the possible ‘redemptive’ factor of the novel exists in the hint of the prospect of recovering what has been lost in the cracks that such a structured mode of thinking encourages: precisely through *not* offering a resolution that would possibly be open to the hazards of such divisiveness, allowing the focus to remain on the interwoven nature of realms that are often considered distinct. The worlds of Desai’s characters are left open-ended in a manner which recalls the unlimited possibility of ‘things’; by doing so, Desai not only successfully navigates the obfuscations of her particular subject position, but also, through the techniques employed in her novel, demands a new intervention in the realm of postcolonial theory. Resonating with theorists such as Appadurai and Brown, hers is an intervention which is both grounded in the ‘real’ nature of the material world, yet contains the possibility to explore the realities of complex and entangled social, political and cultural issues, and their intersection with the smaller world of the home.

¹⁴⁸ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) 19.

¹⁴⁹ Pankaj Mishra, “‘Wounded by the West’, *The New York Times* (February 12 2006).
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/12/books/review/12mishra.html>

SECTION TWO: CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Chapter Three

Reimagining the Form and Scope of the Literary
through Arundhati Roy's and Indra Sinha's
Ecocritical Interventions.

3.1 Introduction

The debate that currently ranges within the field of ecocriticism shares similarities with many of the key debates which have been intensely played out within the domain of postcolonial studies and which continue to be a decisive element of its future. In particular, ecocriticism shares with postcolonial studies a concern regarding issues of theoretical abstraction, in addition to the contending with potentially meaningless or modish categorisation; ‘ecocriticism’ itself is a term often deemed unsuitable or of insufficient explanation of the domain’s complexities. Thus questions regarding the viability of each domain as a productive field of study marks both fields of research, albeit questions of varying levels and intensity. Indeed, the diversification of ecocriticism through its quite recent intersections with postcolonial studies, as well as studies implicating race, gender and other inequities, has largely enlivened the discipline and promoted its dynamic possibilities. However, this vigour brought about by a concern with various types of inequality in recent ecocriticism has not been a feature since the field’s inception, in the way that postcolonial studies has been concerned with such issues, albeit in often controversial or untenable ways. For example, Cheryll Glotfelty’s 1996 definition of ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” is cited in *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism 1993-2003* as possibly the “most quoted essay in the field” and which “remains the closest thing we have to a general definition of the field”.¹ This is not, in itself, a definition which deserves particular attention or which presents a specific untoward challenge, though the definition’s broad scope certainly presents cause for criticism. What is more disquieting is the implicit and continued reliance on such a broad spanning designation to inform *The ISLE Reader*, as it goes on to suggest that

the ecocritical bailiwick includes not only the study of the explicit treatment of human-nonhuman relationships in literature, but also the reading of any work of literature (in any genre) in an effort to discern its environmental implications. We believe that every literary work can be read from a “green” perspective, and that linguistic, conceptual, and analytical frameworks developed in any non-literary discipline may be incorporated into an editorial reading.²

¹ Michael P. Branch & Scott Slovic, eds., *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism 1993-2003* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2003) xvi-xvii.

² Branch & Slovic, xix

By expanding the concerns of “the ecocritical bailiwick” so that it includes any work or genre of literature – though the volume curiously retains a largely American focus – such a perspective effectively erases many of the prolific possibilities of this type of literary study, both in terms of its intersection with a larger reality, as well as the invigoration of, for example, the domain of postcolonial studies. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* continues this quite broadened trajectory of ecocriticism, but productively traces the importance of a line of thought that exists as a precursor to the issues and questions which the ecocritical field values. The volume aims to “recover from obscurity literary critics whose substantial contribution to our understanding of nature has been overshadowed by academic fashions: John Middleton Murry, Kenneth Burke, and John Danby, for instance”³ while also using the ideas of eminent thinkers, Adorno and Horkheimer for instance,⁴ to demonstrate the relevance of these powerful concepts to the development of ecocriticism. In this manner, this volume promotes a wide inclusion of material, genres and authors under the rubric of ecocritical thought in a way that avoids extension of its questions to *any* literature, but yet engages with its central concepts. The volume also aims to engage with the realms of postmodernism, whose density and often opaque nature appears to resist the more material or concretely progressive aims of ecocriticism. Thus the editor cites “Charlene Spretnak’s distinction between ‘deconstructive postmodernism’, which fosters ‘a nihilistic disintegration of all values’ and ‘ecological or reconstructive postmodernism’, which seeks opportunities for creativity and growth. The one merely plays amidst the ruins of modernity; the other works to open up possibilities for both people and planet”⁵ as a useful foundation. Overall, *The Green Studies Reader* sets out a domain “concerned with the living connection with the past and the future”⁶, underlining the productivity of the use of apparently eclectic modes of thought to incite and inform not just a relatively new academic domain but a mode of thought that values both productive theoretical analysis and the possibility of this mode of thought invigorating existing communities.

³ Laurence Coupe, ed., *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London & New York, 2000: Routledge) 6.

⁴ Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, “The Logic of Domination”, and Theodor Adorno, “Nature as ‘Not Yet’”, are both included in this volume.

⁵ Coupe, 7.

⁶ Coupe, 7.

In myriad ways, the debate between the uses of complex or abstract theoretical modes of thought pitted against the return to more concrete or world concerns ranges within critical aims to map the ecocritical domain, in many ways becoming one of the discipline's defining features. These are concerns again shared by both established and recent work in postcolonial studies, demonstrating a pervasive concern with social, ethical or moral concerns, though manifested in various ways. Lawrence Buell in his monograph *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* comments

The conception of ecocriticism as an alliance of academic critics, artists, environmental educators, and green activists reinforced the penchant within the movement for decrying "the metropolitan tendency in literary studies towards high theory and abstraction", as one Australian ecocritic put it.⁷

While Buell attributes credit to such thought, he makes clear the connection between what is oft-considered purely academic work and "public citizenship and advocacy",⁸ underlining the positivity and indeed, centrality of such a dynamic. However, in one of the central debates in the field, centring on how to represent the environment or as Buell puts it "human attempts to speak ecocentrically",⁹ he significantly points to the dangers of this knotted domain sliding into either academic idealism or becoming a means of slighting other academic contributions, effectively entering into an insularised disciplinary antagonism. Along with Buell, Graham Huggan also stresses the potential to be located in what are often supposed theoretically abstract modes. Huggan remarks that the so-called 'ethical turn' in literary studies was not "an alarmed reaction to the perceived excesses of postmodernism's/poststructuralist criticism, but rather a conscious bringing to the surface of postmodernism's/poststructuralism's underlying social and moral concerns".¹⁰ He associates this 'ethical turn' with the domains of both postcolonialism and ecocriticism, and extends their importance by observing that both fields "make implicit claims for the reshaping of the university humanities study in the

⁷ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford, 2005: Blackwell) 6.

⁸ Buell, 6.

⁹ Buell, 8.

¹⁰ Graham Huggan, "Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism and the Animal in Recent Canadian Fiction", in Fiona Becket & Terry Gifford, eds., *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2007) 162.

future”.¹¹ Furthermore, Huggan persuasively documents the overlap between these domains, demonstrating that

postcolonial criticism has effectively renewed, rather than belatedly discovered, its commitment to the environment, reiterating its insistence on the inseparability of current crises of ecological mismanagement from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and abuse.¹²

However, potential impasses in such formulations are evident. Huggan’s various citations mentioned above implicitly render a perspective that is largely confined to academe rather than offering what could be a vital catalyst for conceptual transformation. This is further demonstrated in the comment regarding the historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation, as much of contemporary environmentally-centred activist literature often aims to move beyond these types of claims. Such a formulation documents a further restriction to the world of the text or the world of academia, as these kind of comments are perhaps more suited to a particular literary reading of a text, undermining progressive potential often contained in environmental literary activist writing. These comments are not intended to fall within Buell’s envisaging of a kind of intellectual shadowboxing, but rather to note and pre-empt such aporia, existing even within a largely insightful and progressive argument. What a collaboration between postcolonial studies and ecocriticism potentially offers is a way out of the bind created by the tensions of the well-rehearsed poststructuralist/materialist debate that continues within this domain of postcolonial studies. Whether this is through a considered and careful amalgamation of two modes of thought or through a more deep-seated conceptual change will be explored throughout this chapter.

Remaining with the question concerning the productivity of theory, Buell also argues that what he terms the “distanced abstractions of the theory ecocriticism initially reacted against”,¹³ can actually engender fertile debate. Buell notes that a strategy within ecocriticism has been to “build selectively on poststructuralist theory while resisting the totalizing implications of its linguistic turn and its aftermaths”.¹⁴ However, Buell does not grant such a possibility firm approval. Instead, he uses these kinds of

¹¹ Huggan, 162.

¹² Huggan, 164.

¹³ Buell, 8.

¹⁴ Buell, 9.

possibilities, including within them the fruitful intersections of a new reflexivity within cultural anthropology, to demonstrate the complexity and advancing nature of the discipline. Such comments on the uses of various theoretical concepts and practices have the effect of making a larger statement on the uses of such theoretical engagements, both explicitly, as he acknowledges that “it would be a great mistake to interpret resistance to dominant strains of theory as proof of resistance to theory *tout court*”,¹⁵ but also implicitly in that these postulations undermine the uses of theory, as by emanating from a base that is too wide, rather than specific forms of engagement generating prolific possibilities.

Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* deliberates similar theoretical quandaries, albeit in a largely different manner. Morton comments on the oxymoronic quality of what are often termed ‘theoretical abstractions’: “Far from achieving greater levels of ‘theoretical’ *abstraction* (abstraction is far from theoretical), the volume ‘rises’ to higher and higher levels of *concreteness*”.¹⁶ Addressing issues similar to those raised by Buell, Morton aims to widen the present scope of ecocriticism in order to render its possible conclusions more positively. Morton aims to do so chiefly through renouncing the idea of nature in order for an ecological society to exist, remarking that “the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics and art. The book addresses this paradox by considering art above all else, for it is in art that the fantasies we have about nature take shape – and dissolve”.¹⁷ Morton states that by withholding ideas about ‘nature’ temporarily – as the rhetoric nature invokes as usually having only short-term force –¹⁸ a clearer idea of what “environment” means will be allowed to emerge.¹⁹ Central to this project of withholding certain presumptions, is the importance Morton places on self-reflexivity. Borrowing the term “ecocritique” from Timothy Luke, who uses the term “to describe forms of left ecological criticism”,²⁰ Morton significantly advances the parameters of this term. Importantly, both Luke and Morton use the term “ecocritique” to differentiate between that and “ecocriticism”, which Morton describes as being “too enmeshed in the ideology that churns out stereotypical

¹⁵ Buell, 9.

¹⁶ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 4.

¹⁷ Morton, 1.

¹⁸ Morton, 24.

¹⁹ Morton, 11.

²⁰ Morton, 13.

ideas of nature to be of any use”.²¹ Morton, however, goes further, associating critique with “a dialectical form of criticism that bends back upon itself”,²² returning to the notion of *kritik* established by the Frankfurt School: “As well as pointing, in a highly politicized way, to society, critique points toward itself”.²³ In the process, Morton aims to bring this dimension of reflexivity to “ecocritique”, as a critique which extends both inwards and outwards. What is interesting for the purposes of this chapter is the way in which Morton sets up an ecological theoretical intervention as one which requires the engagement and reflexivity of the self, in a manner that does not signify a removal from the world. Reflecting this dual movement is an associated emphasis on theoretical progression that need not equate with a worldly regression. This chapter will, in many ways, trace this dual movement through the theoretical, amplifying and extending this through the selected texts. In order to chart this theoretical and aesthetic movement, whilst remaining engaged with a particularised context, I employ Félix Guattari’s influential but insufficiently used work *The Three Ecologies* (1989).

3.2 *The Three Ecologies*

Given that Guattari’s *The Three Ecologies* focuses on such wide-ranging issues, some of which may not appear closely related to the concerns of an environmental focus or of issues of environmental justice, his theoretical treatise might appear as just that – an instance of theoretical exercise. However, Guattari’s essay seeks to negotiate issues relating to both the theoretical, aiming to engender an alternative mode of thinking on a conceptual level, and the practical application of these ideas, concepts occurring and adapting simultaneously in relation to the theoretical. Guattari begins by criticising “political groupings and executive authorities”, commenting that “despite having recently initiated a partial realization of the most obvious dangers that threaten the natural environment of our societies, they are generally content to simply tackle industrial pollution and then from a purely technocratic perspective”.²⁴ This early

²¹ Morton, 13.

²² Morton, 13.

²³ Morton, 13.

²⁴ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar & Paul Sutton (London & New York: Continuum, 2008) 19.

assertion serves, in many ways, as a statement of intent for the remainder of the piece, which envisages a shift from the administration of reactionary scientific and technical measures, in addition to a refocusing of the modes of thought behind such applications. In this way, Guattari's essay is very much focused on actual environmental concerns and their interactions with other elements of society and the individual, in a manner that aims to propagate transformation in both the theoretical domain and on the level of praxis.

However, Guattari's intervention is noteworthy for its interrelation of modes which many ecocritical interventions find difficult to negotiate. It avoids total immersion in the potential 'interiority' contained in politics of subjectivity and identity, though his theoretical exposition acknowledges this consideration in important ways; yet Guattari's interposition also navigates issues connected to a more direct form of environmental involvement in a manner that does not forfeit the literary or aesthetic dimension. As an alternative to a pseudo-scientific and technocratic response to convoluted environmental issues, Guattari argues that "only an ethico-political articulation – which I call *ecosophy* – between the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity) would be likely to clarify these questions."²⁵ Significantly, this assertion establishes the interconnectedness of these domains and hints at the beginnings of a mode of thought that can interact across these terrains in manner that evades reduction.

What is perhaps most significant about Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* is the way in which each node or register of this triad interacts and depends on similar conceptual requirements for its survival. This shared quality also constitutes a main site of potential, from where the extension and scope of Guattari's "ethico-political articulation" can emerge and be realised. The need for an "authentic political, social and cultural revolution, reshaping the objectives of the production of both material and immaterial assets"²⁶ is emphasised, and it is through this focus on revival that the very connection between these registers is affirmed. Through the emphasis on the rethinking of both material and immaterial domains, the "ethico-political" and "ethico-aesthetic",²⁷ on which Guattari places increasing import, become reciprocally joined. While these

²⁵ Guattari, 19.

²⁶ Guattari, 20.

²⁷ Guattari, 25.

thoroughly ethical dimensions inform each other to a large extent, it becomes increasingly clear through Guattari's essay that the idea of the ethico-aesthetic is an integral part of the fulfilment of an ethico-political stance, but is also inherently important in its own right. This can be particularly seen in its fruitful opposition to what Guattari confirms as the ineffectiveness of "techno-scientific means" and "pseudo-scientific" paradigms to address issues of environmental import. Indeed, Guattari cites the anxiety which surrounds domains that cannot be treated with a supposed scientific 'rigour' as indicative of this approach, marking subjectivity as a site of particular attention in this regard, arguing that such domains require the creation of paradigms which are "instead ethico-aesthetic in inspiration"²⁸ and which highlight the porosity within previously rigorously defined modes of thought.

Such dispensing with conservative or traditional modes of thought is essential to the interaction of the three ecological registers, in a way that Guattari envisages as enabling a radically different approach. This ethico-political and aesthetic mode emphasises *process* rather than *structure*, and Guattari underlines the way in which a relationship between the three ecologies depends upon this processual exchange. The reason Guattari cites for this alerted mode is the very fact of its difference from established approaches, rather than simply the complexity of the three ecologies:

the three ecologies are governed by a *different logic* to that of ordinary communication between speakers and listeners which has nothing to do with the intelligibility of discursive sets, or the indeterminate interlocking fields of signification. It is a logic of intensities, of autoreferential existential assemblages engaging in irreversible durations... While the logic of discursive sets endeavours to completely delimit its objects, the logic of intensities, or eco-logic, is concerned only with the movement and intensity of evolutive processes. Process, which I oppose here to system or to structure, strives to capture existence in the very act of its constitution, definition and deterritorialization.²⁹

By highlighting this fundamental difference, Guattari effectively emphasises the large conceptual shift that is required; one which cannot be imagined simply. What Guattari defines as "the logic of intensities, or eco-logic" is positioned against an interlocked but ultimately closed system of "discursive sets" or "signification", however infinite this may be or appear. Instead, "a logic of intensities, of autoreferential existential

²⁸ Guattari, 25.

²⁹ Guattari, 30.

assemblages” that allows for a multiplicitous and inseparable engagement is proposed. That this “logic of intensities” is “concerned only with the movement and intensity of evolutive processes”, and is therefore opposed to structure, suggests the necessity to combine the apparently variant levels of significance or power evident in Guattari’s three ecologies – the environment, the socius and the individual. Furthermore, that the *process* Guattari articulates “strives to capture existence in the very act of its constitution, definition and deterritorialization”, further underlines the dimension of constantly changing and multiplicitous connections.

This emphasis on change and the continual remaking of connections is relevant to both aspects of Guattari’s ethico-aesthetic paradigm; as Janell Watson has noted, “ “Ethic” emphasizes the decisions and choices involved in any act of modeling or mapping. “Aesthetic” emphasizes creative productivity and extra-rational subjectivity.”³⁰ Furthermore, Guattari’s notion of “eco-art”, which has at its core a “praxic-opening out”,³¹ surpasses Watson’s reading of the ethico-aesthetic in its emphasis on application and intervention that exceeds the theoretical domain and a confinement to subjectivity. That ‘eco’ is here used in “its original Greek sense of *oikos*, that is, ‘house, domestic property, habitat, natural milieu’”,³² does not inhibit its use in more narrowly environmental terms, and in fact underlines an indispensable interconnectivity. The way in which the different ecological registers engage and interact continually, yet in constantly various ways, reveals the role the ethico-political, and in particular, the ethico-aesthetic, has in enabling this “eco-logic” to emerge; facilitating a complex and multiplicitous interaction, which therefore belies general definition.

Guattari continually returns to an emphasis on the significance of the individual and subjectivity, though maintaining a careful distinction between these. The maintained focus on the multiplicity of the micro-level of subjectivity is, almost contradictorily, in order to facilitate vital extension. Stemming from his wider disillusion with the pseudo-scientific, Guattari maintains that concepts of subjectivity have been unduly dismissed in the name of “scientific” rigour, observing that “it is as though a scientific superego demands that psychic entities are reified and insists that

³⁰ Janell Watson, *Guattari’s Diagrammatic Thought: Writing Between Lacan and Deleuze* (London & New York: Continuum, 2009) 97.

³¹ Guattari, 35.

³² Guattari, 95 n52.

they are only to be understood by means of extrinsic coordinates.”³³ Instead, Guattari proposes a more wholly microscopic detailing of such domains, in which rather than speaking “of the ‘subject’, we should perhaps speak of *components of subjectification*, each working more or less on its own”,³⁴ leading to this differentiation between individual and subjectivity. Brian Massumi designates such a process thus: “subjectification is the constitution, through interlocking passive and active syntheses on every stratum, of infoldings of varying porosity”;³⁵ a description that underlines the various intersections of this process, as well as its apparently infinite micro-levels. In *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari defines the individual as “like a ‘terminal’ for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines, etc”.³⁶ Interiority, therefore “establishes itself at the crossroads of multiple components, each relatively autonomous in relation to the other, and, if need be, in open conflict”.³⁷ This suggests that even though the ‘infolding’ of the processes of subjectification are significant, the productive interior confictions have, simultaneously, equally significant intersections with exteriority, this demonstrating and underlining the productivity of this dual movement of processes of subjectification, while evading a reduction to one singular entity.

However, such an intersection occurs precisely because of the multiplicitous levels of subjectivity, folding inward in a complex manner and because of the ‘individual’ being a kind of centre for these levels of complexity. Subjectivity, when considered in this mode, is complex in its components of subjectification, but also serves as a point where the ‘individual’ can be considered as the connection between these levels of interiority and a dynamic relation with the external world, thus cementing the possibility of the individual without ignoring levels of interiority or relation to the larger world. In particular, the value of the aesthetic domain is cited as a crucial link between the prolific levels of interiority and the relation with domains which extend beyond this potentially insular interest. Again, Guattari cites this potential link as being obfuscated by a careful reliance on “pseudo-scientific paradigms” which in turn means that “the human and social sciences have condemned themselves to

³³ Guattari, 25.

³⁴ Guattari, 24.

³⁵ Brian Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) 80.

³⁶ Guattari, 25.

³⁷ Guattari, 25.

missing the intrinsically progressive, creative and auto-positioning dimensions of processes of subjectification”.³⁸ At this particular crux, Guattari again puts forward the concept of the ethico-aesthetic, designating the “the best cartographies of the psyche, or, if you like, the best psychoanalyses, those of Goethe, Proust, Joyce, Artaud and Beckett, rather than Freud, Jung and Lacan”.³⁹ The ethico-political and ethico-aesthetic modes that were earlier noted as placing emphasis on process as opposed to structure resume significance at this juncture. The significance of such modes is apparent in both the process of subjectification, as well as in the new emphasis on the literary-aesthetic. The potential role of subjectivity in configuring a new engagement with the three ecological registers is largely forged through this political and aesthetic dimension.⁴⁰ In an apparently paradoxical manner, power is located in this smallest or micro-level, demonstrated in the possibility contained within the way in which “...individual and collective assemblages are capable, potentially, of developing and proliferating well beyond their ordinary equilibrium”.⁴¹

Guattari’s trajectory places increasing emphasis on the potential extension and proliferation of radical forms of engagement from smaller locations, such as individual subjectivity. However, the potential contained within the recourse to individual subjectivity and the possibility contained within the ethico-aesthetic frame are inescapably intertwined with the control exercised over both these domains by what Guattari designates as Integrated World Capitalism. Guattari argues that Integrated World Capitalism “tends increasingly to decentre its sites of power, moving away from structures producing goods and services towards structures producing signs, syntax and – in particular, through the control which it exercises over the media, advertising, opinion polls, etc. – subjectivity”.⁴² This has important ramifications for the entangled domains of subjectivity arising from the way in which Integrated World Capitalism (IWC) exerts claims on this most intimate realm, in addition to the manner in which

³⁸ Guattari, 25.

³⁹ Guattari, 25.

⁴⁰ Gary Genosko, in an afterword included in *The Three Ecologies* entitled “The Life and Work of Felix Guattari: From Transversality to Ecosophy”, notes that Guattari favoured a “polyphonic conception of subjectivity of coexisting levels”, and was particularly informed by “the autonomization of subjectivity in relation to aesthetic objects, the so-called ‘partial enunciators’: these are the references (objects) by means of which subjectivity enunciates itself (Guattari, 1995a:13)”, which goes some way towards explaining the importance of the aesthetic in this sense.

⁴⁰ Guattari, 71.

⁴¹ Guattari, 27.

⁴² Guattari, 32.

IWC wields power in relation to the wider domain of society through powerful structures such as the media. Memorably, Guattari argues that such control leads to “the capitalization of subjective power”.⁴³ The entanglement of such domains in this manner reaffirms the value of the notion of an *ecosophy*, which is, in many senses, a productive interaction between these very registers of individual, society, and environment. Thus, it may be noted that Guattari is interested in intricate entanglements of self, society and forces of capitalism, though it may seem initially in ways that are perhaps not wholly unusual or revolutionary. What is, however, remarkable about Guattari’s exposition on these issues is the approach adopted, which he deems “unlike Hegelian and Marxist dialectics” in that “eco-logic no longer imposes a ‘resolution’ of opposites”.⁴⁴ Ultimately, Guattari emphasises a resolution that works *across* categories and in a manner that still retains the emphasis on the import of the individual, the necessity of maintaining difference within the larger collective and of exercising choice accordingly.⁴⁵ In relation to this, Guattari’s concept of transversality is particularly relevant, since this signifies a practice or mode that allows the aforementioned preordained harmonies of “discursive sets”, for example, to be opened out, in a kind of creative singularisation. Transversality entails a non-hierarchical mode of thinking, and is “a dimension that strives to overcome two impasses: that of pure verticality, and a simple horizontality. Transversality tends to be realized when maximum communication is brought about between different levels and above all in different directions”.⁴⁶ From this, its potential effect in the process of interrelation between the aesthetic and individual processes of subjectification becomes clear.

Such an insistence on the significance of the ‘micro’ and on the “singularization” of these sites of micro-politics is not, I would argue, a baulking at the possibility of effecting wider and collective change, but rather an alternative engagement with this very notion. The way in which Guattari’s essay navigates the potential insularity of various micro-levels is predicated on the idea of “dissensus and the singular production of existence”,⁴⁷ a concept that envisages a circumvention of the caprices of mass-media, in addition to underlining an alternative in the form of an

⁴³ Guattari, 32.

⁴⁴ Guattari, 34.

⁴⁵ Guattari, 34.

⁴⁶ Guattari, quoted in Garry Genosko, *Felix Guattari: A Critical Introduction* (London & New York: Pluto Press, 2009) 51.

⁴⁷ Guattari, 33.

ethico-aesthetic intervention. That this “dissensus” is pitted against the imposition of “stupefying and infantilizing consensus”,⁴⁸ registers the necessary discontent with a schema for ‘individual’ participation imposed from above. Such a concept also broadens the ways in which participation may be formulated, allowing for modes of experimentation and the broadening of such an engagement into domains which are often considered extraneous to such a resistance, namely variations of ethico-aesthetic formulation. The control imposed on the individual through IWC also furnishes Guattari’s maintained focus on this micro level with political and cultural weight, as it logically follows that if the smallest unit and daily basis of life cannot move past the confines of a mass-produced and ultimately constricted existence, then a larger collective will be similarly constrained. Guattari argues that the focus of the ecological register related to the social sphere needs to continually address “the fact that capitalist power has become so delocalized and deterritorialized, both in extension, by extending its influence over the whole social, economic and cultural life of the planet, and in ‘intension’, by infiltrating the most unconscious subjective strata”.⁴⁹ Thus the reason for Guattari’s insistent return to the level of the micro-political is in an effort to confront capitalism’s power, rather than a retreat away from such ‘worldly’ concerns.

In this negotiating of this potential space between individual subjectivity as distinguishable from the domain of the micro-political and the micro-social, a fertile ground for theoretical debate is located, and one that will prove to be particularly valuable in terms of the entangled domains of environmental issues, reform, and activism. The significance of such a crossover is maintained and broadened as Guattari contends “it is important not to homogenize various levels of practice or to make connections between them under some transcendental supervision, but instead to engage them in processes of *heterogenesis*”.⁵⁰ Here, he recognises the imposition of various externally devised structures as, to some degree, inevitable, but that, simultaneously, disparate modes of *dissensus* and *singularization* can be engendered. By mobilising each register of ecological praxis, the modes of production that govern subjectivity, society and the environment can be reinvented, and it is in this sense that Guattari declares “ecology must stop being associated with the image of a small nature-loving minority or with qualified specialists. Ecology in my sense questions the whole

⁴⁸ Guattari, 33.

⁴⁹ Guattari, 33.

⁵⁰ Guattari, 34.

of subjectivity and capitalistic power formations, whose sweeping progress cannot be guaranteed to continue as it has for the past decade".⁵¹

Significantly, Guattari's essay also presents a tangible intercession within the politics of the everyday, in addition to fruitful modes of theoretical intervention and production. Though the complexities of subjectivity are considered in psychoanalytic detail in various parts of *The Three Ecologies*, there is an equally enlivening meditation on "mental ecology" as it pertains to everyday life. Such an emphasis destabilises potential charges of theoretical or textual confinement: "It is equally imperative to confront capitalism's effects in the domain of mental ecology in everyday life: individual, domestic, material, neighbourly, creative or one's personal ethics." Thus, in a minute but potentially variable way, the nexus of relations surrounding the individual can, too, participate in notions of *ecosophy*, underlining yet another potential division which Guattari's philosophy usefully traverses. At its most tangible level, this intervention into the everyday delivers one of the most potentially powerful results of Guattari's thought, that "the reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy in one particular domain encourages conquests in other domains – the catalyst for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity's confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level".⁵²

The notion of literary activism, interestingly and controversially, may be situated on this very line demarcating the potential insularity of the theoretical and the textual from the worldly concerns of a larger reality. In a comparable manner, the burgeoning domain of ecocriticism faces similar dilemmas, particularly in terms of its considerations, which vary widely. Both of these domains, which combine the practical implementations of interventions and resistance with abstract, conceptual or textual practices, can find a useful directive in Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*: "Instead of clinging to general recommendations we would be implementing effective practices of experimentation, as much on a microsocial level as on a larger institutional scale".⁵³ Realisation of this aspiration would involve a reconfiguration of how the three ecological registers engage and interact, in a way that allows for new possibilities. Key among these possibilities, in terms of relevance for literary activism and its specifically

⁵¹ Guattari, 35.

⁵² Guattari, 45.

⁵³ Guattari, 24.

environmentally or ecologically concerned facets, is the idea of “creative autonomy”⁵⁴ encouraging similar renewal from one domain to the next. Such an autonomy contains the possibility, for example, to “make the transition from the mass-media era to a *post-media age*, in which the media will be reappropriated by a multitude of subject-groups capable of directing its resingularization”,⁵⁵ thus demonstrating the possibility of progress and mobilisation which begins at micro level.

In various ways, the texts chosen to map the lines of enquiry of this chapter, demonstrate an intense engagement from the site of the micro, in particular the site of the home. In a manner that extends reach inwards, whilst simultaneously moving far beyond these parameters, Arundhati Roy’s 1997 novel *The God of Small Things* charts a movement that can productively be thought of as contributing to an ecological aesthetic. Roy’s essay on the Narmada Dam “The Greater Common Good” (1999) reflects some of the concerns prevalent in what Morton terms “conventional ecocriticism”, which relates to “ideas about space and place (global, local, cosmopolitan, regionalist)”.⁵⁶ Yet, as I will argue, Roy’s interaction with some of these typically “heavily thematic”⁵⁷ concerns of such a mode of ecocriticism, extends past such partial redundancies. Indra Sinha’s novel *Animal’s People* (2007) demonstrates a comparable focus on the micro, and the particularity the everyday of a poisoned environment, whilst his literary politics encourage and compel reflexivity.

⁵⁴ Guattari, 45.

⁵⁵ Guattari, 40.

⁵⁶ Morton, 2.

⁵⁷ Morton, 2.

3.3 Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

He was exasperated because he didn't know what that look *meant*. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair. He didn't know that in some places, like the country Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that *personal* despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cosy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered. It was never important enough. Because Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening.⁵⁸

Though *The God of Small Things* undoubtedly asserts its committed use of innovative language with great force and immediacy from its opening pages, the development of Arundhati Roy's avowed commitment to "small things" is more slowly paced, evading explicit mention and appearing haphazardly or unexpectedly, despite its inclusion in the novel's title. Roy's compelling and sensuous use of language, in a manner that continually appears to defy its potentially delimited boundaries, continues to attract most comment from recent critics and early reviewers alike. An Australian reviewer in 1997, for example, comments on the novel's supposed "tantalizing mix of Indian exotica, mysticism and history on a domestic and national level",⁵⁹ a remark easily denounced in its assured, easy exoticism,⁶⁰ while even the more nuanced reviews focus on Roy's supposed ability to elicit indistinct but deeply felt emotion in the movement "through such a landscape of sensory imagery that we seem to have lived the tragedy long before we can understand it".⁶¹ Inarguably, Roy's particular use of language is a fundamental element of her exploration of the micro-social and political, the everyday and the banal coupled with its devastating opposite in *The God of Small Things*. However, though her use of language as fundamental to the novel's progression is recognised by some reviewers in more critical ways,⁶² there is still a sense that, in

⁵⁸ Arundhati Roy, *The God Of Small Things* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2002) 31. Hereafter will be referred to as *TGOST*.

⁵⁹ Julie Mullaney, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Reader's Guide* (New York & London: Continuum, 2002) 73.

⁶⁰ Mullaney makes a similar point, 73.

⁶¹ Jacket of Indian edition of *The God of Small Things*, Laura Shapiro, *Newsweek*

⁶² See for example Aijaz Ahmad, "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically", in *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*, ed., Alex Tickell (London & New York: Routledge, 2007).

critical reception, at worst, Roy's prose is exoticised, and at best, consideration of her cutting and specific ethico-aesthetic vision elides many considerations.

Despite the tendency amongst reviewers to make flimsy or exoticising comments about the value of Roy's prose, the ability of her language to affect a deeper and simultaneously more subtle purpose remains nonetheless. The linguistic crosscutting of various spheres of influence is reminiscent of the intricate and mutual involvement of the small and apparently banal micro-level with the crushing omnipresence of macro-structures of class and caste, implemented not only by government and police forces, but through apparently innocuous smaller recesses within society. However, a valorisation of the novel's lush language has the more serious potential effect of relegating Roy's active engagement with worldly concerns to a secondary status. While this is a charge frequently levelled at a particularly 'female' domain of writing, the duality of Roy's concerns and the intensity with which these issues are fused warrants new attention, both on a theoretical level and in terms that extend beyond the textual or linguistic. Significantly, Roy herself has recently made the plea to her readers to "not forget that *The God of Small Things* is a political novel".⁶³ It is interesting to note that Roy voiced this appeal that the political dimension of the novel be remembered at a ceremony to mark the novel's translation into Malayalam, the language of the characters, further suggesting the way in which the novel manages to traverse the division between real and fictional worlds. As this reading will argue, the novel's very power resides in its literary form, and the ability to confront the converging dimensions of the personal and political in a manner that points toward the existence of an "ecosophy" wrought in Roy's fictional world.

The construction of an ecosophy within its fictional territory, compatible or comparable with Guattari's conceptualisation of the term, is largely effected through the narrative focus on the inexorable overlapping of various levels, from the minutiae of the micro-level which infolds to divulge various subjectivities, to the sheer vastness of entrenched social and cultural oppressions and new and continuing degradations of heritage and environment; and this constitutes the core of Roy's particular ethical positioning. Roy's narrative holds a notion of the ecological at its core in its consideration of these various domains without reducing or elevating any singular

⁶³ K.P.M. Basheer, "Estha and Rahel Now Speak Malayalam", *The Hindu* (Online edition) 5th February 2011, <http://www.hindu.com/2011/02/05/stories/2011020565262400.htm> Accessed 6th February 2011.

entity, becoming ecosophical in its refusal to be simply or singularly driven by a particular environmentalist politic, in its paradoxically “broad and inconsistent”⁶⁴ mode. Simultaneously, the narrative refuses to be contained by a hazily informed transplantation of ecology to the literary domain; it does not represent an ecological mode of thought in terms of a reliance on a notion that presumes a neat interconnectedness of various entities. Instead, the novel’s ecological relations are woven throughout, surfacing explicitly at times and faintly registering their ecological presence in other instances. The deftness of Roy’s narrative allows for a notion of the ecological or ecosophical to emerge, even when the natural environment, habitat or milieu is not directly raised.

For the most part, *The God of Small Things* effects this ecosophical presence through its continual transitions, crossings and “twinings”, both in its content and narrative structure. In particular, Roy’s exploration of the family unit, and, specifically, the idea of the family’s “morality” centres on instances of overlapping and a notion of *misfitting*, therefore calling into question the connections or overlaps on which the very notion of transitions and “twinings” rest. In this manner, Roy’s ethico-aesthetic is demonstrated through her narrative, which though ecologically centred and very often environment-focused, does not completely separate or delineate such issues. However, at this juncture, a problem related to both the ethical and aesthetic is also revealed. Such an analysis, in terms of the ethico-aesthetic, risks a blind elevation or deification of concepts such as “the local”, while aiming to refuse definition or to increase the complexity of such concepts. Furthermore, it may lead to what Timothy Morton has referred to in another context as “praising a localist poetics, for example, just because it is local, or proclaiming a ‘small is beautiful’ aestheticized ethics – [which] is in greater measure part of the problem than part of the solution”.⁶⁵ In specific relation to Roy’s novel, the challenges of an unequal elevation or focus on the aesthetic, or, on the other hand, the reduction of content to a cohesive and twee plot, remain large, despite the narrative dynamic suggested here.

Roy’s focus on the destabilised familial triad of Ammu and her children Rahel and Estha, encompasses the individual subject, while her exploration of the family unit

⁶⁴ Morton, 9.

⁶⁵ Morton, 11.

extends from this microsocial site to its interactions with the wider collective through its consideration of what may be termed its vulnerable characters. Furthermore, the rapid revelation that this particular family unit does not conform to the norm of the nuclear family, heightens the anxiety this unit causes through what are deemed the family's transgressions. From the beginning, depictions of the family rest squarely at the intersection of psychic and social concerns. Though such depictions, particularly of Rahel and Estha, fuelled by their eventual incest, are often anchored within a psychoanalytic framework, my reading positions the family unit as forming an integral part of Roy's *ethico-aesthetic* perspective in the novel. Though critique of and comment on the novel often ranges widely between anesthetising aestheticism, psychoanalytic probing and dismissal of the novel's politics, this study seeks to evade such potentially rigid categorisations, by focusing attention on the instances of a kind of excess caused by this family unit, that cannot be contained by any one of these particulars. This sentiment is replicated by the intervening omniscient narrator on behalf of Rahel, who has recently returned to her childhood home in Ayemenem and stands surveying her grandmother's old pickle factory: "Looking back now, to Rahel it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question."⁶⁶ This consideration of classificatory conundrums within the novel tellingly begins with an extension inwards to the most intimately felt realms of love and loss, in terms of both the familial and the scope of intricacies of personal love relationships, and is evident in Rahel's recounting of the past, where, even at this singular point in the narrative, a simultaneous widening of concerns is effected as these ordinary events are juxtaposed with a lineage of various incursions:

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 that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few 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.

Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story.

Still to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it.

Equally it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendency, before Vasco da

⁶⁶ Roy, *TGOST*, 31.

Gama arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian Bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled sea serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag.

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

And how much.⁶⁷

Weighty historical events are thus juxtaposed with the ordinary, and thus the narrative continues, horrific in its presumed ordinariness. Two disparate chronologies are actively invoked here, and are linked particularly through the passing of the "Love Laws", simultaneously signalling the intimate and particular through its recourse to love, and the laws established and fossilised by religion and reified by time. Though these events and laws are made permanent through the way in which they are embedded in particular narratives, human interactions with them are not presented as having arrived at a similarly fixed point, as the family's deemed transgressions regarding love are to illuminate.

These transgressions, albeit trifling, in following the orderly path of various kinds of socially restricted love, are mapped out in the second chapter of the novel entitled 'Pappachi's Moth', which charts a kind of family history which is both troubled and unruly. Centring on an opaque idea of "morality", which cannot be neatly defined or classified but yet assumes a central role in the life of the family, morality's grip can be seen to extend into the public domain, as the narrator comments "It was the kind of time in the life of a family when something happens to nudge its hidden morality from its resting place and make it bubble to the surface and float for a while. In clear view. For everyone to see".⁶⁸ As the narrative charges through what is, it is supposed, a testing of the family's honour or its abiding principles, the linking of the familial domain to the larger world, or more accurately, a continual *discordance* between individual subjectivities, larger collective groups, and the *socius* is registered, linking these entities in precisely their divergence from a predetermined yet unspecified norm. This becomes a particularly resonant concept within the terms and confines of the

⁶⁷ Roy, *TGOST*, 32-3.

⁶⁸ Roy, *TGOST*, 35.

family, within which dissent from norms does not constitute a clearly coded act of resistance, but rather is inflected with hues of both conformity and divergence.

Ammu's restless dissents from various forms of stifling familial and marital power are explicitly registered, yet have ultimately failed to provide the release or process of singularisation imagined by her. Fleeing from the cloying confines of her familial home in small town rural India to the narrowness of an oppressive marriage, and finally making an "unwelcomed"⁶⁹ return to the family home in Ayemenem a number of years later, Ammu's attempts to elude an outwardly imposed authority are clear. Interestingly, in the trajectory of Ammu's narrative, this desire to assert oneself is coloured with the impositions of other, larger domains – be it discontent at the impositions of tradition augmented by extravagant ritualised decoration, demonstrated in her being "a foolish jewelled bride",⁷⁰ or desire to rebel against the insincere sympathy of female relations, gloating over her failed marriage, tinged with the intrusion from another realm, as the reference to *Modern Times* demonstrates. However, Ammu's occasional hovering "in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond their power" allows a fretful imagined veering away from the accepted impositions of the external world, paradoxically made possible by these very restrictions, as the intensity of Ammu's deviation relies on the fact that she was "a woman they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous".⁷¹

What Rahel frames as the supposed difficulties with classification presented by the family extends from the idiosyncratic space occupied by Ammu to the larger coming to terms with the vagaries of the wider currents which crosscut the family's existence. Even the children's morality is continually called into question throughout the narrative, and in this particular chapter "Pappachi's Moth", detailing the family's "morality", it is raised in a number of ways. The twins' failure to fit a typified family modality first arises as a point of contention when Baby Kochamma's dislike for the twins is shown, which is pitted in terms of their "doomed, fatherless" status, while "worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian

⁶⁹ Roy, *TGOST*, 42.

⁷⁰ Roy, *TGOST*, 43.

⁷¹ Roy, *TGOST*, 44.

would ever marry”.⁷² Baby Kochamma’s outrage at their perceived flawed and incomplete heritage is ultimately tied to an intense dislike of their mother Ammu and the family unit they comprised, eventually resting on her grudging of the twins’ “moments of high happiness” extracted from the landscape of an everyday involvement in the natural world, and directly followed by the contention that “most of all, she grudged them the comfort they drew from each other. She expected from them some token unhappiness. At the very least”.⁷³ Though the twins’ happiness is demonstrably bound up in such simplicities, not least as the solace garnered from each other reveals, the novel resists any easy conclusions or resolutions of this complex relationship. Instead, Roy demonstrates the complexity of the twins’ relationship in various ways, which avoids a simple merging of the individual concerns or personalities, yet also resists a demarcation in terms of a splitting or a rifting of whole entities.

This “twinning” or duality is raised throughout the narrative in various ways, from early in the narrative, when the “dizygotic” twins’ confusion did not reside in their physical appearance but “lay in a deeper more secret place”,⁷⁴ and is particularly present in the terms within which the twins are often defined; however, it rarely results in what can be said to be a positive or productive manner. From their arrival into the world as “two little ones, instead of one big one”,⁷⁵ to the recurrence of the idea of “Two Things” throughout the narrative, the presentation of duality does not rely on a concept of resolving opposites or reuniting detached modes of being. Similarly, in their adult return to Ayemenem, though the minds of Rahel and Estha are undoubtedly linked, that link retains both enigmatic and irreconcilable elements. For example, at the beginning of the novel, in one retrospection, focalized through Rahel, it emerges that

now she thinks of Estha and Rahel as *Them*, because separately, the two of them are no longer what *They* were or ever thought *They’d* be...Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons. Short creatures with long shadows, patrolling the Blurry End. Gentle half-moons have gathered under their eyes and they are as old as Ammu was when she died.⁷⁶

⁷² Roy, *TGOST*, 45.

⁷³ Roy, *TGOST*, 46.

⁷⁴ Roy, *TGOST*, 2.

⁷⁵ Roy, *TGOST*, 40.

⁷⁶ Roy, *TGOST*, 3.

This irreconcilability is further revealed through the depiction of Estha's silence, revealed as extending to the reaches of his psyche until Rahel arrives and "with her she had brought the sound of passing trains, and the light and shade that falls on you if you have a window seat. The world, locked out for years, suddenly flooded in, and now Estha couldn't hear himself for the noise".⁷⁷ Conversely, Rahel can "hear the raucous, scrambled world inside his head",⁷⁸ suggesting a kind of broken continuity between the twins' internal worlds, or an interrupted closeness. This strange irreconcilable closeness fused with its simultaneous lack of clear division is repeated later in the novel, in a chapter entitled "Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombati", when Rahel, watching Estha, muses: "He was a naked stranger met in a chance encounter. He was the one that she had known before Life began... Both things unbearable in their polarity. In their irreconcilable far-apartness".⁷⁹

This irreconcilability, often read in psychoanalytic terms,⁸⁰ and which is glaringly apparent in adulthood, is already present in forms masked by the banal in childhood. Returning to the chapter "Pappachi's Moth", such an idea is broached through the children's fascination with a glimmer of apparently rare logical connections in the English language in the form of the word "cuff-links". The word, simple in both its function and its word form, provides the twins with a moment of logic that is rarely found in the rest of the novel, which, for all of its interweaving of various domains and its invocations of apparently opposing spheres, rarely reconciles these realms or reveals a sense of logical connection between them. Thus the children's seizing of "this morsel of logic in what had so far seemed an illogical language. *Cuff + link = Cuff-link*" and which "to them, rivalled the precision and logic of mathematics. *Cuff-links* gave them an inordinate (if exaggerated) satisfaction, and a real affection for the English language",⁸¹ indicates their subjective amplification of a fragment of connection in the children's world. This rare exercise in classification forms a stark contrast to the other modes of categorisation which are to impinge on Rahel and Estha's childhood. An alternate and more affecting mode of classification is mooted immediately after the children's delight in the connection mirrored in both the signified

⁷⁷ Roy, *TGOST*, 15.

⁷⁸ Roy, *TGOST*, 21.

⁷⁹ Roy, *TGOST*, 93.

⁸⁰ For example, Janet Thormann, 'The Ethical Subject of *The God of Small Things*', *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8.2 (Fall 2003) 299-307.

⁸¹ Roy, *TGOST*, 50.

and signifier of “cuff-links” is followed with another exercise in delineation as the children are asked to look up the word “Anglophile” in the dictionary. However, this is an exercise which, in many ways, proves futile in terms of definition as their uncle Chacko informs them that “though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were 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”.⁸²

The chapter “Pappachi’s Moth” is also revealing in terms of the view it offers of the family as it co-exists, often uneasily, with the surrounding socius, particularly as they are revealed and exhibited within their car travelling to Cochin. This uneasy undercurrent is first registered as the issue of the advertising of the family’s pickle factory surfaces; the car itself doubles up as a form of advertising, with its colourful billboard depicting pickle and jam jars, elaborate writing and a kathakali dancer.⁸³ In addition to this, it bears the slogan “*Emperors of the Realm of Taste*”, a literal translation of a phrase in Malayalam “which sounded a little less ludicrous”⁸⁴ than the title it now bore; a misappropriation that serves to highlight a continually present disjunction. Ammu heightens the sense of disjunction made tangible by the advertisement by asserting that “the kathakali dancer was a Red Herring and had nothing to do with anything”, to which Chacko retorted that it

gave the products a Regional Flavour and would stand them in good stead when they entered the Overseas Market.

Ammu said that the billboard made them look ridiculous. Like a travelling circus. With tailfins.⁸⁵

The family car’s appearance sets itself against the sea of Communist and Naxalite protestors it is soon to be met with, as well as serving to highlight the class-affiliation tensions within the car, intricately connecting these with the family unit. When Rahel spots Velutha in the crowd of protestors “in a white shirt and mundu with angry veins in

⁸² Roy, *TGOST*, 52.

⁸³ Roy, *TGOST*, 46.

⁸⁴ Roy, *TGOST*, 46.

⁸⁵ Roy, *TGOST*, 47.

his neck”, her instant reaction is to incorporate him into the familial location in which she resided:

‘Velutha! Velutha!’ she called to him.

He froze for a moment, and listened with his flag. What he heard was a familiar voice in a most unfamiliar circumstance. Rahel, standing on her car seat, had grown out of the Plymouth window like a loose, flailing horn of a car-shaped herbivore. With a fountain in a Love-in-Tokyo and yellow-rimmed red plastic sunglasses.

‘Velutha! *Ividay!* Velutha!’ And she too had veins in her neck.

He stepped sideways and disappeared deftly into the anger around him.⁸⁶

Rahel’s “veined” summoning of Velutha can be seen, in some ways, as comparably subversive to Velutha’s participation in the march; her spilling out of the car depicted as something prised loose from a whole entity, straddling the banal with a potentially subversive gesture of inclusion of an untouchable man involved in Naxalite politics. The potential destabilising force contained in Roy’s child narrators is evidenced in Rahel’s unthinking extension from her carefully demarcated familial space, enclosed as it is by the car in this sea of unrest, in this episode. The possibility contained in this moment serves as an indicator of the power residing in the individual family unit, unmarked by the constraints of external impositions and, furthermore, flags the incident’s greater significance in terms the way in which its effect is to unravel on the family later in the novel. Ammu’s anger, which Rahel’s excited exclamation is met with, is recalled years later by an adult Rahel on a train in New York: “That expression on Ammu’s face. Like a rogue piece in a puzzle. Like a question mark that drifted through the pages of a book and never settled at the end of a sentence”.⁸⁷ The manner in which Rahel’s apparently miscellaneous remembrance is likened to a mad woman who Rahel sees on the train effects a connection which cuts across time, geographical location and internal situation transversally, linking various moments and modes of intrusion. An extension which has passed particular confines is again invoked here, as memory, specifically Rahel’s memory is likened to “that woman on the train. Insane in the way she sifted through dark things in a closet and emerged with the most unlikely ones – a fleeting look, a feeling. The smell of smoke. A windscreen wiper. A mother’s marble

⁸⁶ Roy, *TGOST*, 71.

⁸⁷ Roy, *TGOST*, 72.

eyes. Quite sane in the way she left huge tracts of darkness veiled. Unremembered.”⁸⁸ Here, the narrative resumes its exploration of boundaries, and particularly, the particular point in a process of classification or demarcation where overlaps are expected to be found but which, instead, reveal only an abyss of emptiness rather than logically formed connections.

Rather than demonstrating the existence of links between different domains, events and times in a reconciliatory manner, then, Roy’s novel focuses on instances of classification which continually threaten to overspill designated boundaries. This notion of the excesses or overspills – which, conversely, appear to be attracted and, to some extent, enabled, by these very exercises in classification – further resonates with the significance given to houses throughout the novel. A brief consideration of Velutha’s house, and, in contrast the “History House”, further elucidates some of the ways in which boundaries are figured and the fate of classification.

The novel recounts a number of instances where the children make journeys to Velutha’s house, and, tellingly, these journeys are significant in terms of the lack of crossings they require and the sense of productive and positive space first encountered. One particular journey presents a scene which is not in any way deemed transgressive, and is even somewhat harmonious as “a small procession (a flag, a wasp and a boat-on-legs) wended its knowledgeable way down the little path through the undergrowth”.⁸⁹ Tellingly, a physical crossing is not required in this journey, as “the path, which ran parallel to the river, led to a little grassy clearing that was hemmed in by huddled trees: coconut, cashew, mango, bilimbi”.⁹⁰ The figuring of this house relies on allowing various elements to exist, and the house itself sits in a manner that suggests responsive overlap between rigidly defined domains:

On the edge of a clearing, with its back to the river, a low hut with walls of orange laterite plastered with mud and thatched roof nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret. The low walls of the hut were the same colour as the earth they stood on, and seemed to have germinated from a house-seed planted in the ground, from which right-angled ribs of earth had risen and enclosed space. Three untidy banana trees grew in the little front yard that had been fenced off with panels of woven palm leaves.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Roy, *TGOST*, 72.

⁸⁹ Roy, *TGOST*, 205.

⁹⁰ Roy, *TGOST*, 205.

⁹¹ Roy, *TGOST*, 205.

The criss-crossing of an ecology which is simultaneously social and environmental is evidenced in this image, whose physical nature becomes associated with a place where a kind of productive space is engendered, through the children's presence, between these co-existing worlds. Though time appears to have come to an eerie standstill within the house, in the presence of Velutha's disabled brother, Kuttappen, ("The bottom quarter of the calendar (the part with the dates on it) frilled out like a skirt. Jesus in a mini. Twelve layers of petticoats for the twelve months of the year. None had been torn out."),⁹² the house resonates as a productive and imaginative space. Despite Velutha's absence, the house is figured here as a place where the children's imagination can freely exist, without or despite control wrought by larger external influences, as they traverse imaginary waters in their newly found boat:

The twins climbed into the vallom and rowed across vast, choppy waters.

With a *Thaiy thaiy taka thaiy thaiy thome*. And a jewelled Jesus watching.

He walked on water. Perhaps. But could HE have *swum* on land?

In matching knickers and dark glasses? With His Fountain in a Love-in-Tokyo? In pointy shoes and a puff? Would He have had the imagination?⁹³

Similarly, the children's presence in Velutha's house facilitates a veering of Velutha's own circumscribed existence, as he recognises Ammu's features in the children for the first time. This identification engenders a release that is tainted with associations of madness: "Madness slunk in through a chink in History. It only took a moment."⁹⁴ In an almost direct reversal of the productivity the house allowed in the children's world, the beginnings of Velutha's demise are registered.

In contrast to the figuration of the physical structure of Velutha's house and its positive psychic connotations, the abandoned house that is dubbed the "History House" by the twins relies on the vagaries that classification exerts. The "History House" is a concretisation initially formulated by the twins in order to counteract the murkiness of

⁹² Roy, *TGOST*, 208.

⁹³ Roy, *TGOST*, 211.

⁹⁴ Roy, *TGOST*, 214.

the lens through which they viewed the ambiguousness of their “history”.⁹⁵ Its source lies in Chacko’s speech likening their estranged history to a locked house:

Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside.

...Estha and Rahel had no doubt that the house Chacko meant was the house on the other side of the river, in the middle of the abandoned rubber estate where they had never been. Kari Saipu’s house. The Black Sahib. The Englishman who had ‘gone native’. Who spoke Malayalam and wore mundus. Ayemenem’s own Kurtz. Ayemenem his private Heart of Darkness. He had shot himself through the head ten years ago when his young lover’s parents had taken the boy away from him and sent him to school...

The History House.⁹⁶

However, it becomes increasingly clear that this concept of the “History House” cannot fulfil the criteria of its creation – to define or embody the twins’ sense of their history. The “History House” becomes the site of the children’s personal trauma, but extends past the confines the children had allocated to “history”, stretching to include and colour the politics and environment of both childhood and adulthood. In this manner, the notion of the “History House” brings the novel’s concentration on the overlapping of domains into focus yet again, and has the effect of highlighting the twins’ centrality in such processes. This idea of history, as it is conceptualised by the twins, is not confined to a personal interpretation, and hints at the ecological current running through the narrative, without explicitly addressing it. If the “History House” is figured in terms of the word “eco”, which stems from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning “house, domestic property, milieu, natural habitat”,⁹⁷ its extensions and overlapping territories are apparent. The concept of *oikos* occupies a further tension in the ecocritical domain, as its meaning of “household” further denotes a “nexus of human, nature and the spirit beings”,⁹⁸ in that it can be used to designate “the divinely appointed order of things”.⁹⁹ In the particular context of the “History House”, this specific use of the prefix ‘eco’ is potentially illuminating, as it incorporates and spans

⁹⁵ Roy, *TGOST*, 53.

⁹⁶ Roy, *TGOST*, 54.

⁹⁷ Guattari, 95 n52

⁹⁸ Nirmal Selvamony, Nirmaldasan & Rayson K. Alex, eds., *Essays in Ecocriticism* (Chennai & New Delhi: OSLE-India & Sarup & sons, 2007) xii.

⁹⁹ Buell, 140.

language and items associated with the home, but utilises such associations in a manner which reverts the potential positivity to be located in such interconnectedness. The children's trauma becomes pervasive, and it is watched through the "dinner-plate eyes" of a hitherto secluded domiciliary, revealing itself in the domestic domain of "the back verandah". The uneasy connectivity between various overlapping domains is evident in the anticipation of the impossibility of the children's exit from this arena:

They didn't know then, that soon they *would* go in. That they would cross the river and be where they weren't supposed to be, with a man they weren't supposed to love. That they would watch with dinner-plate eyes as history revealed itself to them in the back verandah.

While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws. They heard its sickening thud. They smelled its smell and never forgot.

History's smell.

Like old roses on a breeze.

It would lurk forever in ordinary things. In coat-hangers. Tomatoes. In the tar on the roads. In certain colours. In the plates at a restaurant. In the absence of words. And the emptiness in eyes.¹⁰⁰

The sprawling capabilities of personal trauma, largely imposed by external forces, are further documented in descriptions of the "History House". These interactions between vast concepts of history, of laws and their presumed transgressions through love, are evident in their existence alongside their manifestations in the "ordinary things" of the everyday. The recurring presence of the concept of the "History House" itself is testament to the manner in which this traumatic event of Velutha's killing is contained within its allocation to the site of the "History House", but also, sprawling in its irrepressible diffusion, reinforces the overlapping of domains that consistently appears throughout the novel. Significantly, Roy's depiction of the suffusion and excess of these boundaries does not point toward a celebration of the children's deemed transgression of crossing the river to "be where they weren't supposed to be, with a man they weren't supposed to love",¹⁰¹ in a radical or celebratory manner. Rather, the narrative is numbed by instances of such sprawling events which emanate from designated sites of classification, such as the "History

¹⁰⁰ Roy, *TGOST*, 55.

¹⁰¹ Roy, *TGOST*, 55.

House”. Again, the narrative clarifies that processes of interconnection, (as instanced by the merging of the space of domesticity and the space within which brutality can be justified), are ultimately regressive. This is further reified as the tragic merging of domains wherein the twins’ processes of subjectification are shaped. Significantly, the negative narrative dynamic wrests control again within this comparison of the domestic milieus, rather than allowing the potentially triumphant fusion of territories, discernable in the twins’ visit to Velutha’s house, to be maintained. The imaginative space engendered by Velutha’s abode is thus nullified by the negative interweavings of the “History House”.

Such a complex contestation of narrative dynamics within *The God of Small Things* is often obscured by a focus on conclusion, and specifically readers’ and critics’ investment in the idea of a conclusion that successfully negotiates and resolves the issues dealt with throughout the novel. Since the novel’s ending fails to effect a complexity comparable to that engendered by the competing and unresolved tensions throughout, it has attracted some criticism in terms of what is perceived as its resigned, pessimistic manner. Aijaz Ahmad, in particular, provides a notable instance of literary-critical disillusionment with Roy’s novel, largely in terms of the issues from which he deems the novel to shirk in terms of its conclusion. Ahmad details numerous problems with Roy’s work in the attainment of this conclusion, including the occasional “over sentimentality” of the language, and the “way in which the book panders to the prevailing anti-Communist sentiment, which damages it both ideologically and formally”,¹⁰² despite also heralding the novel as possibly “the most accomplished, the most moving novel by an Indian author in English”.¹⁰³ More serious for Ahmad is the manner in which Roy’s novel falters in terms of “the way it depicts and resolves issues of caste and sexuality, especially female sexuality”, which Ahmad argues is inherently “more damaging, since the novel does stake its transgressive and radical claim precisely on issues of caste and bodily love”.¹⁰⁴ Significantly, Ahmad attempts to separate out each of these supposed failings of Roy’s novel; this rigidly demarcated delineation elides large tracts of the process of the novel, instead focusing on conclusions, which are rendered unsatisfactory.

¹⁰² Aijaz Ahmad, “Reading Arundhati Roy Politically”, in Alex Tickell, ed., *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007) 112.

¹⁰³ Ahmad, 2007, 111.

¹⁰⁴ Ahmad, 2007, 113.

However, many aspects of Ahmad's reading of Roy's novel are well-founded, in particular Roy's depiction of Ammu and Velutha's relationship and its fate. Ahmad judges Roy's imagination of this relationship as confining social problems to the realm of the erotic, which in turn brings the novel to its tired conclusion; as he argues: "If Ammu were to live on, she would have to face the fact that the erotic is very rarely a sufficient mode for overcoming real social oppressions; one has to make some other, more complex choices in which the erotic may be an element but hardly the only one".¹⁰⁵ However, my analysis differs in terms of the way in which it locates the novel's potentiality in its *processes*, narrative and issue-driven, which demonstrate the interconnections of the social and micro-social in a multifaceted manner. For instance, Ahmad argues that, with regard to what he sees as Roy's anti-Communist sensibilities, it is a "settled ideological hostility which leads to an inherent incapacity to affectively imagine what she so passionately despises."¹⁰⁶ This, it can be presumed, leads to what Ahmad deems Roy's inability to depict Communist struggle from the perspective of Velutha. In relation to the scene where the family car is surrounded by the Communist protestors in the chapter "Pappachi's Moth", Ahmad argues that what Roy "*can* depict imaginatively and with affect is the terror felt by the women inside the car; the other side of this conflict, the striking workers, remains for her an indistinct mass".¹⁰⁷ Ahmad's configuration of this particular moment is largely indicative of how he views the novel as a whole, and contrary to this, I would argue that this scene's most powerful focalisation is conducted through the hazy lens of the child narrator's eyes. This perspective, though allowing for the indistinct nature of naive perception, still facilitates the emphasising of certain significant elements, for instance, Velutha's red flag and his clearly felt ardour, both of which are admired and matched by Rahel respectively.

This scene, like others in the novel is imagined through an obliquely fashioned lens, which evades an easy reconciliation of its various invocations. Thus Ahmad's impatience with the novel's conclusions as lacking both lustre and a thoroughly and fully carried out transgression effects a placing of value on the solidity of definite conclusions, and also demonstrates a very particular sense of where a "zone of rebellion"¹⁰⁸ should exist in the novel. Rather, it may be argued that Roy's ethico-

¹⁰⁵ Ahmad, 2007, 116.

¹⁰⁶ Ahmad, 2007, 112.

¹⁰⁷ Ahmad, 2007, 112.

¹⁰⁸ Ahmad, 2007, 119.

aesthetic resides precisely in her refusal to reconcile oppositional, and occasionally overlapping, domains, as well as in her refusal to allow the ethical and the aesthetic to co-exist easily.

3.4 Arundhati Roy's "The Greater Common Good".

Arundhati Roy's essay "The Greater Common Good", one of her more specifically and singularly issue-driven polemical pieces of writing, serves as an instance of an intervention that aims to be practical, political and provide a conceptual alteration in public and personal consciousness. This seminal essay is also one of Roy's most focused in terms of its espousal of environmental politics and ethics, although critics such as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee have rightly noted that Roy's politics are innately intertwined with an environmental commitment throughout both her fiction and nonfiction.¹⁰⁹ However, in comparison with the accolades received for the nuances of her literary fiction, Roy's inclination towards indignation and a moralising or emotive rhetoric in her nonfiction have been well documented by commentators, with many noting the ways in which such, essentially rhetorical, tactics obscure the command of this form of activism.¹¹⁰ However, this type of singular focus on the form of Roy's non-fictional work, and in particular, "The Greater Common Good", is inadequate in terms of analysing the intricate constellation of ethical, political and aesthetic in this continuum from literary fiction to the genre of the political essay. Comparably, the immediate reception of *The God of Small Things* suggested a focus on the sensuous qualities of Roy's prose that overshadowed other kinds of simultaneously occurring politics, in a manner that is somewhat at odds with the more thoroughly variegated analysis it has since received. Though the critical appraisal of Roy's nonfictional essays has demonstrated a more equally weighted attention to form *and* content, this often does not produce a more incisive appraisal of the complex politics of the relationship

¹⁰⁹ See Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, "Arundhati Roy: Environment and Uneven Form", in Bonnie Roos & Alex Hunt, eds., *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* (Charlottesville, USA: University of Virginia Press, 2010) 17.

¹¹⁰ See for example David Jefferess, "The Limits of Dissent: Arundhati Roy and the Struggle Against the Narmada Dams", in Ranjan Ghosh & Antonia Navarro, eds., *Globalizing Dissent: Essays on Arundhati Roy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009) 157-180.

between form and content. Instead, such criticisms have largely resulted in a dismissal of Roy's utilisation of both of these categories. Alternatively, this reading, informed by the analysis of her literary text above, aims to provide an analysis of how Roy's essay "The Greater Common Good" works *across* categories in various ways, and in the process, how it poses questions of importance for literary activism.

In a manner comparable to how Roy moves from the small to the unbearably large in her only novel, the known facts of the Narmada Valley are invoked in a manner that demonstrates an acute awareness of the impact of 'the local' and 'the global' on each other, while also attempting to resist the often blanketed nature of these terms. Such a highlighting of the interwoven character of apparently oppositional domains, however, does not take the same form as it did in Roy's fictional work; indeed, it is the specific details Roy chooses to invoke that are often responsible for the critical agitation her essays often provoke. The critic Julie Mullaney has, for example, termed the specific details and comparisons Roy sometimes chooses to invoke as "problematical 'rhetorical' confluences which appear in what can be described as her 'hyperbolic' style and her use of dangerous moral equivalences".¹¹¹ However, my reading of the constellation of the micro and macro in Roy's nonfiction argues that a certain and an important equilibrium is maintained across categories, including that of form. This is not to say that Roy effects a tritely balanced construction of the categories of the local and the global, but rather that her prose works *across* these categories, considering both but evading the restriction a polarised dichotomy would effect.

Nonetheless, the issue of aesthetics is not merely a peripheral concern in "The Greater Common Good", as Roy immediately brings the aesthetic and the scientific into collision, in a powerful indication of the domains she seeks to unsettle through her nonfiction. In a manner that, at first, seems to dismiss or sideline a notion of lofty aesthetics, marks of 'high' literary works and an instance of contemporary postmodernism are pitted against the resolutely 'factual' apparatus of the techno-scientific world of dam building:

Instinct led me to set aside Joyce and Nabokov, to postpone reading Don DeLillo's big book and substitute it with reports on drainage and irrigation, with journals and books and documentary

¹¹¹ Julie Mullaney, "'Globalizing Dissent'? Arundhati Roy, local and postcolonial feminisms in the transnational economy", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 40.1 (2002) 56-70, 64.

films about dams and why they're built and what they do. My first tentative questions revealed that few people know what is really going on in the Narmada valley. Those who know, know a lot. Most know nothing at all. And yet, almost everyone has a passionate opinion. I realized very quickly that I was straying into mined territory.¹¹²

Resonating with the Guattari's comment regarding a configuration of the ethico-aesthetic in which he designated Joyce as amongst those responsible for the "best cartographies of the psyche",¹¹³ cited earlier in the chapter, yet seeming to herald a break from the possibilities of an aesthetic engagement in this manner, Roy immediately unsettles any sense of continued easiness across these lines of ethics, politics, and aesthetics. Despite the abundance of scientific and technical knowledge and references available, the sense of opaque process clouding the dam project is palpable. Taking the movement this passage suggests as part of the impetus of a particular ethico-aesthetic channelled into Roy's nonfictional work, and moving from the earlier consideration of Roy's "fictional" ecosophy constructed within and through her novel, this section thus aims to further the analysis of Roy's ethico-aesthetic perspective through consideration of comparable categories within her nonfictional essay "The Greater Common Good".

Though Roy's work continually reaffirms the merit of pursuing what may be termed an ecosophical perspective, her prose in this essay evokes a sense of the ecological while simultaneously challenging a notion of the kinds of justice and equality the invocations of such ecosystems might conjure up. In this manner, Roy's prose hints at the way in which ideas of ecological practice or modes of living are often ensconced within their opposite, as her phrases, pitched in terms of ecological systems, continually evoke environmental and ecological exploitation. In other words, Roy's narrative repeatedly raises the way in which the environment, its specific socius, and the individuals within that nexus are encircled in an exploitative practice. These practices are marked and masked by the government as a kind of democratically ecological system: localised environments, particularly rivers, but also by extension, forests and catchment areas, provide the raw material on which to impose a form of absolutism posing as democratic rationale, or as within the interest of the "greater common good". Roy caustically and explicitly references this systemic violence,

¹¹² Arundhati Roy, "The Greater Common Good", in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2002) 49. Hereafter will be referred to as "TGCG".

¹¹³ Guattari, 25.

penned as working in a unobtrusive, anonymous way, in a manner comparable to the workings of an ecosystem: “Twenty-five million people live in the river valley, linked to the ecosystem and to each other by an ancient, intricate web of interdependence (and no doubt, exploitation)”.¹¹⁴

Vandana Shiva usefully glosses the term “maldevelopment” in India, as “the violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems, that sets in motion process of exploitation, inequality and violence. It is blind to the fact that a recognition of nature’s harmony and action to maintain it are preconditions for distributive justice”.¹¹⁵ In a manner comparable to the functioning of this term, Roy’s narrative trajectory exposes what may be termed ‘mal-ecological’ practices. Just as Shiva’s maldevelopment speaks of violating the “integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems”, so too does Roy’s rhetoric speak of broken systems of ecological justice. In Roy’s narrative, the “exploitation, inequality and violence”, can be identified in the discourse surrounding the particularity of the dam construction; and this discourse, in turn, is shown as being partly responsible for perpetuating a murkiness around the issue which works against the cause. Though the implications of “The Narmada Valley Development Project” or as Roy designates it “India’s Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster”¹¹⁶ are real and palpably felt, in a manner that Shiva’s notion of ‘maldevelopment’ attests, Roy hints at the intricate nexus which perpetuates this injustice, as her idiom continually raises the way in which the specifics of environmental justice are obscured by bad or ‘mal-ecological’ practices. Thus the rhetoric of an imagined naturalness of relations between democracy and displacement in the construction of dams is uncovered, and so too, the relation between implemented practices and their individual effects.

Significantly, Roy’s own trajectory, at times, demonstrates the inter-functions of the imposition of mal-ecological practices and the destructiveness of a rhetoric pitched in ecological tones. For example, a kind of falsely metrological system of planning is superimposed on an almost invisibly interconnected ecological system, in a manner that intertwines these apparently competing perspectives, as she notes:

¹¹⁴ Roy, “TGCG”, 72.

¹¹⁵ Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women Ecology and Development* (New Delhi: Zed Books Ltd, 1989)

5.

¹¹⁶ Roy, “TGCG”, 86.

The system of canals superimposes an arbitrary concrete grid on the existing pattern of natural drainage in the command area. It's a little like reorganizing the pattern of reticulate veins on the surface of a leaf. When a canal cuts across the path of a natural drain, it blocks the flow of the natural seasonal water and leads to waterlogging. The engineering solution to this is to map the pattern of natural drainage in the area and replace it with an alternate, artificial drainage system that is built in conjunction with the canals.¹¹⁷

An arbitrary mode of planning thus cuts through intricate and interconnected systems leading to environmental destruction, demonstrating the ruthlessness of such practices specifically localised to the Sardar Sarovar canal and its surrounding areas. This mal-ecological practice is also demonstrated on a larger scale, as Roy demonstrates how the Narmada Valley locality and its people are brought into a forced relation with the market system. Through a likening of the “perennial irrigation”¹¹⁸ of the valley carried out with a view to producing cash crops, to doing to the soil what “anabolic steroids do to the human body”, Roy equates processes like this, whether requiring delicate reorganisation or aggressive manipulation, to the distortion of naturally ordered entities. In this situation, Roy presents only the markets as thriving: “Ecologically too, this is a poisonous payoff. Even if the markets hold out, the soil doesn't. Over time it becomes too poor to support the extra demands made on it. Gradually, in the way a steroid-using athlete becomes an invalid, the soil becomes depleted and degraded, and agricultural yields begin to decrease”.¹¹⁹ Thus Roy makes evident this capacity of mal-ecological practice to register its devastation on an explicitly local level, while only the global market is depicted as being sustainable. In this way, her essay highlights the deployment of disingenuous practices, pitted in terms of ecology and ideas of specific, local detail, yet speaking and serving the interests of much larger systems.

An intricacy similar to what Roy cites as the “web of exploitation” encircling the communities of the Narmada valley, is again made visible through reference to a kind of domestication of cycles of exploitation, as Roy examines the inordinate World Bank loans given to India to pursue its construction of thousands of various size dams. Conjuring up notions resonant of local processes in the cosily maintained role of the Government of India in this arrangement, Roy notes:

¹¹⁷ Roy, “TGCG”, 122.

¹¹⁸ Roy, “TGCG”, 120.

¹¹⁹ Roy, “TGCG”, 121.

The relationship between us is exactly like the relationship between a landless labourer steeped in debt and the village moneylender – it is an affectionate relationship, the poor man loves his moneylender because he's always there when he's needed. It's not for nothing that we call the world a Global Village. The only difference between the landless labourer and the Government of India is that one uses money to survive. The other just funnels it into the private coffers of its officers and agents, pushing the country into an economic bondage it may never escape.¹²⁰

The rhetoric Roy uses here reaffirms the way in which a presumed logic of an apparent 'naturalness' can be used to explicate and, in a certain way, justify, an unequal and exploitative economic arrangement. Roy's continued ironic use of the naturalisation of modes of exploitation, both environmental and of its people, is thus rhetorically constructed and framed through ideas of the 'local'. This questioning of the use of the trope of an interconnectedness or an 'ecology' by others is thus extended to the economic domain, in Roy's attempt to expose this presumed 'naturalness', or at least a sense of the inevitability of certain economic relationships. Suggested here also is a call to resist a kind of disabling mode of speaking of the 'local', or the 'micro', at least in terms of imagining this category as a transparent or 'organic' mode. This inverse blanketing, and the exposure of the inverse use of the category of the 'local' not as one of mobilisation but as one of stagnation, engenders the idea of a kind of resistance within the rhetorical, an exploration of which could potentially prompt a reconsideration across categories of form and content, evading hierarchy. In a mode akin to a Guattarian transversality, Roy's construction of categories goes some way towards demonstrating the need for a reconfiguration of such concepts, which are not bound by or do not privilege systems of simple verticality or horizontality, but focus on various and nebulous interrelation. Significantly, this mode of connecting the environmental or ecological degradation to the economic and political, thus considering the impact of global impositions on the smallest spaces of the Narmada Valley, is part of the way in which Roy's essays builds detail concerning the impact of 'big' discourses on these micro recesses of society:

Whichever way you look at it, the Narmada Development Project is Big. It will alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India's biggest rivers. For better or for worse, it will affect the

¹²⁰ Roy, "TGCG", 77.

lives of twenty-five million people who live in the valley. It will submerge and destroy 4,000 square kilometres of natural deciduous forest.¹²¹

Paring back layers of injustice and trauma to reveal the small and evocative detail that permeates the core of an intricate web of micro and macro may well be considered as part of the particular aesthetic effected by Roy, particularly as has been determined through popular response to *The God of Small Things*. Maintaining a certain level of continuity with her literary work, “The Greater Common Good” thus offers an exploration of the confines of the family unit in order to facilitate an individuation of complexities in the specific context of the Narmada valley struggle. However, in the conclusion to the essay, the variegated nature of the issue of dam construction in the Narmada valley, and the variously shaded forms and sites of resistance or potential resistance, are blanketed with a sense of oppressive categorisations. These oppressive categorisations significantly centre on invocations of the family, apparently swathing the possibility for any form of resistance. The results of absolutist and undemocratic policy are pitched in tones speaking of disconnected systems of environmental and ecological rhetoric:

To slow a beast, you break its limbs. To slow a nation, you break its people. You rob them of volition. You demonstrate your absolute command over their destiny... How you can snatch a river away from one and gift it to another. How you can green a desert, or fell a forest and plant one somewhere else. You use caprice to fracture a people’s faith in ancient things – earth, forest, water, air.

Once that’s done, what do they have left? Only you. They will turn to you, because you’re all they have. They will love you even while they despise you. They will trust you even while they know you well. They will vote for you even as you squeeze the very breath from their bodies. They will drink what you give them to drink. They will breathe what you give them to breathe. They will live where you dump their belongings. They have to. What else can they do? There’s no higher court of redress. You are their mother and their father. You are the judge and the jury. You are the World. You are God.¹²²

Roy’s configuration of governmental power as the world, and as “God” here, establishes a scenario where disempowered communities have been interminably contained through the exertion of power over natural resources. The sheer violence of using earth, forest, water, and air, in part, according to Roy, to demonstrate nationalistic

¹²¹ Roy, “TCGC”, 75.

¹²² Roy, “TGCG”, 135.

power, has the effect of subduing a very specific demographic. Paradoxically, the similarities and difference with her fictional work are registered at precisely this moment, as this totalising construction of power seems to render any possibility of palpable resistance impossible. Furthermore, the way in which Roy summons other modes, glossed in this instance with an unyielding and authoritarian sense of confinement, from the family to the larger restrictions of law and religion, to the all-encompassing idea of ‘the world’, compounds this sense of inescapable confinement. Roy does cite instances of positive engagements wrought from the site of the family, particularly, in her reference to the families who staged resistance in “one of the nerve-centres of resistance” in the village of Manibeli in Maharashtra, by refusing to leave their homes as the flood waters rose, in what she terms a “Monsoon Satyagraha”.¹²³ However, Roy’s deft weaving amongst these figurations of the family incisively demonstrates the possibility that is contained in such oblique but relentless confrontation of potentially stultifying categories. Such a destabilisation posited through this most intimate site of the family therefore marks a defiant *lack* of the very sentimentality which she is often accused of adopting.

Tellingly, the familial tropes Roy invokes in the final moments of her essay have been utilised in various ways throughout, in a manner that raises questions about the modes and nature of resistance. Tracing this familial trope back through the essay, one can see how Roy confronts the way in which this site of potential resistance is also deployed and depleted through its use in a reductive explanation of earlier historical struggles. The trope of the all-powerful and so, irrefutable, “mother and father” signalled in the rousing final pages of Roy’s essay links to an earlier mention it receives in the essay. Significantly, this earlier citation of a restrictive or destructive formulation of the familial circle refers specifically to the way in which the dam resistance groups are glossed in the public imagination of their resistance. The comparison is couched in terms of the familiar figures of Gandhi and Nehru, both of whom are given maternal and paternal connotations respectively:

The Nehru versus Gandhi argument pushes this very contemporary issue back into an old bottle. Nehru and Gandhi were generous men. Their paradigms for development were based on assumptions of inherent morality. Nehru’s on the paternal, protective morality of the Soviet-style centralized state. Gandhi’s on the nurturing, maternal morality of romanticized village

¹²³ Roy, “TGCG”, 98

Republics. Both would probably work, if only we were better human beings. If we all wore khadi and suppressed our base urges. Fifty years down the line, it's safe to say that we haven't made the cut. We haven't even come close. We need an updated insurance plan against our own basic natures.¹²⁴

Strikingly, the lines that demarcate the spheres of a mass resistance, and which are, therefore, not thoroughly individuated, are coloured in terms of normative familial dichotomy, only achievable through the suppression of a more unwieldy desire, of “base urges”, and the elevation into a higher realm of morality. Such a construction precludes an individuated or differentiated form of resistance, but furthermore, this analogy that utilises traditional familial roles to describe the impossibility, or at least unfeasibility, of a mass resistance thus generates a more urgent need to disengage from oppressive reterritorializations of the family.¹²⁵

In turn, such a disengagement lends itself to the creation of new forms of dissent. In Roy's trajectory, this potential reimagining of resistance is raised on the following page, where a call to make redundant such celebrated leaders is issued. Contained in this call is a notion involving a reworking of the internalities that comprise instances of dissent or dissensus, beginning with the idea of celebrated leaders. This focus on supporting what Roy terms “our small heroes. (Of these we have many)”,¹²⁶ seems to mark the beginning of a call to individuate resistance, and is distinctly reminiscent of Guattari's entreaty to desist from the elevation of certain figures, as a fundamental element of formatting an ecosophical perspective:

The ecosophical perspective does not totally exclude a definition of unifying objectives, such as the struggle against world hunger, an end to deforestation or to the blind proliferation of the nuclear industries; but it will no longer be a question of depending on reductionist, stereotypical order-words which only expropriate other more singular problematics and lead to the promotion of charismatic leaders.¹²⁷

However, in Guattari's terms, this does not necessarily suggest a deification of “small heroes” in the removal of celebrated leaders. This tension is more evasive of a finally

¹²⁴ Roy, “TGCG”, 52.

¹²⁵ ‘Reterritorialization’ here refers to Guattari's use of the term to indicate the oppressive confinement of desire to and through the home.

¹²⁶ Roy, “TGCG”, 53.

¹²⁷ Guattari, 23.

settled resolution, but the idea that a notion of “unifying objectives” need not be excluded from such a dynamic, is potentially prolific in that it does not exclude the emergence of new relations or “collective subjectivities”,¹²⁸ to such unifying terms. Importantly, such a focus aims to evade the reduction of potential of various types of exchange when simply horizontal and purely vertical categories are removed.

In summary, the particular use of the category of the family, deployed in an effort to both flatten out the variegated terrain of the issues of the Narmada valley and to render resistance as seemingly impossible, is confronted by Roy in a number of ways. Her intermittent return to the stories of individuals further marginalised by the processes involving the construction of the dam, may be seen as representing a continuation of her notion of supporting the many “small heroes” of the struggle, thus further differentiating its contours. Yet, conversely, the resolutely specific details of the techno-scientific domain set up a tension between this specialised discourse and the human detail it obscures. Roy draws lines of careful demarcation between these oppositional ideas of utilising specific details and “small things”, apparently, but deceptively similar, in that each of these two categories assess small detail from a larger frame. In this particular instance, Roy raises what has been lost in the continuing altercation between a sense of the specifics of the context, alongside the larger configuration of the struggle:

For the people of the valley, the fact that the stakes were raised to this degree has meant that their most effective weapon – *specific* facts about *specific* issues in this *specific* valley – has been blunted by the debate on the big issues. The basic premise of the argument has been inflated until it has burst into bits that have, over time, bobbed away.¹²⁹

Here, the particular facts of the valley are presented as weapons of resistance, which have been almost obliterated by the very nature of the debate, and are depicted as floating away in an image reminiscent of the detachment of environment and justice. In this manner, Roy appears to re-establish her stance as valuing and valorising the small, the specific detail, as in *The God of Small Things*. However, an apparent contradiction

¹²⁸ Guattari, 86 n18.

¹²⁹ Roy, “TGCG”, 50.

is immediately raised with the condemnation of the motives of a “ ‘special interest’ readership”,¹³⁰ who comprise of

Experts and consultants [who] have hijacked various aspects of the issue – displacement, rehabilitation, hydrology, drainage, water-logging, catchment area treatment, passion, politics – and have carried them off to their lairs where they guard them fiercely against the unauthorised curiosity of interested laypersons.¹³¹

By cordoning off these various areas of expertise, a disjunction results, involving the carving up of potential sections of resistance until they are rendered almost meaningless. This raises a peculiar contradiction in terms of the approach advocated by Roy herself, as the treatment of ‘specifics’ allocated by these experts is dismissed summarily as the blunting of issues produced by the widening of the debate. Such a fragmentation is further shown to have the opposite effect to a mobilising dissensus, as it becomes resolutely anti-popular. This has the further effect of demonstrating resistance’s precarious and continual entanglement with its opposite, in the form of a distribution of knowledge that becomes encoded with power. This is further manifested as Roy, apparently motivated by the urge to re-establish a certain type of popular and harmonious but differentiated resistance, continues: “disconnecting the politics from the economics from the emotion and human tragedy of uprootment is like breaking up a band. The individual musicians don’t rock in quite the same way. You keep the noise but lose the music”.¹³² Within this apparent contradiction of forfeiting the specifics for the larger picture, dismissing the specifics, as outlined above, as too divisive, an argument for a new relation of the particular to the general emerges.

Roy continually returns to the flattening consequences potentially contained within the notion of a mass-movement of resistance, such as those generated by the Narmada Dam Project: “Because in the valley there are stories within stories and it’s easy to lose the clarity of rage in the sludge of other people’s sorrow”.¹³³ These explorations – and at times denunciation – of “specifics”, be it of the family unit or of the reduction of information, are in turn couched in Roy’s own distinct and personalised

¹³⁰ Roy, “TGCG”, 51.

¹³¹ Roy, “TGCG”, 51.

¹³² Roy, “TGCG”, 51.

¹³³ Roy, “TGCG”, 109.

register. The negative effect of such a register is that, despite all the remonstrations regarding the blanketing effects of sentimentalisation and mal-ecological rhetoric imposed from without, it does not create sufficient space for a mediation on the potential distortion of the stories of “small heroes”. What has most irked Roy’s critics, most notably Ramachandra Guha, is precisely this register, though designated as “self-absorption” and “egotism” from this perspective.¹³⁴ Tellingly, Guha’s critique hovers on the line between aesthetics and ethics, in a manner that implies his view that a certain type of rhetoric or aesthetic cannot support a certain kind of ethics:

In her stream-of-consciousness style, the arguments were served up in a jumble of images and exclamations with the odd number thrown in. The most serious objections to the dam, on grounds of social justice, ecological prudence and economic efficiency, were lost in the presentation. What struck one most forcibly was her atavistic hatred of science and a romantic celebration of adivasi lifestyles.¹³⁵

Though Guha’s vitriolic comments have the effect of presuming to designate who can and cannot maintain an involvement in a group registering dissent,¹³⁶ and indeed largely replicate the accusation Guha himself levels at Roy, in terms of a presumption of a right to hand out “moral certificates”,¹³⁷ such a polemic identifies a crucial fault line in debates surrounding the domain of activist, and particularly the domain of literary activism. While Guha hastily condemns Roy largely in terms of her unapologetic form, arguing that “the super-patriot and the anti-patriot use much the same methods. Both think exclusively in black and white... In either case, an excess of emotion and indignation drowns out the facts”, Roy’s essay has launched a far more nuanced inquiry into a similar but differently pitched debate. Her non-fictional writings mediate a continuing difficulty, and one that is central to a notion of an actively engaged literature: how to tread a line between conveying the small detail without an encumbrance wrought by limitations of the banal, and providing a level of specific detail which does not risk the cordoning off of knowledge into elite specialisations. Returning to the notion of the global and the local raised at the beginning of this section, Arif Dirlik’s

¹³⁴ Ramachandra Guha, “The Arun Shourie of the left”, *The Hindu*, (Sunday November 26th, 2000) <http://hindu.com/2000/11/26/stories/13260411.htm>

¹³⁵ Guha, “Arun Shourie”.

¹³⁶ Chittaroopa Palit, “The historian as gatekeeper”, *Frontline*, 17.26, (December 23, 2000 – January 05, 2001).

¹³⁷ Guha, “Arun Shourie”.

arguments regarding the containment of the idea of the “local” – initially construed as a potential site of resistance in postmodern thought, yet simultaneously containing within it a potential to be assimilated within the operations of global capitalism,¹³⁸ – are particularly salient in regard to an analysis of Roy’s essay, and further assert the need to continually reappraise the utilisation of such categories. A reading of Roy’s essay which notes her insistence on privileging small, local detail, and yet recognises that this has the potential to engender sweeping narratives of various kinds, maintains an acute sense of the inherent perils in such a task. The retaining of this inflammatory, indignant rhetoric by the author, which importantly does not forgo its substantial core, enacts a deliberate choice; motivated by the aim to evade a complicit interpellation while retaining a resistance in the terms within which the writer chooses to speak.

3.5 Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*

My story you wanted, said you’d put it in a book. I did not want to talk about it. I said is it a big deal, to have my story in a book? I said, I am a small person not even human, what difference will my story make? You told me that sometimes the stories of small people in this world can achieve big things, this is the way you buggers always talk.¹³⁹

Rather than create a narrative that gradually accumulates a diversely political and affective force, Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* directly and immediately exposes issues that are continually raised in postcolonial, activist and disaster narrative alike, from the rendering of various sections of the population inhuman, to the often predatory quest for such ‘stories’. Set in Khaufpur, a fictionalised Bhopal, the town remains in the caliginous shadow cast by the American “Kampani” whose factory released poisonous gases into the air almost twenty years previously. Mirroring the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984, the novelistic exploration invokes the thousands who died in the direct aftermath

¹³⁸ Arif Dirlik, “The Global in the Local”, in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2006) 467.

¹³⁹ Indra Sinha, *Animal’s People* (London: Pocket Books, 2008) 3. Hereafter referred to as *AP*.

of the initial explosion at the Kampani's factory. In a manner comparable to the reality of Bhopal, the moment of the novel details how Khaufpur's citizens have continued to suffer the effects of what is referred to as "that night",¹⁴⁰ for so long that the temporality of the word 'aftermath' is thoroughly distorted. Such a setting, although avowedly fictional, would suggest the creation of a world inescapably compressed by a need to catalogue perpetrations and sentimentalise suffering. This is circumvented, in large part, and most obviously, through its unconventional narrator, Animal. Less immediately obvious, the novel's narrative techniques which effectively hold the particular and the broader spectrum within which the particular occurs, in instantaneous tension merit close consideration. Similarly pertinent to the narrative's construction of an effective eco-narrative, is the way in which these tensions with the larger world are manifested in the microcosm of the everyday; an ordinary that can scarcely be called banal in the context within which it occurs.

Critiques of *Animal's People* tend to focus on elements of the carnivalesque, the picaresque and the abject, as bawdily embodied by the novel's protagonist and narrator, Animal. Other analyses of the novel are justifiably concerned with the exposure of the violence often inherent in the unequal relationship between the west and its involvement in the global south; as one particular view of *Animal's People* notes, "the narrative is immediately concerned with the politics of seeing, of visibility and invisibility, in the context of global and national socioeconomic inequality".¹⁴¹ Both of these focuses are not unwarranted, as the novel's continual subversions of literary and other practices remain one of the most powerful features of the narrative, and Animal's "picaresque" character is undoubtedly one such subversion. Furthermore, senses of the inequity still maintained between parts of the world are blatant throughout the narrative in multiple ways. However, the following reading of the novel seeks to relate this tension to the specifically *literary* politics espoused throughout, and which are made apparent from the opening chapter. Evidence of such subversion, or even inversion, of narrative practices is made explicit from the opening of the narrative, as the novel's initial focus is not the brash and irreverent Animal, but is extended outwards to the "eyes" that consume Animal's tale.

¹⁴⁰ Indra Sinha, *AP*, 5.

¹⁴¹ Andrew Mahlstedt, "Animal's People (Review)", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 16.3 (2009) 661-663, 662.

Ostensibly, Animal begins to tell his story to a journalist, “the Kakadu Jarnalis, came here from Ostrali”.¹⁴² This potentially inequitable transaction is framed from the outset of the narrative, by means of an ‘Editor’s Note’, which documents the circumstances under which the information was recorded:

This story was recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy in the Indian city of Khaufpur. True to the agreement between the boy and the journalist who befriended him, the story is told entirely in the boy’s words as recorded on tapes. Apart from translating to English, nothing has been changed.¹⁴³

Suspicion is thus planted by such claims to authenticity, transparency and the attestation of a truth untainted by external voice and channels of power and influence. The ‘Editor’s Note’ goes on to explain that “difficult expressions which turned out to be French are rendered in correct spelling for ease of comprehension”, and that the recordings are presented in the order of numbering on the tapes. This framing device is also expanded further, as the ‘Editor’ points the reader to the Khaufpur website, www.khaufpur.com, for more information. The move to broaden the realm of fictional territory in such a manner is significant, particularly so in terms of the constructed nature of such ‘marginalised’ narratives, and this specific aspect of Sinha’s narrative will be examined in more detail later in this analysis. The scepticism engendered by such claims to narrative virtuosity by the Editor is compounded by Animal’s defiant dismissals, as he initially sings “filthy songs” and talks “gibberish” to the journalist who does not speak Hindi:

You were hoping the gibberish sounds coming from my mouth were the horrible stories you’d come to hear. Well, fuck that. No way was I going to tell those stories. I’ve repeated them so often my teeth are ground smooth by the endless passage of words.¹⁴⁴

Thus, Animal, at first, resists the telling of his story, and primarily recoils from a desire from foreign journalists for ‘stories’, journalists who

¹⁴² Sinha, *AP*, 3.

¹⁴³ Sinha, *AP*, unnumbered page at beginning of novel.

¹⁴⁴ Sinha, *AP*, 5.

come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there's so much pain in the world. Like vultures you are jarnaliss. Somewhere a bad thing happens, tears like rain in the wind, and look, here you come, drawn by the smell of blood. You have turned us Khaufpuris into story-tellers, but always of the same story. Ous raat, cette nuit, that night, always that fucking night.¹⁴⁵

Significantly, Animal does not use the tape recorder provided by the “jarnalis” to document his story, and instead, in a physical resistance to the regularised channels by which information is appropriated, eventually decides to tell his story, but on a tape recorder given by his friend, powered by batteries stolen from a local shop.¹⁴⁶ Despite the symbolic nature of these subversions, Animal must still tell his story to the “Eyes” that consume such narratives.

Animal begins his story which is in large part the trajectory of his bodily deterioration that has led to him being confined to walking on all fours, but almost immediately halts his narration to pose the question: “How can you understand this?”¹⁴⁷ Animal’s glance outwards, in this early encounter, affirms the significance of this relationship throughout the text, and it is continually, albeit sporadically, returned to throughout the novel in various ways. Resuming this external narrative contact a number of lines later, Animal addresses the reader more forcefully, as he declares “Everything will get explained in due course. I’m not clever like you. I can’t make fancy rissoles of each word. Blue kingfishers won’t suddenly fly out of my mouth. If you want my story, you’ll have to put up with how I tell it.”¹⁴⁸ The “eyes” that Animal refers to from this point on in the narrative are ostensibly the reader, but encompass a particular type of reader, namely the western reader who studies and, in a certain way, ‘consumes’ such stories, in addition to ordinary ‘passive’, and perhaps more overtly spectatorial, readers. Despite this declaration of authority and determined assertion that the story will be told in a particular way, Animal cannot relinquish the feeling of the eyes, and the eyes of Animal’s readers soon assert an overwhelming presence. The eyes are ubiquitous: “I am saying this into darkness that is filled with eyes. Whichever way I look eyes are showing up. They’re floating round the air, these fucking eyes, turning this way and that they’re, looking for things to see”.¹⁴⁹ They also take on a toxic

¹⁴⁵ Sinha, *AP*, 5.

¹⁴⁶ Sinha, *AP*, 12.

¹⁴⁷ Sinha, *AP*, 2.

¹⁴⁸ Sinha, *AP*, 2.

¹⁴⁹ Sinha, *AP*, 12.

presence, as Animal tells of how “their curiosity feels like acid on my skin”,¹⁵⁰ and demonstrates the putrid nature of their appropriation:

See, it’s like this, as the words pop out of my mouth they rise up in the dark, the eyes in a flash are onto them, the words start out kind of misty, like breath on a cold day, as they lift they change colours and shapes, they become pictures of things and of people. What I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies.¹⁵¹

This scavenging of stories is further linked with the failure of the eyes to understand even the basic events of “that night”, alerting to such inconsistencies and incoherencies in the retelling:

That night they say was a night of great cold. Zafar used to say that as people were breathing clouds of mist out of their mouths that night, they little knew what kind of mist they’d soon be breathing in.

The eyes are watching people breathing mist. Stupid eyes, they don’t know what the mist does to the people, they don’t know what happens next. They only know what I tell them.¹⁵²

Here, the past and present are eerily joined in the eyes’ failure to understand the causality of events, and whose misinterpretation engenders continual and repetitive modes of distortion.

Early in the narrative, on Tape Three, the Eyes are summoned to provide or participate in the meditation on the poisoned environment of the ruins of the Kampani’s factory. Animal begins his tour with the Eyes by invoking the simultaneously absent and omnipresent foreign audience, noting that, in another failure to comprehend the basic actualities or physicalities of the area, “when jarnaliss and foreigners come to Khaufpur they always think the factory is a big building. It isn’t. Its wall seems never-ending, and inside is an area equal to the whole of the Nutcracker”.¹⁵³ In this apparently contradictory statement, the remnants of the factory are both figured as “never-ending”, and also immaterial, as Animal diminishes the size of the structure apparently ingrained in foreign minds. Similarly, inside the wall of the factory, is both a vast, empty space,

¹⁵⁰ Sinha, *AP*, 7.

¹⁵¹ Sinha, *AP*, 12.

¹⁵² Sinha, *AP*, 13.

¹⁵³ Sinha, *AP*, 29.

but also strange forest bursting with life: “Look inside, you see something strange, a forest growing, tall grasses, bushes, trees, creepers that shoot sprays of flowers like fireworks”.¹⁵⁴ In this manner, the narrative is pulled simultaneously in two opposite directions:

Eyes, I wish you could come with me into the factory. Step through one of these holes, you’re into another world. Gone are city noises, horns of trucks and autos, voices of women in the Nutcracker, kids shouting, all erased by the high wall. Listen, how quiet it’s. No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can’t survive here. Wonderful poisons the Kampani made, so good it’s impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they’re still doing their work.¹⁵⁵

The grounds that Animal describes encompass two contrasting spaces simultaneously: a peaceful, almost ethereal space, and yet a demolished landscape, silenced and hellish. The depiction of the particular physicality of the location is couched in a manner that is perhaps familiar to environmental literature, maintaining overt connections between the contorted landscape and the ills that have vanquished it. The forest that abounds within the boundary of the factory’s shadow is thus rendered as indicative of the ongoing struggle between the poisoned land and a lost sense of an apolitical landscape that is trying to reassert itself: “Under the poison-house trees are growing up through the pipework. Creepers, brown and as thick as my wrist, have climbed all the way to the top, tightly they’ve wrapped wooden knuckles around pipes and ladders, like they want to rip down everything the Kampani made”.¹⁵⁶ In this description of the contaminated location, the narrative too struggles within itself, continually invoking the creations of the spectre of the Kampani: a strange, ruined forest devoid of animal and insect life, a barren territory which continues to remain dangerous, and one which is subject to a sustained scrutiny from the outside. There is a sense of a missing link in this ecology of justice that sustains this kind of paradoxical stasis. The remaining structure of the actual factory is configured as a physical skeleton, and this frame provides a physical location for the ghosts of those killed by its effluence, in a manner that links the physicality of the environment, which is still detrimental, with the lack of justice or reparation bestowed on the locality. Significantly, traces of the words that continue to poison also remain and Animal shelters in these “rooms that the

¹⁵⁴ Sinha, *AP*, 29.

¹⁵⁵ Sinha, *AP*, 29.

¹⁵⁶ Sinha, *AP*, 31.

Kampani, when it fled from Khaufpur, left knee-deep in papers. The Kampani papers made a thick quilt, plus I had the dog to keep me warm. In the offices the chemical stench was less.”¹⁵⁷ The Kampani’s elusive nature is thus effectively concretised through a physical but a neglected and abandoned paper-trail.

Indeed, this paradoxical stasis is fortified by the way in which it seems to be made to endure the burdens of the tags ‘place’ and ‘space’ simultaneously, while fitting into neither category. ‘Space’ is often defined as a geometrical or topographical abstraction, while ‘place’ gives a sense of the bounded and to which meaning has been ascribed,¹⁵⁸ but these distinctions fail to imbue the factory grounds with secure classification. Simultaneously Animal’s ‘place’, his home, it is also “a shunned place”, where Animal feels the full force of his difference: “where better for an animal to make its lair?”¹⁵⁹ In addition to this, the factory grounds are toxic and political ‘space’, upon which differing and competing visions are imposed but not resolved. At this juncture, the watching Eyes are now invoked within the parameters of a subtly changing narrative, as Animal switches from “I” to the first person plural “we”. Of further significance is the fact that this pronoun shift takes place as Animal takes the “Eyes” to the top of the factory’s ladders in order to obtain the full vista of Khaufpur. In this move that enhances the vision of the spectators, the pronoun changes to “they”, underlining the juncture at which a narrative of seeing or visibility takes over from the audibility of Animal’s story:

‘Wah! what a view!’

It’s the first thing *they* say when *they* get up here, from here you can see clear across Khaufpur, every street, every lane, gully, shabby alley... My friend Faqri, he lost his mum and dad and five brothers and sisters in those lanes... East’s Phuta Maqbara, to the west Qazi Camp, killing grounds all... On that night it was a river of people, some in their underwear, others in nothing at all, they were staggering like it was the end of some big race, falling down not getting up again, at Rani Hira Pati ka Mahal, the road was covered with dead bodies.¹⁶⁰ [my emphasis]

This narrative moment further supports a distinction between visibility, and an audibility which would facilitate understanding from the external perspective of the

¹⁵⁷ Sinha, *AP*, 30.

¹⁵⁸ Buell, 63.

¹⁵⁹ Sinha, *AP*, 29.

¹⁶⁰ Sinha, *AP*, 31.

“Eyes”, in *Animal’s* narrative. The moments in *Animal’s* narrative which simultaneously invoke frameworks of visibility and audibility are instructive in terms of the creation of *Animal’s* own perspective, and will be traced in more detail below.

To return briefly to the more general context of Sinha’s work, his literary exploration of a particularised environmental disaster that expands into the political resonates suggestively with the difficulty raised by Guattari of a situation where governments and other forces only confront environmental issues in terms of disaster, impending or otherwise. Though *Animal’s People* raises this kind of situation in terms of a *failure* of intervention on behalf of governing bodies regarding a past disaster, its exploration of environmental catastrophe gains further significance in that it facilitates a reflection on the modalities of activism and its failures. While explorations such as that by Rob Nixon in “Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque”, incisively expose relationships structured by “the free-market double standards that allowed Western companies to operate with violent, fatal impunity in the global South”,¹⁶¹ an alternative focus can offer a useful means of a critique across the convoluted terrain of activism. Sinha’s literary configuration of activist politics in terms of its relation with smaller levels of society, rather than the more facilely defined relation between activism and macro, or corporate structures, complicates its space of relations and in turn presents important questions for the sphere of the literary politics of the novel. Specifically, my reading aims to explore Sinha’s rendering of potential similarities between the technocracy raised by Guattari and the pitfalls of certain activist modalities.

Many of the characters in Sinha’s novel are actively and variously involved in what *Animal’s* indirect focalisation terms the “endlessly foul stream of Khaufpuri politics”,¹⁶² and all of the characters are constructed in terms of their involvement with the poisoned community, whether in terms of anti-Kampani activity, or in providing direct aid to the community. However, the modes of characterisation employed often present one-dimensional or caricatured figures, from the saintly but unmoveable and blinkered Zafar who leads the local agitation group, to the “Amrikan” Elli Barber, idealistic and distinctly and typically ‘western’. The narratorial framework both

¹⁶¹ Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 55.3 (Fall 2009) 443-467, 446.

¹⁶² Sinha, *AP*, 261.

circumvents and highlights these inconsistencies in values and practices in various ways, in a manner that does not allow the narrative progression to become burdened by polemic. Through employing the particularity and peculiarity of the novel's narrator, cited above, and through frequent character interaction and dialogue, a number of issues central to the novel are exposed and explored.

The particular modes of characterisation Sinha employs throughout the novel, in many ways, demonstrate suggestive relations between those who speak and those who listen. Indeed, the one-dimensional nature of these characters is often expressed through the way in which dialogue is configured between characters. For instance, though Zafar is presented as charismatic and intensely concerned with local politics, he evidently endorses a form of activism that is scathingly exposed by Animal as partly based on a kind of empty sloganeering:

'Whatever we had they have already taken, now we are left with nothing. Having nothing means we have nothing to lose. So you see, armed with the power of nothing we are invincible, we are bound to win.'

I've not heard this before, I guess it's Zafar's new theory, but give it ten days and it will be on everyone's lips.¹⁶³

It is significant that Animal's rejoinder is internalised, and this forms a pattern for Animal's participation in the direct narrative as a whole. Throughout the novel, Animal acts as a kind of hearing 'space' onto which the dialogue is spoken. Animal rarely vocalises his reactions to their opinions directly, but yet allows a disclosure of the binary terms through which such dialogue is often rendered. In another such moment, Animal's reaction to Zafar's continued boycott of Elli's medical clinic is internalised, and thus effectively exposes Zafar's charismatic but obstructive leadership, as Animal's unvocalised implosion demonstrates:

Zafar brother, with all your doing good plus doing without, you're a hero in these bidonvilles, no hero are you to me. You who are so fucking noble, so modest, above all, so powerful at your one word the people of the Apokalis put aside their suffering. You say, do not go to this clinic and

¹⁶³ Sinha, *AP*, 55.

even those who are full of pain, can't breathe, are burning with fevers, even though the flesh is melting from their bones in flakes of fire, still they do not go.¹⁶⁴

Such a one-dimensional and undifferentiated form of activism stifles an active and individuated participation from its members, even in terms of securing the most basic needs, while imposing an over-generalised mode of activist politics on the resistance movement.

Zafar's sentimentality is also exposed, in a manner that seems to contradict the rigidity expressed by his blocking of the clinic, and again, it is Animal who calls such modes of relation into question, and on this occasion, specifically alerts the "Eyes" to this occurrence. Animal brings his hindering sentimentality to light during a visit that Animal, Zafar and Nisha, make to a woman called Pyaré Bai, gesturing outward past the inner narrative framework: "Eyes you should hear it, because the story of this one woman contains the tale of thousands".¹⁶⁵ Pyaré proceeds to tell her story, of her husband who worked at the Kampani, and who, in his efforts to protect his family from the poisonous gases released on "that night" had inadvertently exposed himself to the toxins. The woman tells of how her husband refused medicine, as he insisted that because his death was looming, she should not waste their money on his death; Pyaré then adds a phrase in Hindi which is not immediately translated for the reader. Zafar's response to this story is wrought by a sentimentality unusual in its explicitness:

'Wah wah,' says Zafar. He's taken off his glasses and is wiping them. Blinking, he's. What does he think, this is some fucking poetry recital? Eyes, what she said means this, 'On every page there's you and only you, oh love of my life, it's this book I keep in my heart.'¹⁶⁶

In this precise literary manoeuvre, Animal draws the attention of the "Eyes" to such instances of sentimentality and to a response to suffering coloured in poetic terms, explicitly denouncing such mawkishness on Zafar's behalf, while also making the consuming "Eyes" part of and complicit to this mode by translating the woman's words. Furthermore, Nisha's personal interest in this particular story is exposed by Animal.

¹⁶⁴ Sinha, *AP*, 136.

¹⁶⁵ Sinha, *AP*, 83.

¹⁶⁶ Sinha, *AP*, 84.

Pyaré's family's suffering is rendered in stark detail: "The small girls were always hungry. At night they cried. She would bind cloths round their waists and give them water to fill their empty bellies. She found a job carrying cement on a building site".¹⁶⁷ Yet, this story is glossed with Nisha's personal despair, as Animal deduces from Pyaré's wedding photo: "the happiest moment in the love affair of a Hindu woman and a Muslim man. Like Nisha and Zafar".¹⁶⁸ In this manner, the taint of Nisha's personal involvement is shown to elevate this story above others, while Zafar's one-dimensional nature is confirmed through his continued sentimentalising. Animal's role in bringing such one dimensionality to the fore is confirmed in this scene, underlining his function as the novel's reflexive hinge, bringing the novel's own process of meta-characterisation to the fore in the process.

Elli Barber, an American doctor responsible for the aforementioned clinic, presents a similar, potentially caricatured version of activist politics, and also a particularly western involvement: idealistic and sometimes unintentionally patronising, she earns Animal's admiration and scorn simultaneously. Her character is significant in that much of the narrative suspense is created through suspicions regarding her authenticity, but perhaps more significantly, the effects Elli's character has on Animal's internal processes underline the intricate narrative and activist frameworks she is placed within. For instance, at various points in the narrative, Elli appears to be unable to wrest herself from a framework of the aestheticisation of suffering, though she vocalises her frustration of continually being enclosed within this discourse. Though she reacts angrily to having to listen to another doctor "reduce the terror of dying people to a moon in a second rate poem",¹⁶⁹ the narrative demonstrates that Elli herself, at times, perpetuates a comparably virulent vision. A particular facet of this vision is depicted in an apparently innocent scene, where Animal describes the official opening of Elli's free clinic, situating Elli's mode of activist politics within a certain framework of observation:

Elli steps out smiling, the breath for her welcome speech already in her lungs. Man, how slowly that smile fades. Last night, didn't we all hear Zahreel Khan promising crowds? She must have

¹⁶⁷ Sinha, *AP*, 84.

¹⁶⁸ Sinha, *AP*, 85.

¹⁶⁹ Sinha, *AP*, 153.

expected to see people filling the street, clapping when the doors opened, but there's no crowd, no queue waiting outside, apart from me and a few onlookers, the lane is empty.¹⁷⁰

This expectant mode of vision is occupied by Elli in various guises throughout, and is highlighted by Animal's narration; it from misguided benevolence to the offensive, though they are sometimes yoked together. In a repetition of the almost patronising tones of the above passage, Elli's "soft voice, like she's cooing to a pigeon",¹⁷¹ combined with her expectant gaze, "that smile on her face, same as when she flung open her doors",¹⁷² moves into the more intimate circle of Animal's domestic sphere. Even more destructive is the way in which Elli's vision alters Animal's own perception, warping the parameters of his neighbourhood perspective.

In a conversation with a government doctor, Elli describes her view of the area Animal has introduced as "Paradise Alley, it's that boulevard of dreams that runs from the corner of Kali Parade to the heart of the Nutcracker".¹⁷³ Starkly contrasted is Elli's view of the area:

'Just look at this place. These houses look like they've been built by termites.'

At this the government-waali gives an uneasy laugh.

'Seriously,' Elli says, 'this whole district looks like it was flung up by an earthquake.'

On hearing Elli speak this one word, *earthquake*, something weird and painful happens in my head. Up to that moment this was Paradise Alley, the heart of the Nutcracker, a place I'd known all my life. When Elli says *earthquake* suddenly I'm seeing it as she does. Paradise Alley is a wreckage of baked earth mounds and piles of planks on which hang gunny sacks, plastic sheets, dried palm leaves. Like drunks with arms round each others' necks, the houses of the Nutcracker lurch along this lane which, now that I look, isn't really even a road, just a long gap left by chance between the dwellings. Everywhere's covered in shit and plastic. Truly I see how poor and disgusting our lives are.¹⁷⁴

That Animal is also privy to this comment is significant, as he had inched closer to "ear-ogle their conversation", in a move that is telling in terms of its use of a word associated with vision, "ogle", to render Elli's conversation with a "government-waali"

¹⁷⁰ Sinha, *AP*, 134.

¹⁷¹ Sinha, *AP*, 181.

¹⁷² Sinha, *AP*, 182.

¹⁷³ Sinha, *AP*, 104.

¹⁷⁴ Sinha, *AP*, 105.

audible. Here, seeing and hearing are inextricably joined, as Animal's profoundly altered perception of his world attests. Frameworks of audibility and visibility are thus powerfully fused, and Animal's multifaceted apprehension of the world is confirmed, while conversely, the perspectives of outsiders, Elli in this case, remains limited to the visual. In a comparable mode to the way in which the "Eyes" descended on Animal's words, moulding them into an already established image,¹⁷⁵ this moment in the narrative confirms this singularity of perception, and again, draws attention to a level of meta-characterisation underlining the frequently one-dimensional characters it presents.

The narrator, Animal, has been largely explored so far through his interaction with other characters, and one of the noted features of Animal's interaction with these characters, as noted earlier, is that his own part in the dialogue often goes unvoiced, or at least unheard within the direct action of the narrative framework. However, there are moments within the novel where Animal's persona accumulates specific and bawdy narrative force, rather than occupying a space which facilitates a narrative tension in terms of character interaction. Ironically, Animal's apparently bawdy and banal interventions allow for the novel's most effective exploration of issues relating to environmental justice and the kind of politics that might best secure such an idea of justice. In the discourse specifically directed by Animal, direct invocations of the disaster, environmental politics and other kinds of political agitation are evaded, as the closest quarters of Animal's world are revealed and created. Such interventions, indirectly conveyed, thus ultimately constitute part of an authorial activist agenda, based on a complicating of the lines and constellations of the everyday.

As has been noted, Sinha's literary exploration is forged within the confines of a particularised, but ultimately large disaster, in terms of political and environmental significance; though fictionalised, it still operates within the matrix of such an event. However, narrative scope also extends outwards in a gesture that extends past the consuming "Eyes", in its incorporation of large, contemporary events, namely in its deployment of the September 11th attacks. The deployment of this event implicitly sets this occurrence of the 9/11 attacks alongside the particularised circumstances of Khaufpur; the co-existence of these two chronologies demonstrating a disjunction in the ideas of normalcy between these two worlds. Specifically, Animal's initial reaction to

¹⁷⁵ Sinha, *AP*, 12.

and configuration of these televised events are telling in terms of the way in which the ‘everyday’ is configured and consequently, Guattari’s concept of “mental ecology” may be a useful one in terms of exploring the engagement the novel forges. As a concept, mental ecology relies on freeing itself from the enclosures of systems which aim to ‘manage’ these worlds of affective potential, and thus their relation to other ecologies, namely social and environmental. This moment in the narrative is potentially illuminating in terms of the rupture across territories of the individual, the home, environment and the socius in their multivalent capacities. The disruptive potential of the everyday gains important power in this triad of ecologies, potentially allowing a breaking free from a delimited range of discursive sets, similar to the emphasis that the idea of “mental ecology” places on processes of constant singularisation and differentiation.¹⁷⁶

The events of 9/11 take place in Tape Five, and Animal’s initial reaction suggests a particular political reaction:

The big thing that happened in Amrika, when it I saw it on the tele do you know what I did? I clapped! I though, fantastic! This plane comes out of nowhere, flies badoo! into this building. Pow! Blam! Flowers of flame!¹⁷⁷

However, Animal’s naivety is revealed as he continues to comment “‘*Fucking brilliant! Bollywallah special-effects, forget it!*’”¹⁷⁸ As the meanings of these events gradually unfold, Animal’s failure to place their significance or meaning within his own world is revealed as troubling:

These two women, Ashraaf and Bano, they are crying, I can make out the shine of tears. Me. I don’t believe it’s real. It’s a hoax, clip from a movie, trailer of some coming multi-starrer. Has to be.

‘In Amrika bombs, explosions, buildings falling, such things are normal. I’m telling you, yaar, see *Fight Club*.’ It’s Farouq, the movie expert.

‘So what are you saying?’ I ask. ‘Normal it’s a movie, or normal it’s not a movie?’

¹⁷⁶ Guattari, 33.

¹⁷⁷ Sinha, *AP*, 60.

¹⁷⁸ Sinha, *AP*, 60.

...Even after the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth planes hit and all those buildings fall, Zafar maintains it is not a movie. Zafar has to be wrong. Stuff like that doesn't happen in real life. Not in Amrika anyway. Here in Khaufpur it's different. Here in Khaufpur we had that night. Nothing like that has ever happened anywhere else.¹⁷⁹

This confusion over normality, cast on such a large scale as this, is instructive. With a strange simultaneity, "real life" is configured as the reality Animal knows – the subdued terror of a poisoned town – and a reality that is also removed and distanced from this, in the America that is configured not necessarily as place, but as event or set of events. Outside of the regularised, normalised environmental violence of the everyday in Khaufpur, this spectacle is conversely configured as normal, particularly in terms of its existence in Animal's mind as a film set, compounded by the virtual repetition of planes crashing and buildings falling. Animal's confusion over time zones conveys a distorted sense of temporality; he appeals to evidence of Khaufpur's darkness to highlight the 'reality' of his world rather than the virtual reality of the scenes on the television, but instead reveals a greater chasm in his experience of normality:

'How can it be happening right now?' I ask. 'Look outside, it's dark, it's raining, but these buildings are in sunshine.'

'Wah, you idiot!' cries Farouq. 'Don't you know there's a time difference between Khaufpur and Amrika? When it's night here, it's day there.'

'I tell you it's a movie. Soon it will finish. Words will come, THE END.' But now I'm feeling stupid, which I hate. 'Tell me what happens,' I say. 'I have to get Ma's supper.'¹⁸⁰

Upon Animal's return home to Ma Franci, a French missionary nun whose language faculties were erased by the events of "that night", Animal attempts to comfort his mother-figure:

'C'était un film,' I tell Ma Franci when we get home. 'C'est normal.'

Says Ma, 'Pauvre Jaanvar á quatre pattes, pour toi c'est quoi le normal?'

Poor four-foot Animal, for you what is normal?¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Sinha, *AP*, 60-61.

¹⁸⁰ Sinha, *AP*, 60.

¹⁸¹ Sinha, *AP*, 61.

Both a rupture between the film images Animal has absorbed and a distorted sense of the ‘normal’ emerge from this scene, and the exchange between Animal and his maternal figure here is significant in terms of the way in which it constructs concepts of the domestic, the normal, the everyday for the remainder of the novel. In particular, normality is construed in a wider context. Most enlivening, is the way in which ideas of an ‘ordinary’ configuration of the world are called into question by this apocalyptic event, and the varied ways in which this is sustained throughout the domestic narrative. Despite the confusion rendered by Animal’s seeing of these images, the distorted image of his own everyday world is most significant. The space opened up by such a distortion allows a sustained scrutiny of the way in which the most intimate realms of the home are configured in the novel and for the reader also. The effect of such opening out of lines of ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, and their continual, interminable intertwinement throughout Animal’s story, further contains the possibility of gaining access to a reinvigorated sense of what the practice of the everyday might mean.¹⁸²

Following confusions and distortions of ‘normality’ in this scene, Animal’s domestic world continues to be constructed, structured and explored in various ways through intersections of reality and unreality. For Animal, the most typical sense of home is conjured through his relationship with Ma Franci, in their home which they have made just outside toxic grounds of the factory.¹⁸³ However, Animal also, often movingly, constructs another home world, that involving a little girl, Aliya, and her grandparents, Hanif and Huriya. This domestic world is one constructed with what seems impossible detail; impossible since its very lack of existence is heralded almost as it is brought into being by the narrative:

Aliya’s calling, ‘Animal, come and play.’

Her voice comes flying in from outside, plus I can hear people talking as they go past, crow cawking in the tamarind tree. Sun’s well up, from far off a radio is playing the song, *Ek tu jo milaa*, meeting you I meet the whole world, one flower in my heart the world’s abloom...

¹⁸² For a perspective on Guattari’s focus on the practice of the everyday see Lone Bertelsen & Andrew Murphie, “An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain”, in Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010) 138-161. The authors persuasively argue that “Guattari’s embracing of affect in social practice is *ethical* in that it evaluates practices of living”. 141.

¹⁸³ See Sinha, *AP*, 43. Here, Ma Franci has moved from her home in the convent to a stone tower just outside the factory grounds, while Animal presumably moves from his “lair” within the factory walls in order to live with Ma Franci in this movement of the home which confirms its multiplicity in the novel.

.... 'Come on, Animal, let's play.' Her voice is suddenly faint like it's caught away by the wind, or whispered on the moon, or lost in the crackling of a great fire. Eyes I think I will go mad. I'm filled with sadness because Aliya is not really out there. Her voice is not real, it's like people say, just another voice in my head.¹⁸⁴

This narrative remembrance is significant in that it constructs layers of confused chronology, as Animal's later knowledge of Aliya's death taints the sequential progression of his story through the tapes. In this instance, Animal's knowledge of Aliya's death is carried through his telling of his story in a manner that not only confuses time scales, but interweaves the sorrow of Aliya's death throughout. Interestingly, the overlapping of these worlds or territories of different states of knowledge is most explicitly apparent in this moment where Animal tries to reconstruct or bring into being something akin to familial intimacy. The world in which Aliya features is created in great detail by Animal and is invoked at various points throughout the narrative, and attests the significance of the continual presence of two worlds within Animal's narrative. This construction of the domestic, and specifically of childhood and the relationships with the world it engenders, is often movingly rendered, for instance, in Animal's first invocation and exploration of the unstable and unreal world Aliya inhabits.

Tellingly, the construction of Animal's world of the everyday, the family, and the home, also take place in Tape Three, as the invocation of Aliya is intertwined with the story of Ma Franci, Animal's maternal surrogate. The initial mention of the child is suspended until the end of this Tape as Animal goes about introducing the Eyes to Zafar's gang, to the Kampani grounds and to Ma Franci, a missionary nun who came to Khaufpur forty years previously but who lost all of her knowledge of Hindi and other languages, retaining only her "childhood speech of France".¹⁸⁵ From the outset, Animal's everyday and most intimate world is disquietingly constructed with recourse to elements which do not appear 'real', or which in other cases are all too reflective of the reality of a poisoned environment. However, both the complexly constructed child figure Aliya, who is simultaneously ethereal and representative of a suffering too real or permanent, and Ma Franci, an elderly, almost ghost-like presence in her representation of an earlier form of an outreach to the Khaufpur community, signify dual difficulties.

¹⁸⁴ Sinha, *AP*, 21.

¹⁸⁵ Sinha, *AP*, 37.

Firstly, each signifies the *real* failures of aid and access,¹⁸⁶ while secondly each represent, in various ways, the difficulties and evasions of the more elusive notion of the creation of home, in addition to its spectral presences.

These spectral lines of entanglement within the domestic domain allow an examination of the ‘ordinary’ in the novel (a concern that is frequently sidelined in critical focus on the aberrant attributes of a poisoned environment), or perhaps more specifically, at least an exploration of the ‘extraordinary’ or ‘unordinary’ within its everyday domain. Through the specific event where Ma Franci flees from the attempts of the missionary presence to send her ‘home’ to France, the entangled relationships of the real and unreal are established, as it is Aliya who leads Animal to the place that Ma Franci has now made home. Tellingly, Animal reminds the Eyes of Aliya, who directs him to Ma Franci’s location in the factory grounds: “Eyes, do you remember that I mentioned hearing Aliya’s voice calling me to play? Her granny said I behaved like a kid? Well, Aliya’s granny is Huriya Bi”.¹⁸⁷ In this manner, Animal establishes more layers of connections, akin to familial lineage, in his endeavour to rediscover Ma Franci’s new location, and thus his new home:

A little way off, across the tracks and near the factory wall, is a falling down tower of stone with grass growing out of its walls. Some bigwig built it hundreds of years ago, in those days the factory lands were orchards. It was maybe a tomb, no one knows its purpose, when the poison factory came and threw its wall around the orchards, this ruin was left outside. Out of this place is coming the singing, a faint light flickers inside.

That’s where I find her, sitting on the floor, with a simple bundle of her possessions opened and strewn around her.

‘Ah, there you are, home at last,’ she says. ‘Be a dear and put the kettle on.’¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ For example, see Clare Barker and Stuart Murray, “Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism”, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4.3 (2010), pp.219-236. In particular the statement “...in a process Said would recognize only too well, the chain of events by which high-risk environments, poverty, and disability mutually produce and reinforce on another exemplifies the relationships of power that systematically devalue human lives”, (233) is resonant with the way the lives of Animal’s familial figures are constructed. Barker extends this perspective in a conference paper entitled “Disabling Postcolonialism: Theory, Criticism and Accessibility”, (EACLALS 2011) where she pays attention to the *real* difficulties of access experienced by Animal and Aliya as Animal tries to bring Aliya to Elli’s clinic. Furthermore, Barker’s suggestion that reading strategies are revised in order to pay attention to the complexity of disability is useful.

¹⁸⁷ Sinha, *AP*, 41.

¹⁸⁸ Sinha, *AP*, 42.

The creation of the home in the novel is structured in such a way that the very real and concrete concerns of the everyday exist, but yet the ‘normalities’ of the domestic are simultaneously configured as extraordinary in the potential they contain for a restructuring of Animal’s perspective. Such potentially abstract intersections between these levels of what is construed as domestic normality are given concrete form through daily rituals of home and community making; for instance, Animal speaks of the role of Huriya Bi’s rituals of hospitality and the creation of community:

She’s making tea, which she does whenever I, or anyone comes, to her house. Her wrinkled hands push twigs into the clay hearth, causing tiny flames to spurt under the kettle. That kettle with blackened bottom and sides, must be hundreds of cups of tea I’ve had from it. Let others believe in god, for goodness and a kind welcome I’ll believe in that kettle.¹⁸⁹

These routines significantly transform the grammar of the domestic, as depicted in the scene where Ma Franci is successful in a second evasion of repatriation, having escaped a French priest by disguising herself in a burqa. Here, the noun ‘chai’ is transformed into a signifier of deeper import, in a scene of transformative kinship,

There they are, two old ladies, squatting by the hearth, Ma’s still got on the black burqa she escaped in. There too is heaven’s kettle, a curl of steam from its spout tells me that chai has been accomplished.¹⁹⁰

Scenes of this nature accumulate a potential power to illuminate the connections that are continually made between the everyday and various modes of resistance and activism. This is particularly resonant in the way both episodes navigate the complexities of asserting the desires of the individuals in the community and the resisting of external impositions.¹⁹¹

In another instance, the scene of the home, specifically Animal’s home, comes under investigation from Elli, and the focus or subject of Elli’s gaze is again tellingly

¹⁸⁹ Sinha, *AP*, 104.

¹⁹⁰ Sinha, *AP*, 146.

¹⁹¹ It is also significant that both of these scenes are determined by Ma Franci’s determination to make home on her own terms, prevented in the first instance where she flees the convent and resettles in the factory grounds, and in the second scene where she escapes being repatriated by Pere Bernard by escaping in a burqa.

extended outwards in a reference the ever-watching “Eyes”. Highlighted initially is what Elli sees in Animal’s home, and how this gaze is then refracted both outwards to the Eyes, and inwards on itself as Animal contemplates his own vision: “Eyes, wherever a person lives is normal to them, but in Elli’s eyes is the same look that I have seen in Kakadu’s, Père Bernard’s and so many others”.¹⁹² This “look” that Animal has experienced so many times is vocalised through Elli’s “pigeon-coos”,¹⁹³ of sympathy, in sounds reminiscent of Elli’s previous movements into Animal’s domestic circle,¹⁹⁴ creating a continuity across Elli’s reactions. Yet simultaneously, these one-dimensional or uniform reactions on Elli’s behalf work in a way that allows Animal’s to convey the gap that exists in regard to their levels of perception. Animal refers to Elli’s wrist watch to underline this gap in perspective: “ ‘Elli, I don’t need a watch because I know what time it is. It’s now o’clock. Look, over there are the roofs of the Nutcracker. Know what time it’s in there? Now o’clock, always now o’clock. In the Kingdom of the Poor, time doesn’t exist”.¹⁹⁵ However, perhaps more significant is the acknowledgement of a ventriloquism of Zafar’s mantras embedded within what is ostensibly Animal’s ‘voice’:

Hope dies in places like this, because hope lives in the future and there’s no future here, how can you think about tomorrow when all your strength is used up trying to get through today? Zafar says this is why the people don’t rise up and rebel.’

Thus in my lousy mood do I rattle off the ideas of our leader, his vision of a people for whom there is no night and day, only a vast hunger through which suns wheel, and moons wane and wax and have no meaning.¹⁹⁶

Interestingly, in Animal’s presentation of his home to Elli, and to the “Eyes”, rather than detail the construction of the home, he offers instead a refraction of the layers of perception that sit atop this complex space.¹⁹⁷ Thus rather than opening up the space of his home to Elli’s eyes, Animal’s narration here further encloses this site through his referencing of the various layers of representation which render such sites inaudible and invisible.

¹⁹² Sinha, *AP*, 183.

¹⁹³ Sinha, *AP*, 184.

¹⁹⁴ See Sinha, *AP*, 181, where Elli visits Aliya.

¹⁹⁵ Sinha, *AP*, 185.

¹⁹⁶ Sinha, *AP*, 185.

¹⁹⁷ I use ‘space’ here rather than ‘place’ to signify the competing perspectives placed upon the domain of home in Khaufpur.

While the domestic is conveyed through various acts and resistances which accumulate in complexity, the horror and tragedy that the domestic continues to harbour in Animal's world is also manifested. This is most devastatingly affirmed with the death of Aliya, and this death is all the more devastating in its reminder of the perpetual repetition of horror encountered within Animal's, and by extension, Khaufpur's realm of the everyday. As Aliya's presence is announced as non-existent at her very introduction, her death appears as a repetition that must be endured within the lives of the people affected by the continuing events perpetuated by the disaster. The description of this scene where Animal and Elli rush to offer aid for the child whose condition is said to be worsening is devastatingly wrought in its literary detail but also contains echoes from outside the frame of the narrative, in Sinha's pre-novelistic involvement with the Bhopal campaign, copywriting for a Bhopal charity. In particular, a gesture made by Aliya's grandfather, in an effort to memorise Aliya's face, resounds with a photo that is recognisable as a symbol of the Bhopal campaign for justice. The photo, taken by a photographer who found a father burying his daughter, who "unable to bear parting from her, brushed the earth away for one last look",¹⁹⁸ is summoned in Hanif's despairing gesture:

We find the old man with his granddaughter lying in his lap. Aliya's face looks strange. She has rouge on her cheeks, her eyes are ringed with kohl, her mouth is smeared with lipstick. She is wearing a fancy new dress. Old Hanif's fingers are moving over her face, as if he is trying to memorise its details.¹⁹⁹

In this rare moment of high emotion which Animal himself feels keenly and does not try to conceal, the Eyes are tellingly called upon to witness, or perhaps more specifically, to feel the tragedy of the unfolding scene:

Eyes, I won't translate, there's not a language in this world can describe what's in my soul. Oh my poor friend, why did I never take you fishing? Come back and you shall ride daily on my

¹⁹⁸ "Bhopal, A Brief Background". <http://www.bhopal.org/what-happened/bhopal-a-brief-background/>

¹⁹⁹ Sinha, *AP*, 325. There are other echoes of some of the stories provided on Bhopal.net contained within Sinha's narrative, such as the story of the Government Minister who drinks a glass of local water in front of a crowd to demonstrate its safety and then going around the corner to regurgitate this contaminated water (110). Further demonstrating the reciprocal traffic between both fact and fiction, this version of the Bhopal.net website directs the user to Sinha's novel as a means of raising money for the Bhopal medical appeal but also, by extension, providing a valuable intervention into the discourse surrounding the Bhopal disaster.

back, my ribs you may kick as much as you like. Poor child, so sudden your going that your grandparents are still pleading with Elli to save your life. Oh dear old folk, a rupee's worth of rouge, a street-corner lipstick, the angel of death is not so cheaply bought.

Now the old bugger too is crying, I cannot watch. There is something so cruel about eyes which may not see, but may yet shed tears. My own breath is coming in sobs, in gluts like the lungs are refusing it, and why should I live? No longer is there love, nor hope, it's the death of everything good.

...I run outside, never has any Khaufpuri heard me howl. The heartless stars glitter like knives above the city.²⁰⁰

Animal's character appears to have finally been unhinged by this death, which simultaneously incorporates the tragedy of a child's death, and the perpetuating repetition of this death ensconced by environmental disaster caused and controlled by layers of bureaucracy. Significantly, this moment calls the attention of the Eyes, while emphasising that this event itself cannot be translated. This urgent summoning of the Eyes contains the spectre of the continuing reality of such environments outside the literary frame, simultaneously revealing the most heartfelt outburst from Animal, and exposing potential intersections and crossings between the literary and the world.

Though Sinha extends links between the literary and the specific, worldly context of tragedy wrought by environmental disaster in this poignant scene, the different 'worlds' which punctuate the novel are returned to in the final Tapes. In particular, these final moments of the novel are interposed with the landscapes of Animal's traversal of internal, phantasmagorical and natural worlds. Following a series of events where Animal presumes Zafar and Farouq have died on hunger strike, and coupled with Nisha's rejection of his hasty marriage proposal, Animal, in despair, takes hallucinogenic pills, the effects of which are potentially deadly: "Thirteen golis I chew, my mouth like a dark cloud engulfing thirteen little black moons, a final swallow and it is done".²⁰¹ Animal subsequently runs away from Khaufpur, and in a manner that echoes the earlier analysis of two 'spaces' that are set up within the depiction of the factory grounds, Animal's journey here explores a similarly conflicted space. This journey, partly induced by the consumption of the "golis", is one that takes him deeper into a hellish landscape of the psyche, and the wilderness into which Animal flees, alternating between the nightmarish and beautiful, is endowed with its own psyche.

²⁰⁰ Sinha, *AP*, 326-327.

²⁰¹ Sinha, *AP*, 334.

Lost in his “own jungle”,²⁰² Animal is simultaneously taunted by creatures he cannot see,²⁰³ and is protected and exposed by his environment:

Shady is the forest but under its trees is no relief. I am searching for other living things, none do I see, coloured like the back of a shrike’s the forest, browns and fawns, grasses dry, dry thorns, dry trunks, its leaves are suffering in the heat’s fierce fetch, not just me’s this agony but in the world. Where are you animals, let me introduce myself?... My nose only discerns the scent of parched earth, my only fellow beings are these silent sufferers rooted in dust waiting for rain.²⁰⁴

The environment bears down on him seemingly relentlessly, shunning him, while Animal continues to search for other living beings, similar to him, but finds only death. The trees bear voices and threaten to encircle and consume him,²⁰⁵ and Animal eventually imagines himself as turning into the earth, while the trees take on animalistic attributes:

The dream animals come near, one by one they approach, they don’t look friendly, but even before my open eyes the world is changing, never till now have I seen trees clothes in feathers, why is grass growing from the backs of my hands?²⁰⁶

In this moment, Animal is firmly caught between the multitudes of the nonhuman world, while the chasm between human and nonhuman only appears greater. The world Animal experiences is, at a particular point, a deeper engagement with self: “I am a small burning, freezing creature, naked and alone in a vast world, in a wilderness where is neither food nor water and not a single friendly soul. But I’ll not be bullied. If this self of mine doesn’t belong in this world, I’ll be my own world, I’ll be a world complete in myself”.²⁰⁷ Almost simultaneously the world Animal is looking for is only located when he ‘dies’, and readers are asked to imagine a world that can encompass modes of duality and stretch past boundaries:

²⁰² Sinha, *AP*, 338.

²⁰³ Sinha, *AP*, 338.

²⁰⁴ Sinha, *AP*, 342.

²⁰⁵ Sinha, *AP*, 355.

²⁰⁶ Sinha, *AP*, 348.

²⁰⁷ Sinha, *AP*, 350.

There are animals of every kind, leopards and deer and horses and elephants, there's a tiger and a rhino, among them are small figures on two legs, except some have horns some have tails they are neither men nor animals, or else they are both, then I know that I have found my kind, plus this place will be my everlasting home, I have found it at last, this is the deep time when there was no difference between anything when separation did not exist when all things were together, one and whole before humans set themselves apart and became clever and made cities and kampanis and factories.²⁰⁸

Represented in these alternate instances are moments, which are to some extent, detached from recognisable worlds and causes, a space where, potentially, the various opposite locations invoked throughout the novel are defined by their re-emergence. In this phantasmagorical episode, Sinha seems to evoke something akin to Guattari's idea of "eco-logic", which is raised in relation to the transversal connection potentially to be made across the three ecologies. As this "eco-logic" is defined by a set of relations different to that between "speakers and listeners", and instead emphasises the space required for processual innovation it is necessarily a deeper and more open yet continually engaging process; the novel's final moments thus appear here to traverse something akin to this kind of reimagining. Though these scenes potentially represent Sinha's exploration of the depths of Animal's psyche and its undeterminable interconnection with a world and environment that are, in certain ways, indistinguishable, they are, perhaps too neatly reconciled with the return of Zafar, Farouk, and others from Khaufpur who come to the jungle looking for Animal in order to bring him back to Khaufpur. This resolution, bluntly added to these scenes of phantasmagorical exploration, paradoxically imposes an overly-refined conclusion on the novel that cuts short Animal's exploration of a re-routed relation with 'home' and the 'world'. Thus the unending or proliferating potential Guattari notes as possible in an "eco-logic", which is "concerned only with the movement and intensity of evolutive processes. Process, which I oppose here to system or to structure, strives to capture existence in the very act of its constitution, definition and deterritorialization",²⁰⁹ is somewhat thwarted by this demonstrated need for a narrative resolution.

Though Sinha's novel culminates at this juncture, its return to the slow processes of the everyday politick is perhaps a necessary responsibility to the dual movement traced elsewhere in the novel. The point of re-entry into Animal's everyday is a juncture where

²⁰⁸ Sinha, *AP*, 352.

²⁰⁹ Guattari, 30.

the hearing's again been postponed, the Kampani's still trying to find ways to avoid appearing...There is still sickness all over Khaufpur, hundreds come daily to Elli doctress's clinic...the factory is still there, blackened by fire it's, but the grass is growing again, and the charred jungle is pushing out green shoots. Moons play hide and seek in the pipe work of the poison khana, still the foreign jarnaliss come.²¹⁰

The potentiality of the phantasmagorical episode is thus not wholly overturned as the narrative returns to its literary politics, more familiar from the beginning of the novel. Animal's internal dialogue returns the reader to the narrative's beginning, and reflecting the continuation of the world of a poisoned community cited above, the narrative simultaneously calls attention to the endless repetition of Animal's story, and by extension, the stories of many others:

It's then I've remembered the tape mashin in the wall. I will tell this story, I thought, and that way I will I'll find out what the end should be... Eyes I'm done. Khuda hafez. Go well. Remember me. All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us.²¹¹

Oxymoronically beginning Animal's narrative again as it ends, the never-ending proliferation of similar narratives and locales continues.

3.6 Extensions of the literary frame: Hyper-textual Khaufpur and Animal's journalism

Both the hyper-textual Khaufpur, in the form of the Khaufpur.com website, and Animal's two specifically focused articles for *Himal Southasian* online magazine, effectively maintain the visibility of the issues that the novel endeavoured to expose. Particularly in Animal's journalistic articles, a concentrated and concisely wrought focus on the ecological and activist issues that permeate the novel is delivered. Furthermore, Animal's articles in this online magazine successfully bring the issues espoused in the novel into relation with contemporary currents surrounding the

²¹⁰ Sinha, *AP*, 365.

²¹¹ Sinha, *AP*, 366.

production, reception and circulation of particular kinds of novelistic fiction, effecting a potentially self-reflexive move on behalf of the distinctly involved author. The articles written by Animal for Himal online magazine, entitled “Animal in Bhopal December 2009”, and “Blah, blah, blah, July 2010”, combined with the fully navigational and hyper-textual setting of the Khaufpur.com website which allows the user to browse through some articles from the *Khaufpur Gazette*, amongst other aspects of the town of Khaufpur, thus extend the world created in the novel past its own boundaries. Of further significance in terms of the continuities with *Animal’s People*, or perhaps more specifically, signalling a *discontinuity*, is the *refusal* of narrative closure on a larger scale, which this extension into the virtual world signifies.

This ‘hyper-textual’ and navigational virtual world of Khaufpur further resounds with Guattari’s idea of “intensities”, which form a central part in his concept of “ecologic”, ultimately based on dispensing with traditional modes of thought in order to further a more radical engagement. In the hyper-textual world of Khaufpur, created through the various digital repositories of Animal’s narrative and world, something akin to the “intensities” Guattari evokes are made available, in large part through the engagement with ongoing and contemporary issues that is allowed by this new temporality of the ‘virtual’. Rather than “the logic of discursive sets” which “endeavours to completely delimit its objects”,²¹² these intensities offer what Gary Genosko describes as a “lack of fixity” which is “a fecund amodality (an abstract, intense feeling of vitality not object-oriented or attached to causes) that is ripe for ecologic. This is where the logic turns to praxis”.²¹³ Though these potentialities and possibilities exist, with a special force in the proliferating realm of the virtual, tensions remain even within this virtual temporality.

That the movement to the digital realm does not equate with a seamless resolution of the novel’s literary politics is confirmed when Khaufpur’s website is remembered in its initial context of invocation, as supplementary narrative reference for the ‘Editor’ of Animal’s Tapes, and thus potentially a product of the impulse to record stories for ‘consumption’ cited at the beginning of the novel. The function of the external and externalising frameworks – the ‘Editor’ and the direction to the Khaufpur website mentioned at the beginning of the novel, the tapes, the references to the “Eyes”

²¹² Guattari, 30.

²¹³ Genosko, 78.

– and the way in which these external narrative frameworks are linked to the extension of the literary frame in its various forms is thus centrally important. Reflective of the endlessly circular nature of the politics lucidly rendered in the novel, this virtual realm offers further critique of the processes raised in the novel – of activist complicity, and consumption of stories, for example – in the replication and repetition of these strands in this digital territory. However, the potential complicity of the virtual provides important opportunity for the extension and enlivenment of the novel’s critique. Particularly, the way in which this extension brings into new focus issues relating to voice, stories and the construction of narrative is significant for a reconsideration of the interaction of these issues.

The article, “Animal in Bhopal”, dwells significantly on the issue of location, most obviously in its re-routing of issues that dealt with the fictional Khaufpur to the still suffering Bhopal, but also in its juxtaposition of these settings with what, at least in this article, are the centres of western literary power. The article begins in France, where Animal is said to have recently visited as part of the promotion for *Animal’s People*; perhaps significantly, Indra Sinha’s diasporic location is now also within France. Such a juxtaposition of facts is also significant in terms of the issues within which this online construction of the world of Animal and of Khaufpur intervenes, in its continual intermingling of the power of stories and the location from which they arise. Through this initial establishment of location, the juxtaposition of various seemingly incompatible but continually co-existing categories is also established. Celebrity of various kinds is invoked, and particularly relevantly, the idea of the authorial celebrity, many of whom Animal meets on the circuit of Booker Prize events and “litfests”. Such authors co-exist seemingly happily with the financialisation and consumption of Animal’s story, and by extension, other such stories. The names of these “scores of places – their names clamour in my mouth – London, Oslo, Roma, Napoli, Stockholm, Yerushalayim...”,²¹⁴ indicate an unease with these presumed centres, providing additional comment on the consumption of Animal’s perceived wisdom as he opines to journalists: “ ‘Society is going to the dogs. Today it’s us, but tomorrow it’s you who’ll be poor. It’s you who are the people of the Apocalypse.’ This has them all nodding”.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ “Animal in Bhopal”, *Himal Southasian* (December 2009).

<http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/687-Animal-in-Bhopal.html>. (i)

²¹⁵ “Animal in Bhopal” *Himal Southasian* (December 2009).

<http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/687-Animal-in-Bhopal.html>. (i)

Indeed, Animal's inebriated presence at the Booker prize dinner is an apparent reference to the meagre sales of the novel both before and after its announcement on the Booker shortlist.²¹⁶

Animal's constructed presence at such events facilitates a focusing of attention on the channels through which stories like these circulate. The circulation of this fictional character in what is an ostensibly 'real' world, has the effect of blurring lines of fiction into something that may be shaded more as fact. In this interplay, fact and fiction exist in a manner comparable to the existence of the worlds of the 'real' and 'unreal' explored earlier, and their relations are effectively destabilised and defamiliarised. This process of engendering unfamiliarity is highlighted further in Animal's comment which designates his most real and intimate world of Khaufpur as appearing "the most bizarre, unlikely foreign, and to me the most surprising of all",²¹⁷ instigating a dislocation of the most intimate world. However, simultaneously, the pervasion of other cities like Bhopal, and Animal's Khaufpur, produces another list of places: "Minamata, Seveso, Chernobyl, Halabja, Vietnam, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Toulouse, Falluja", gesturing toward the seemingly never-ending perpetuation of contaminated locations, familiar in their poisoned terrain.

In a direct acknowledgement of this kind of ghostly repetition, tracts are taken verbatim from the text of *Animal's People*, tellingly, when Animal describes the Kampani grounds in Bhopal, in a kind of intertextual borrowing from the novel. The inclusion of this extract from the novel is significant in that it demonstrates the systematic order and interchangeability of destructive foreign capital, but also in the ways in which the fictionalised Khaufpur and Bhopal, for all their similarities, are continually differentiated. In this instance, Animal's home "the Nutcracker, that vast and desperate slum, my home" is missing, yet adds to the feeling of an "endlessly repeating nightmare".²¹⁸ In another instance of this direct intertextual link, Animal's earlier voice which describes the parasitical nature of foreign journalism is now channelled through an old woman in the slums of Bhopal who shouts at Animal and the

²¹⁶ "Booker club: *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha", *The Guardian* (8th October 2007).
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2007/oct/08/bookerclubanimalspeopleby>

²¹⁷ "Animal in Bhopal", (i), *Himal Southasian*, (December 2009)

<http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/687-Animal-in-Bhopal.html>.

²¹⁸ "Animal in Bhopal", *Himal Southasian*, (December 2009), (iii)

journalists as they are passing by, directly linking this repetitive and in many ways, violent endeavour:

We are walking through a grim slum when an old woman comes hurtling out of her house and plants herself in front of our important guest. ‘Hey you!’ she yells at him. ‘Yes, you! Big man! What do you want here, with your film crews and photographers and jarnaliss and hangers-on? We’ve had enough of your sort. You come here to gawp, and suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there’s so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you. Somewhere a bad thing happens, and look, here you come, drawn by the smell of blood. And when you’re glutted with our suffering you’ll salve your conscience with grand promises. Next day you’ll go back to your own country, and for us here, nothing will change.’²¹⁹

In a reversal of the positions traced through the novel, Animal is cast here as the possessor of the gaze, as he takes up the extra-literary position as ‘author’ of his story and travels beyond his own story. The form of media in which Animal recognises such a potential complicity is further significant, as he becomes increasingly involved with practices involved with the construction of stories, and hence, literary construction, in these journalistic forays. Importantly, the sense of perspective earlier noted by Animal in the novel here becomes blunted or stunted, as he cannot move past this position of being possessor of the gaze, and offers no alternative to his earlier subversion of the editor’s will, further affirming the difficulty and in some ways immovability or intractability of this new position, in spite of its initially apparent potential.

The section of this article in which Animal is interviewed by a reporter from the *Khaufpur Gazette*, and which is also available from the *Khaufpur Gazette* section of the Khaufpur.com website from the reporter’s perspective, raises important questions regarding the power of stories, and the construction of such narratives. Though ostensibly this interview is centred on the construction of Animal’s story in the fictionalised world of Khaufpur, it also poses incisive questions about the role of the literary text in such activist modes on a metafictional level. In the interview, Animal tells of how he spoke of the tragedy of Khaufpur until

my tongue ached and my teeth were ground smooth by the passage of words. I searched a thousand ways to convey the horror, the pain of what really happened to so many people, and you are right, nothing changed.

²¹⁹ “Animal in Bhopal”, *Himal Southasian*, (December 2009), (iii).

So I gave up talking of great calamities – my story was not about tragedy but about small people who live their lives in the shadow of giant words.²²⁰

In a direct link to tracts of the novel,²²¹ Animal partially reverses his qualms about telling or ‘selling’ his story expounded throughout the pages of the novel, as he freely articulates these feelings in the *Khaufpur Gazette*. This seemingly philosophical meditation on the power of the ‘small story’ manages to retain the possibility of its significance, but is then immediately undercut by the journalist who replies indifferently, querying the difference it will make. The article thus undermines, almost mocks, such a notion, exposing its continual difficulty. Despite the newly found form of the *Khaufpur Gazette* as the vehicle for Animal’s story, it has the effect of becoming a more abstracted form of musing on the “small people who live their lives in the shadow of giant words”. In this moment, the only option available is to ruminate on the impossibility of singularising the individual story in an affective way, simultaneously signalling an aporia in the promise of the never-ending proliferation of the virtual.

In at once an implicit and explicit mode, the claims both Animal and Sinha make through this article attest to the need for a literary engagement which will provoke an intense response, defined by its inescapability, yet deep enough to dislodge the tireless and multileveled repetition of representations. Through the intricately created hypertextual world of Khaufpur.com and Animal’s articles for *Himal Southasian Magazine*, the particular and ongoing crisis of Bhopal is given a potentially positive new space of engagement, while the fictionalisation of other elements of this issue posit the literary realm by implication as a space of, potentially, more than retrospective engagement. The way in which Animal’s narrative seems to have reached a cul-de-sac in this process of re-engagement in the realm of digital media incisively suggests that the process of resingularization must be more thoroughgoing; a redefined “eco-logic” that practices innovations and within and across domains, primarily the three ecologies of mental, social and environmental. Sinha adds and emphasises valuable dimensions to his literary oeuvre, connecting the proliferation of stories rendered consumable, with a similar proliferation of real sites of environmental and political trauma. Through this, Sinha attempts to render these sites and stories as more than political ‘space’ onto

²²⁰ “Animal in Bhopal”, (iv), *Himal Southasian*, (December 2009).

²²¹ Sinha, *AP*, 3.

which competing dialogues have been forced, yet in the process undermines and undoes some of the dynamism Guattari locates in the “intensities” that, in their sheer isolation from a recognisable world, form part of an “eco-logic”.

3.7 Conclusion

The multifarious nature of literary, non-fictional, and part-literary texts, in addition to the extended issues considered throughout the texts in this chapter – environmental, aesthetic, political, and ecological – calls into question whether these issues, literary-aesthetic and ethico-political, in all their various entanglements, can be resolved or ‘concluded’ satisfactorily. Each of these texts, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and “The Greater Common Good”, and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, the Khaufpur.com website, including the *Khaufpur Gazette*, and the articles written by Animal in *Himal Southasian*, attests to the ongoing plurality within a domain of literary creation extending from the context of contemporary South Asia. The very multifaceted nature of such texts raises the question of whether such various forms and issues can sit within the boundaries of the literary domain of ‘ecocriticism’. Indeed, a central focus of this chapter has been the way in which the selected texts have exceeded and surpassed formal lines in ways that render them potentially transformative. Importantly, the chapter not only signals the multitude of environmental and ecological engagement prevalent in these instances of contemporary South Asian literary scene, but also the multifarious ways in which the configuration of the home is *still* being raised, and is being enlivened by these very discourses of engagement.

The discourse surrounding the home, its place, creation and maintenance propels the consideration of boundaries that have been the concern of this chapter. In this manner, the close focus on the realm of home further transforms the idea of ‘place’ and ‘space’, already such a prevalent and key area in ecocritical studies, often removing or compelling a reconfiguration of these categories, as the readings of the texts have

demonstrated throughout. The inevitability of the consideration of boundaries in terms of the home has also demonstrated how a consideration of the idea of home based on a system of “inclusions and exclusions” becomes, to some extent, untenable in these texts when interrelated with a politics of a poisoned environment, or the politics of an environmental degradation and mass displacement sanctioned by the government. More elusively, these texts are also inflected by the idea of an ecology which does not provide a productive, dynamic connection but is instead based on a dynamic of disruption.

Analysis of Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* for the most part, has deliberately eschewed direct focus on the environmental issues in the novel that have previously garnered attention in this regard. Instead, this reading has analysed *how* the literary aesthetic implemented here by Roy might be a useful mode for an ethico-aesthetic perspective in an ecological frame. Importantly, this ecological aesthetic, or “ecosophy”, in a reclaiming of Guattari’s term, does not reconcile or demonstrate easy connections between different domains. Instead, Roy’s “ecosophical” literary fiction focuses on supposed points of connection, only to dash these moments of co-relation, or to render them meaningless. In line with this particular aesthetic, analysis of Roy’s deployment of the home, and the family, as sites of complicated inscription has fruitfully demonstrated how such sites are often dynamic points of departure from tightly inscribed systems. Significantly, however, these moments of excess and resistance are ultimately nullified, and the accompanying, temporarily positive narrative dynamic rendered hollow.

Subsequently, this chapter gave critical consideration to Roy’s essay “The Greater Common Good”, in a mode that was partially informed by the literary aesthetic of Roy’s novel. As has been shown, Roy’s essay charts a largely self-conscious deployment of categories, which in turn requires a rethinking of categories such as ‘global’ and ‘local’, which are widely used terms in activist and literary domains alike, and categories which have informed and enlivened her literary work: what may be termed the “small things” of individual stories, differentiated through Roy’s focus on the techno-scientific “specifics”. Thus, the mode of reading employed here has demonstrated the way in which the “ecosophical” aesthetic of Roy’s literary work, and her configuration of categories of the home and the familial, may be used to query and invigorate activist practice, literary and otherwise.

Finally, this chapter analysed Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, and the literary politics it espouses. The novel creates an intensely particular world of a fictionalised poisoned town, whilst affirming in different ways the persistence and proliferation of such locations. The simultaneity invoked here, of particularity and an endlessly repeated sameness, is an inherent part of Sinha's literary politics; its instantaneous invocation and layering of multiple issues often pulling the narrative in different directions at once, disturbing the narrative from within. Most clearly, the disturbance effected in Sinha's narrative has rendered tangible a gap within and between various modes of understanding and apprehension. Furthermore, a similar gap can be recognised external to the literary text, as readers are compelled to continually reflect on what they do not, or cannot, understand or apprehend; even Sinha's extension of the narrative to the virtual realm does not provide or allow a point of fully understanding, or narrative closure to be reached. Neither, and perhaps surprisingly, is there a sense that a thoroughly different mode has been effected by this transition to the virtual than can more positively distinguish it from the literary. Instead, the created virtuality created signals a vital "contemporaneity", in terms of disallowing the literary world to fall out of the temporality in which contemporary politics occur. In this manner, the digital domain engenders a further repetition, vital for enhancing a continual awareness and reflexivity, yet not locating the propensity for a changed frame of reference wholly within this sphere. Where Sinha most powerfully intervenes in the disturbance of narrative and the issuing of the call to reconfigure frameworks of understanding, is in and through his construction of the everyday in the novel. In one of *Animal's* ruminations from the digitalised *Khaufpur Gazette*, he philosophises: "I do not know what is literature, nor what makes it mere. I have told you the truth. What you do with the truth is up to you",²²² the seeming finality of such a statement instead generates various possibilities.

²²² Indra Sinha, " 'Unfashionable Truths': Fashion Editor of the *Khaufpur Gazette* Nabanna Mistri, interviews Jaanvar, aka Animal, Khaufpur's street-kid of the moment".
<http://www.khaufpur.com/animalinterview.html>

SECTION TWO: CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Chapter Four

Extending Boundaries: Children's Literature
by Mahasweta Devi and Salman Rushdie

4.1 Introduction to Children's Literature

Peter Pan stands in our culture as a monument to the impossibility of its own claims – that it represents the child, speaks to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable and exists for the book, much as the book (so the claim runs) exists for them.¹

Jacqueline Rose's study *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984) remains seminal to date, largely because of its unrelenting critique of the production of children's fiction, taking the cultural phenomenon of *Peter Pan* as its means of central illustration. From this proliferating of *Peter Pan*, which has never been secure in its position as work of children's fiction because of its original form as short story for adults, Rose works through the entangled ways that it aims to represent and construct the child, and the various concealments and simplifications this involves. By posing the question of adult's "desire" in thus constructing the child, using "desire to refer to a form of investment by the adult in the child",² Rose explores the way in which the unity of the construction of the child, within and through children's fiction, is used to secure or gloss over other areas of complexity, most prominently the configuration of language, but also in the domain of sexuality. Additionally, Rose also demonstrates the way in which such constructions of the child promote an unwavering fixity and unity so as to belie various historical, cultural and social differences that exist in childhood, as in adulthood. Indeed, this may be considered as the fundamental premise for Rose's argument: that children's fiction acts as a mode of evasion and concealment, beginning with its failure to acknowledge the impossibility of its own claims. These issues, in particular, have important implications for constructions of the literary, and the way in which, according to Rose, certain aspects of the literary may be used to contain the threat of such instability.

Rose sees children's fiction as stemming from the conceptualisation of the child in the philosophy of Locke and Rousseau. She argues:

¹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 1.

² Rose, 2.

Literature for children first became an independent commercial venture in England in the mid-to late-eighteenth century, at a time when conceptualisation of childhood was dominated by the philosophical writings of Locke and Rousseau...It is assumed that children's fiction has grown away from this moment, whereas in fact children's fiction has constantly returned to this moment, repeated it, and reproduced its fundamental conception of the child. Children's fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state.³

Thus the particular conceptualisation of the child as a mode of circumventing the complications of various domains is heralded in this comment regarding the persistence of imagining the child as origin or beginning. The repeated production of this concept of the child testifies to its enduring power, as well as the stasis that Rose sees as pervasive in the domain of children's fiction. That such an enduring concept and image which holds the power to bypass issues of complexity is ensconced within fiction for children begins to demonstrate the encircled and self-perpetuating nature of this claim. This philosophical effort to fix representations of the child as 'pure point of origin' thus enables a certain stability within the adult world, offering a return to a pure, uncontaminated mode of language, sexuality, and of comprehending the world.

These uncomplicated and uncontaminated ways of constructing the figure of the child equate with imagining that there is a point at which the world and the language which aids its construction can be comprehended in a similarly straightforward mode. Rose argues that "children's fiction emerges, therefore, out of a conception of both the child and the world as knowable in a direct and unmediated way, a conception which places the innocence of the child and a primary state of language and/or culture in a close and mutually dependent relation".⁴ Moreover, her argument that Rousseau's conception of "the association of childhood with primitivism and irrationalism or prelogicism characterizes our contemporary concept of childhood",⁵ is extended by Rose to twentieth-century writers for children such as Alan Garner. "Garner," she argues, "like Rousseau two centuries before him, places on the child's shoulders the responsibility for saving humankind from the degeneracy of modern society".⁶ In this

³ Rose, 8.

⁴ Rose, 9.

⁵ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (Great Britain: Peregrine Books, 1979) 116.

⁶ Rose, 4.

sardonic comment, apparently dismissive of Garner's fiction for children, Rose provides a useful point of access to the entangled and continuing debates regarding children's literature. Although she concedes that Rousseau and Garner occupy different positions in terms of how this aim is to be achieved, she posits "a continuity in children's fiction which from Rousseau up to and beyond *Peter Pan* to Alan Garner, in which the child is constantly set up as the site of a lost truth and/or a moment in history, which it can therefore be used to retrieve".⁷ In this lineage beginning with the educational treatise of Rousseau,⁸ a determination to keep the idea of the child in a particular place of preserving an innocence felt to be lost in many ways in the adult world is identified. This in turn, equates with a prescribing or an effort to keep in place an innocence and transparency of language in fiction for children, in order to serve a similar ideological function of guarding against 'contamination' and 'decay' of values. Rose cites Locke and Rousseau's suspicion of the degeneracy of language, and the way in which they viewed language's increasing abstraction from what it signified, as akin to "the decay which accompanies social advance",⁹ as mutually reinforcing. However, as Rose notes elsewhere, looking at *Peter Pan*, the access to an origin of this work as a work of children's literature is itself ironically conflicted and unstable, despite the unity and innocence *Peter Pan* maintains in its status as cultural phenomenon. Rose provocatively proclaims that "*Peter Pan* was both never written and, paradoxically, has never ceased to be written",¹⁰ in reference to its origins as an adult short story and its proliferating reinvention since. That *Peter Pan* is often seen as representing this 'oneness' or 'eternal' child can be read as disputed by its own creation; as Rose comments, "this constant dispersion of *Peter Pan* challenges any straightforward idea of origin or source".¹¹

As this conceptualisation of the child as unified, 'eternal', and as providing a "pure point of origin", continues to hold weight, in Rose's view other domains of complexity are glossed or concealed. Significantly, this extends to an erasure of difficulty in material domains: "Childhood also serves as term of universal social

⁷ Rose, 43.

⁸ Rose describes as a morphing of "this concept of childhood into the idea of fiction for children which would send the child itself off on this investigatory journey back into our past". Rose, 43.

⁹ Rose, 47.

¹⁰ Rose, 6.

¹¹ Rose, 6.

reference which conceals all the historical divisions and difficulties of which children, no less than ourselves, form a part".¹² This obfuscation of division and difference in the realm of childhood extends to the historical and the social, with the effect of further reinforcing childhood as a place free of complication, and establishing children's fiction in a similar domain. Perhaps most significant in Rose's claim regarding the maintenance of this kind of ahistorical continuity, is the way in which such a concept fortifies the claim of childhood, and by extension, fiction for children, as a safe and separate realm where both adults and children can take refuge, whilst this separate space additionally serves the ideological function of masking and controlling these functions. This in turn has the effect of setting up fiction for children as itself a fabrication, not only in its fictionalised character, but in the way in which it fabricates a static space of idealisation by, through and also for, the adult.

Such an imagined and indeed, enforced, unity, according to Rose, extends its grip into the commercialisation of children and fiction for children, with particular reference again to the case of *Peter Pan*. *Peter Pan* has been 'sold' in many ways as symbolic of the eternal child, and as an archetype of the "innocent generality"¹³ of children's fiction, effecting a similar blurring which transfers into its commercialised form. Rose argues that *Peter Pan* has been thoroughly associated with money and commerce since its inception, but yet has managed to maintain a blurring of this monetary dimension through its return to the idea of 'unity' that surrounds the child. In her words,

Peter Pan, as has already been mentioned, accumulated vast sums of money. But whereas we could see that money (its quantity) as helping us to define the value of *Peter Pan* (just what is it worth?), instead it only makes it more obscure. One look at the extent of the commercialisation of *Peter Pan* is enough to establish that we do not really know what we are talking about when we refer to *Peter Pan*. In its history to date, *Peter Pan* has stood for, or been converted into, almost every conceivable (and some inconceivable) material forms: toys, crackers, posters, a Golf Club, Ladies League, stained glass window in St. James's Church, Paddington, and a 5000-ton Hamburg–Scandinavia car ferry... *Peter Pan* is, therefore, more than *one* – it is repeated, reproduced, revived and converted in a seemingly endless spiralling chain. But it is seen to represent *oneness*. And that oneness conceals the multiplicity of commodities, the accumulation of money, and the non-identity of the child audience and reader to whom it so awkwardly relates.¹⁴

¹² Rose, 10.

¹³ Rose, 1.

¹⁴ Rose, 103.

That such a multiplicity of forms and commercialisation, and their endless repetition, can be yet represented as a unity attests to the powerful and pervasive sense of control exerted over and within the domain of children's fiction. In this manner, processes of monetary accumulation are also made to represent oneness, again concealing complex, cynical, and largely adult processes through the figure of the child. Rose argues that these processes are central to the existence, production and dissemination of children's fiction but are yet rendered opaque by this aura of "innocent generality" surrounding children's fiction, maintained by the adult. Though Rose takes the extreme example of the cultural phenomenon of *Peter Pan*, and has been criticised for this kind of seeming generalisation and inflammatory rhetoric based on a very select number of children's texts,¹⁵ the underlying point remains valid, and in many cases continues to be missed by critics. While *Peter Pan* represents an extreme form of this kind of 'oneness' and concealment despite, and even because of, the concealed lines of commercialisation, such evasions are rendered invisible through processes that deploy concepts of the literary. The literary domain, as I will discuss, is, according to Rose, used as a mode within which to maintain this cohesiveness and unity. Furthermore, Rose argues that this 'oneness' is not a quality only applicable to the domain of children's literature; it is present in other literary and cultural domains, but in children's literature these domains are more seamlessly covered. She argues, again in the context of *Peter Pan*:

The aestheticisation, the glorification, the valuing of the child – to which its first publication so eloquently bears witness – act as a kind of cover for these differences, of reader and address, differences which manifest themselves in the very physical substance of the book. If we look at the children's book market, its identity falls apart, exposing the gaps between producer (writer), distributor (bookseller or publisher), purchaser (parents, friends and/or children) and the consumer (ideally, but only ideally, the child). These spaces, missed meeting points, places of imposition, exploitation (or even glorification of the child) are not entirely different in kind from those which characterise other aspects of the literary life of our culture. They are not exclusive to the world of children's books. But there is something about the totality, the oneness, of *Peter Pan*'s status as a myth which makes them appear as an affront – the affront, for example, of claiming, as I would, that J.M. Barrie never wrote a version of *Peter Pan* (on stage or on paper) for children.¹⁶

Significantly for this thesis, Rose views literature and conceptualisations of the child, and by extension, children's fiction, as entangled or as mutually reinforcing in

¹⁵ See for example, Perry Nodelman "The Case of Children's Fiction: Or the Impossibility of Jacqueline Rose". *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 10.3 (Fall 1985), 98-100, 99.

¹⁶ Rose, 109.

terms of their sometimes idealistic conception. Such idealisations are utopian to such an extent that they become regressive and ignore various realities. In the context of Rousseau's philosophy and its continuity with Garner's fiction, as perceived by Rose, she argues:

Literature is the repository of a privileged experience and sensibility at risk in the outside world where values are being crushed under the weight of cultural decay. This is a conception of literature which has important implications for how we think about childhood. It also dominates much aesthetic theory in general...this type of aesthetic, which sets up literature as something which can save us from what is most socially and culturally degenerate, is in the process of gravitating down to the nursery.¹⁷

In this particular instance which traces the apparent continuities between this philosophy of the child, and fiction for children, the glorification of both the child and of literature is such that it suggests a simplification and regression in the idealisation of both. Both are, in ways, held apart – the idealisation of the child from an adult world rife with complexity and division, and the conceptualisation of literature as a mode of saving what the world threatens with its very complexity. This idealisation of both is compounded by Rose's earlier use of a quotation by John Rowe Townsend, who, in an appeal to the coherence of realist writing undermined by modernist complications asserts: “ ‘I came to the child because I see in him the last refuge from a literature gone berserk and ready for suicide’ ”.¹⁸ The literary, framed in this manner, becomes centred on ideas of form and limits; a demarcation that is controlled by the external limits placed on conceptualisations of the child. In this manner, what is written for the child becomes circumscribed by the frequently returned to ‘impossible relation’ between adult and child.

Rose acknowledges that she has chosen, “in a deliberately selective way, some of the recurring points of the definition of the child, and of writing for children, which seem to predominate in our culture”.¹⁹ In particular reference to Garner, she argues that he combines the traditions of fairy tale and adventure story, “and reaffirms their link

¹⁷ Rose, 43.

¹⁸ John Rowe Townsend quoted in Rose, 10.

¹⁹ Rose, 59.

with a concept of an origin which is recoverable through the child”.²⁰ Furthermore, Rose argues that children’s fiction has retained a realist aesthetic, in a continuation of Rousseau’s idea of language which was not laden with abstraction and was not too far removed from the world it sought to capture. Thus in reaction to the innovations of modernism, according to Rose, “is the recurrence of a set of terms (cultural preservation/decay) and the remarkable consistency with which one particular aesthetic is being laid on the child, and associated with children”.²¹ Since that particular aesthetic is realism, “the preoccupation with realistic writing” is judged by Rose to be at once a “fully aesthetic and moral concern”.²² This claim underlines the entanglement with a conservative or directive ethos which she identifies at the heart of children’s literature and accompanying the constrictions of conservative form as

Realism in children’s writing cannot be opposed to what is ‘literary’ or truly ‘aesthetic’, once it is seen that realism does not refer just to the content of what is described, but to a way of presenting it to the reader. Realism is a fully literary convention – one which is being asserted with increasing urgency in relation to fiction for the child... Realism – in the sense in which we have seen it defined here for children – is that form of writing which attempts to reduce to an absolute minimum our awareness of the language in which a story is written in order that we will take it for real (the very meaning of ‘identification’).²³

In this manner, Rose maintains continuity in her claim that the idea of the child is used as a safeguard against degradation of values, but also used in order to minimise the child’s awareness of co-option.

As already discussed, Rose identifies this deceptive stability in writing for children as maintained partly in order to render invisible the complex relationship of adult to child. One of the specific ways in which this is achieved is through what Rose sees as a rigid separation in narrative voice, a demand that “the narrator be adult *or* child, one or the other. It does not really matter, provided that it knows, with absolutely no equivocation, *which* it is, and that it uses that knowledge to hold the two instances

²⁰ Rose, 59.

²¹ Rose, 61.

²² Rose, 65.

²³ Rose, 65.

safely apart on the page”.²⁴ Rose goes on to argue that “writers for children must know who they are. They must know and understand children, otherwise they would not be able to write about them in the first place. But they must also know who *they* (as adults) are, otherwise that first knowledge might put their identity as writers at risk”,²⁵ in a striking assertion of cleanly defined parameters and boundaries. Suggested here is that writers for children must, to some extent, separate their adult selves from this act of writing for children, in a partial effort to deny the very confusion or difficulty of the adult/child relation. But the very fact that the adult writer endeavours to occupy this self-conscious awareness as writer for children underlines the project of concealing the complex workings of language, its instabilities and lack of innocence. The confusion of adult and child’s narrative voices, in other words, poses a threat of contamination that is converted into a patrolling of the literary. Such instances evidence a “loss of narrative *control*”, which serves to further underline this necessary patrolling of literary boundaries, and also goes some way towards indicating the reason for Rose’s continued use of the term *fiction* in relation to children’s writing, rather than ‘literature’; what writing for children maintains is, according to Rose, exactly this fiction of stability.

The demands for clarity of narrative voice extend to demands made on the literary, calling the very ethical and aesthetic dimensions of the literary into question:

What is at stake here is a fully literary demand for a cohesion of writing. It is a demand which rests on the formal distinction between narrator and characters, and then holds fast to that distinction to hold off a potential breakdown of literary language itself. The ethics of literature act as a defence mechanism against a possible confusion of tongues.

... in the case of children’s fiction, the question of form turns into a question of limits, of irrationality and lost control, of how far the narrator can go before he or she loses his or her identity, and hence the right to speak, or write, for a child. Writing for children rests on that limit...²⁶

Literary ethics in this regard equates with the maintenance of an equilibrium effected through clear division, of narrator and characters, adult and child in Rose’s conceptualisation. When taking contemporary children’s literature into account,

²⁴ Rose, 69.

²⁵ Rose, 70.

²⁶ Rose, 70.

particularly that which appears to address issues that are not strictly related to the world of the child, this perceived danger of “a possible confusion of tongues”, assumes new resonance. The persistence of an adult-driven narrative and register for children remains a difficulty, and perhaps even more so, as a children’s literature navigates political and social issues; the “confusion of tongues” in this context might concern the politics of a globalised and multicultural children’s literature and the difficulties embroiled therein. What is most significant for the purposes of this chapter is the way in which ethical and aesthetic questions in relation to the literary become infinitely more tangled and convoluted in the context of children’s literature: supposedly radical ideas about ethics, politics and aesthetics seem suddenly subverted, and their progressive, liberatory potential rendered as directive, constrictive, or contorting.

Kimberley Reynolds’ recent work *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (2007) challenges and confronts Rose’s work in ways which are significant in terms of exploring the diversity of children’s literature, from modernist innovations to the contemporary engagements of children’s literature with alternative media. Here, Reynolds posits an idea of the literary that is largely at odds with Rose’s conceptualisation of the term; this can be identified even at an apparently superficial level, with Reynolds’ repeated use of phrases like ‘children’s literature’, while for Rose such ideas significantly remain at the level of ‘fiction’, demonstrated in her reluctance to relinquish this term. Significantly, despite Reynolds’ frequent use of such words and phrases which privilege the literary in this manner, her exploration does not limit itself to instances of ‘high’ culture as such a usage might suggest. Instead, Reynolds’ work is focused on the plurality and multiplicity of narrative forms and genres, many of which extend beyond the strictly literary. What is most significant in terms of my later textual readings, is the way in which Reynolds configures issues of ethics and aesthetics, within or in relation to the literary.

From the outset, Reynolds appears to occupy an almost diametrically opposed position to that established by Rose, with their respective stances affirming definitive rather than complementary perspectives. Against Rose’s claims that writing for children is innately conservative and encouraging of conformity, Reynolds argues that the domain of children’s literature presents a

curious and paradoxical cultural space: a space that is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive. It is a space ostensibly for children – and certainly in the fictions created for them children encounter ideas, images and vocabularies that help them think and ask questions about the world – but children’s literature has also provided a space in which writers, illustrators, printers, and publishers have piloted ideas, experimented with voices, formats and media, played with conventions, and contested thinking about cultural norms (including those surrounding childhood) and how societies should be organised.²⁷

Thus Reynolds raises, from the outset, some of the arguments central to Rose’s thesis, particularly the notion of adults having a particular investment in the domain of children’s literature, though Reynolds situates this claim in an overtly radical and transformative framework. This is not to suggest that Reynolds does not move beyond the kinds of issues raised by Rose, as Reynolds advances the boundaries of previous arguments in significant ways, but there are certain shared and abiding concerns which confirm their lingering significance. In the quoted passage from Reynolds, relationships between adult and child, in addition to the culturally constructed norms surrounding childhood, and the manner in which both of these issues are navigated within the domain of children’s literature, are confirmed as central to any thinking about children’s literature. Significantly, hints of what emerges as one of the central tenets of Reynolds’ argument can also be located in this short passage, as her focus on generic pliability and transformation comes to the fore. While the potential usefulness of such a focus is easy to imagine, as it means that children’s literature is being considered less as a cordoned off domain, the precise significance of Reynolds’ focus on generic interaction and transformation for ethical, political and aesthetic reasons will be explored in more detail. Significantly, how these interactions are played out in what may be seen as Reynolds’ configuration of the literary will also be considered.

Despite Reynolds’ focus on the significance of form and genre in the innovation of children’s literature, her configuration of the literary, its role, and potential effect remain more difficult to pin down. In fact, *Radical Children’s Literature* seems to effect a partial distancing from the domain of the literary while simultaneously reaffirming it. A kind of effacement of what may be termed the strictly literary is

²⁷ Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

achieved by not just a persistent focus on *other* forms, but also on a sense that some of the dynamic mainstays of children's literature rely on traits that are inadvertent at best, and potentially contrived at worst. This is evident in Reynolds' comments on the idea of children's literature, in its multiplicitous states, as being freer in certain respects, and as less susceptible to, some of the confines of adult literature. For example, she cites "the less self-consciously literary modes and conditions of reading" associated with "the incorporating [of] visual elements and narrative devices adapted from other narrative forms and formats",²⁸ in a suggestion that such an ideal unselfconsciousness in regard to the literary is central to its success. Comparably, the "lack of visibility" sometimes afforded to this domain, which "contributes significantly to the freedoms available to those who create children's literature", supports her view that the field of children's literature, if not wholly reliant on such ideas of unselfconscious freedom for its radical potential, is at least supported by it, in this instance in relation to its authors.

Thus for both readers and creators of children's literature, the idea of an unselfconscious freedom, or lack of awareness of constraining narratives, whether of the confined and conventional storybook narrative or the larger narrative of constricting conventions, is made paramount. Though shaking off the constraints of both types of narrative constriction is undeniably powerful, both, in their apparent reliance on vagaries, have the contradictory effect of partially nullifying their relevance and direct intervention into the debates that permeate the field of children's literature, most importantly the charges of simplification and concealment made most prominently by Rose. Returning to an earlier quote cited by Reynolds, where children's literature was lauded as providing "a space in which writers, illustrators, printers, and publishers have piloted ideas, experimented with voices, formats and media, played with conventions, and contested thinking about cultural norms (including those surrounding childhood) and how societies should be organised",²⁹ a difficulty occurs, as the possibility of the utilisation of this 'space' as a site of formal innovation, aesthetic experimentation and the pushing of boundaries threatens to 'forget' its designated audience. A simple reversal of the problems located by Rose does not erase the more permeating difficulties ensconced in the troubled act of communication within this unequal framework; nor am I suggesting that Reynolds' work effects this reversal, yet the

²⁸ Reynolds, 8.

²⁹ Reynolds, 3.

possibility remains a concern. Furthermore, the argument that children have a “lack of formal awareness of genres and conventions”,³⁰ may augment the sense that children’s literature, in some of its more radical forms, is straightforwardly an area where such conventions can be played with, thus concealing the complexities of the field with a false cohesiveness.

However, the resounding value of Reynolds’ comments in this regard relates to her highlighting of the way in which children’s literature underlines its potential as transactive literary space. The dual emphasis on reader (child and adult), and author – largely adult, but beginning to expand this framework through her exploration of ‘fan-fiction’³¹ – approaches an acknowledgement of the *literary* space between adult and child, in defiance of Rose’s assertion that “children’s fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between”.³² From the outset, Reynolds sets up an opposition to Rose particularly with regard to the idea of “children’s literature being arrested as a literary form”,³³ and does this largely through demonstrating how various authors interact with levels of formal innovation. Indeed, the idea of transformation in various ways informs and is central to Reynolds’ thinking about the literary. Reynolds explicitly focuses on form and genre in this notion of transformation, and cites the potential reflected in what she terms “children’s literature’s lack of generic rigidity; it not only tolerates but embraces generic mutation, and also takes in and nourishes kinds of literature that have temporarily fallen from favour in writing for adults”.³⁴ The particular promise of the connections made here between generic transmutations, in addition to the revitalising of particular, perhaps outmoded genres, are the positive connections that these transformations engender between literature for children and for adults, as well as the other narratives that pervade the everyday world of both children and adults.

This is not to suggest that such kinds of traffic between narratives reduce or collapse the boundaries between adults’ and children’s literature; instead, Reynolds

³⁰ Reynolds, 60.

³¹ Reynolds, 180.

³² Rose, 1.

³³ Reynolds, 4.

³⁴ Reynolds, 16.

situates such transactions in a positive manner. What Rose might see as the “consignment to the nursery”³⁵ of certain forms, Reynolds imbues with a positivity that extends to both sides of this literary divide. In terms of the rejuvenation of a genre traditionally associated with children’s literature, Reynolds cites “magic(al) realism” as “one that demonstrates well children’s literature’s role in aesthetic and social innovation and transformation as well as the tendency of children’s literature toward generic hybridity”.³⁶ In this regard, the genre’s associations with aesthetic innovation and transformation and its critique of the wider surrounding world are particularly important in terms of refuting the alleged conservative or normalising impulses often levelled at children’s literature. The potential for tracking such interactions between children’s literature and ‘other’ literature in Reynolds’ mapping is clear, and extends to perhaps less obviously radical instances of genre transformations such as both children’s literature’s and magic(al) realism’s connections with the Romantic tradition. Reynolds comments that magic(al) realism

values and is concerned with developing the relationship between humans and nature, and celebrates the power of the imagination...They work on the willingness to believe that there is more to the world than we can comprehend with our senses and intellects, and so subvert and override epistemological certainties. Like the Romantics, magic(al) realist writers see the capacity for intellectual openness as being accessed by the imagination³⁷

What is most interesting here is the way in which Reynolds connects such innovations of genre which retain their links with children’s literature, with concepts of childhood. Furthermore, the way in which both the Romantic tradition and the genre of magic(al) realism, in relation to ideas about children’s literature and concepts of childhood, reaffirm their connections to the wider world and the incitement of change through a reordering of the world is significant. It is also notable that, in comparison to expanding and potentially dynamic radical claims in relation to the literary, ecocriticism maps a similar history of influence and affect.

However, Reynolds’ concern with generic innovation in children’s literature tends to be more future-oriented, in terms of the investment in new media, particularly electronic and digital, in a manner that suggests a deep-seated need for infiltrating

³⁵ Reynolds, 18.

³⁶ Reynolds, 19.

³⁷ Reynolds, 20.

secured narrative structures. In particular, she aims to gauge “the extent to which children’s literature is participating in the challenge to find aesthetically satisfying new narrative forms capable of capturing the globalised, high-speed, communication-saturated experience of growing up in the twenty-first century”;³⁸ consequently, she specifically develops the notion of “transliterature” rather than simply the “transtext”, which requires a balance “between the aesthetic and technological opportunities provided by new media. Achieving this balance requires exploration of narrative possibilities at all levels and in every medium”.³⁹ This idea of an interaction with new media thus goes far beyond any kind of superficial engagement with this new domain, and necessitates a need for narrative change.

The influence of new media shapes Reynolds’ conception of the literary in a number of important ways. Throughout *Radical Children’s Literature*, an identification of the possibility of various types of new media is continually made, both in terms of how it is already being utilised and the untapped potential of this continually changing media. Though such potential is acclaimed throughout, and Reynolds emphasises the need to develop “a symbiotic relationship between texts and technology”,⁴⁰ some irreconcilabilities exist with regard to such new media. Rose’s comments which hint at the commercialisation inherent in children’s literature, in the way that “children’s fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver)”,⁴¹ return with some force here. The point Rose raises here remains important for children’s literature in general, and is a point in particular that needs to accompany the extension and proliferation of the various and multiple literacies children now possess, and the extension and proliferation of children’s literature into the domains of new media. The argument by Rose that such an overarching seamlessness is not just applicable to the domain of children’s literature⁴² raises further implications for how Reynolds is constructing an idea of the literary. It is difficult to argue against the value Reynolds identifies that radical picture books for children have anticipated “about narrative structure and organisation that have come to fruition in electronic texts – such things as interactivity, fusions of visual and verbal

³⁸ Reynolds, 155.

³⁹ Reynolds, 157.

⁴⁰ Reynolds, 157.

⁴¹ Rose, 1.

⁴² See Rose, 109.

narrative modes, and disruptions to sequencing”.⁴³ Yet her analysis of radical’s children’s literature, occasionally seems to be based on a wish for this kind of innovative interaction between new media and children’s literature, rather than being premised on an already occurring process. Furthermore, the underlying premise of certain arguments regarding the power of new media is somewhat limiting in this context, and potentially circumvents various kinds of relationships, particularly with issues on the margins of such debates. For instance, Reynolds puts forward the presence of various forms of new media in children’s literature as offering a challenge to old dichotomies, such as ‘good’ nature versus ‘bad’ technology. However, these dichotomies are not really explored or undone by Reynolds in any significant way. This in turn implies that the issue is not the rejection of one or the other term, but instead necessitates a fuller exploration of these boundary conditions of environmental concerns and the potential innovations of new media.

4.2 Postcolonial Interventions and Children’s Literature

In recent decades, the lens and frame of postcolonial studies has provided a productive progression in terms of the analysis of children’s texts. In the 1990s, the postcolonial theoretical framework expanded to incorporate constructions of the child, perhaps most significantly as opened up by Stephen Slemon and Jo-Ann Wallace’s article “Into the Heart of Darkness? Teaching Children’s Literature as a Problem in Theory” (1991).⁴⁴ Later studies, such as a special issue of *ARIEL* in 1997 on “Postcolonial/Postindependence Perspectives: Children’s and Young Adult Literature”, edited by Roger McGillis and Meena Khorana, focused on children’s literature specifically, in addition to various constructions of the child. These early perspectives focused on the alignment of ‘primitive’ and ‘child’ often performed with respect to colonised societies, in the case of Slemon and Wallace, while McGillis focused on the

⁴³ Reynolds, 38.

⁴⁴ Stephen Slemon & Jo-Ann Wallace, “Into the Heart of Darkness? Teaching Children’s Literature as a Problem in Theory”. *Canadian Children’s Literature* 63 (1991) 6-23

‘contradiction’ of a postcolonial children’s literature, or a postcolonial criticism of it, which underlines the difficulties of conceptualising children’s literature in terms of ‘voice’. McGillis argues that the issue of voice, so central to early figurations of postcolonial studies, becomes necessarily more convoluted in the domain of children’s literature, arguing that

Children, then, may not be in the position of postcolonial subjects, speaking for themselves and taking responsibility for their own actions. The literature which they read may also participate in a colonizing enterprise if we assume that it sets out to draw its readers into the world as adults see and construct it.⁴⁵

This quote from McGillis provides an altered frame from which to consider the difficulties of the adult ‘speaking for’ child as a knowable, clearly demarcated and uncomplicated being. McGillis’s concern is one which centres on the potentially ‘colonising’ effects of children’s literature, as raised most persuasively by Rose, with the simultaneous considerations that “children and their literature are always postcolonial, if by postcolonial we mean that which stands outside and in opposition to tradition and power”.⁴⁶ Such issues were picked up and expanded upon in his later volume *Voices of the Other: Children’s Literature and the Postcolonial Context* (2000), where McGillis, in his introduction, makes his focus on the “culturally invisible”, as represented by children’s literature apparent, and the way in which children’s literature in particular as being “powerless to take part in the conversations of cultural and other forms of political activity”.⁴⁷ However, simultaneously, McGillis’ volume offers “revisionary readings of canonical texts”, demonstrating the continuing practice in postcolonial studies of looking back, often with a simultaneous tendency toward future orientation. Indeed, this particular dimension of postcolonial studies is one which continues to persist within children’s literature, as it is frequently caught between a looking back and the projection of utopian futures onto the literary. Though the way in which the postcolonial is refracted through the study of children’s literature has changed significantly since its inception, some abiding concerns remain, including the

⁴⁵ Roderick McGillis & Meena Khorana, “Postcolonialism, Children, and their Literature”, *ARIEL*, Vol.28, no.1 (January 1997), 8.

⁴⁶ McGillis & Khorana, 8.

⁴⁷ Roderick McGillis, ed., *Voice of the Other: Children’s Literature and the Postcolonial Context* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), xxi.

idea that “when we take children’s books seriously as an object of study, we initiate the very colonizing of the field that that field had seemed to resist”.⁴⁸ Furthermore, McGillis links this pervasive question within children’s literature to questions that remain within postcolonial studies: “In short, the notion of “postcolonialism” in relation to children’s books requires some organization. What do we mean by ‘postcolonialism’ in relation to children’s literature?”⁴⁹

Such questions are fundamental to the domain of postcolonial studies, as well as within the postcolonial as it is considered through or refracted in children’s literature. Comparably central is the significance of ‘home’, and indeed the persistence of the image of the house, which has been explored throughout the thesis in various ways. The deep-seated importance of, and narrative structure provided by, concepts of home in children’s literature remain a central, and indeed, productive focus for the possibilities of children’s literature. Virginia L. Wolf’s seminal article “From the Myth to the Wake of Home: Literary Houses” (1990), reaffirms the central position of home in children’s literature as it also seeks to explore how the home is configured in various children’s texts for various ages, aligning the complexity of the text’s dealing with the home with stages in the child’s development. Wolf argues that though the condition of ‘homelessness’, or what may also be called the ‘unhomely’ persists in adult literature, these children’s texts demonstrate a comfort taken in the ‘myth’ of the home, even when the home is not present in its fully ‘mythical’ state nor one full of capacious possibility. Wolf’s chosen texts are Randal Jarrell’s *The Animal Family*, Mary Norton’s *Borrowers*, Penelope Lively’s *House in Norham Gardens*, Paula Fox’s *One-Eyed Cat* and Ann Schlee’s *Ask Me No Questions*, and despite the difficulties and complexities that these texts affirm, she argues at the end of her article that “not one of these books entirely denies the possibility that one can be at home in the world. Even in the heavily ironic and tragic treatment of the house in *Ask Me No Questions*, myth is tentatively affirmed”.⁵⁰ The potentially more significant issue at stake here, particularly in terms of the parameters of this chapter, is not the idea of being at home in the world, which is, in any case, an untenably large and generalised question, but asking questions of how the

⁴⁸ McGillis & Khorana, 9.

⁴⁹ McGillis & Khorana, 9.

⁵⁰ Virginia L. Wolf, “From the Myth to the Wake of Home: Literary Houses”, *Children’s Literature*, 18 (1990) 53-67, 66.

home negotiates the boundaries that are, in many ways, central to the home's foundation.

Wolf's claim that "home is the dominant place in children's literature, but also that the house is the chief form it takes",⁵¹ is formative in this mode of conceptualising the home as an enclave and enclosure, marked by its very boundaries, in the image and structure of the house. Though Wolf extends the places where the resonances of 'home' may be found beyond the bounded walls of the house, she underlines the essentially 'mythic' elements of these places. Developed from an interpretation of Jean Piaget's model of children's cognitive development, which emphasises the child's gradual realisation of their subjectivity and separation from the world, Wolf's understanding of the importance of 'mythical' places in children's literature is attributed to "the infant's mythic experience of being at one with the world [which] continues to haunt our imaginations, despite our adult awareness of its egocentricity";⁵² thus "the celebration of place in children's literature is essentially a celebration of the self at one with the world".⁵³ In accordance with Piaget's theory of development, Wolf sees the 'mythic places' associated with home in children's literature as aligned with these stages of development:

We might expect many books for the young to focus on place as home, often as a mythic house. Then, in books for increasingly older children, we might expect the focus to shift to the need to protect, make, find or recover a home. The next shift would be to a character's internalization of the meaning of home, and finally, perhaps, to the ironies of homelessness, "the wake of home".⁵⁴

Though Wolf incisively registers the significance of the varying states of 'home' in children's literature, the dominance of the trope of 'home' in children's literature can be reconsidered by refusing to approach this concept in the binary terms which it is often positioned: absent-present, complete-incomplete, protective-threatening. Such an approach will take on increasing relevance in the later analysis of Devi's and Rushdie's texts.

⁵¹ Wolf, 54.

⁵² Wolf, 55.

⁵³ Wolf, 56.

⁵⁴ Wolf, 56.

Though Wolf acknowledges the importance of place more broadly in children's literature, rather than solely 'home', or more specifically, 'house', an emphasis is still placed on the tradition of "snug and cozy places", "the pastoral or lovely place", or "topophilia, or love of place itself".⁵⁵ The scope of her claims regarding the complexity and difference within children's literature does not, as a result, go far enough in refuting the more persuasive ideas raised by Rose regarding the ways in which children's literature may be deemed to gloss various complexities. Perhaps most regrettably omitted in Wolf's analysis is a response to the claim made by Rose that "Childhood also serves as a term of universal social reference which conceals all the historical divisions and difficulties of which children, no less than ourselves, form a part".⁵⁶ The unabashed expression and analysis of "love of place", particularly in the idyllic, pastoral, or uninscribed places described here by Wolf appears, in some ways, to reinscribe and reaffirm some of the difficulties that children's literature, particularly in recent times, has sought to complicate. Conversely, the recent refocusing of a postcolonial theoretical framework to incorporate the concepts of home and place, extending consideration of this to 'space' and environment, in a manner that belies such universalising tendencies has been welcome in the complications it facilitates.

Though the previously cited question posed by McGillis, centring on the meaning of postcolonialism in relation to children's literature, remains important, it has, necessarily, become a question that has been shaped by the developments and transformations within postcolonial studies and theory. Clare Bradford's *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature* (2007), begins with the premise that "postcolonial theory, most obviously and usefully, offers an alternative way out of traditional or usual modes of considering children's literature".⁵⁷ Though Bradford focuses largely on settler societies in her analyses, her work also effects a broader and yet potentially more incisive move, as she works to underline how postcolonial theory itself may be interrogated through the lens of children's literature, thus effecting a double use of the postcolonial framework – applying its dimensions to the realm of children's literature while conversely using children's texts as a mode of challenging this framework and testing its limits. Bradford's methodology is thus

⁵⁵ Wolf, 54.

⁵⁶ Rose, 10.

⁵⁷ Clare Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007) 8.

comparable to the way in which Reynolds underlines the reciprocal traffic between adult and children's literary domains.

Furthermore, and significantly in terms of avoiding generalising tendencies in relation to the conceptualisation of the home in children's literature, Bradford directs children's literature analysis firmly into the realm of postcolonial studies, with its attentive consideration to the way in which "texts inscribe the shifting relations of power and knowledge evident in colonial and postcolonial societies, and in their discussions of traditional narratives, postcolonial literary studies resist universalizing interpretations, preferring to focus on the local and particular".⁵⁸ In this manner, deployment of a postcolonial theoretical framework can make space for analyses of children's literature outside its seemingly fixed and designated boundaries, even the resolutely traditional and largely conservative reoccurrence of the home. Bradford's preferred focus on the local and particular is valuable; however, as with other aspects of postcolonial literature which focuses on such concerns, text-based methods of circumventing the attendant blanketing venerations of such states also need to be implemented. Meanwhile, Bradford's focus on ideas of 'place' and 'space' takes on a particular resonance in the context of postcolonial studies:

While tropes of travel and movement across space are endemic in children's literature generally, in postcolonial texts they take on particular inflections, rehearsing colonial journeys involving the dislocation of colonized people from their ancestral homes, alluding to the expeditions of exploration that characterized and symbolized colonialism, and thematizing the many journeys through which individuals and groups of colonizers sought to find or make homes for themselves.⁵⁹

The usefulness of employing a postcolonial theoretical framework, evidenced in Bradford's *Unsettling Narratives*, as a means of surpassing seemingly fixed boundaries surrounding children's literature has been further enlarged with a 2008 volume entitled *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*. This volume argues that "children's literature is marked by a pervasive commitment to social practice", and while it questions what is behind such allegiances, "an outcome of this commitment, in both the literature itself and the critical discourses which serve the

⁵⁸ Bradford, 2007, 8.

⁵⁹ Bradford, 2007, 14.

literature, is a pervasive impulse toward what can be termed ‘transformative utopianism’”.⁶⁰ While the volume may seem to conform to traditional delimitations placed on children’s literature, consolidating the impulse within children’s literature towards future-oriented visions and utopias, the authors aim to track “the extent to which contemporary texts reinscribe conservative views and values embedded within narrative and discursal features and naturalised because accepted as given”,⁶¹ thus in many ways working against the traditional concept of utopianisms. When such notions of working against traditional or conservative values are viewed in terms of home, place and space, and coupled with the working against the traditional narrative framework or structure provided by the idea of ‘utopia’ in children’s fiction, a potentially dynamic mode of analysis can be located in this inversion. This notion of distorted or unfinished traditional trajectories of reconciliation and future-oriented visions will be central to my later readings of Devi’s and Rushdie’s texts.

Of further significance, in terms of this chapter, are the ways in which this volume engages with the concerns of ecocriticism, as a concern of relatively recent resurgence in literary circles, which also provides an important new way of thinking of space and place, encompassing more than the traditional notions that these concepts may entail. Relatedly, the way in which this volume apparently reconfigures the recurring significance of family structures is of interest to the parameters of this chapter. The volume appears to simultaneously reaffirm and reject the radical potential of both domains of environmental and familial concern, as it emphasises the ways in which both new configurations of the family and environment are progressive, yet continually limited or frozen. On the presence of an environmentally informed aesthetic in utopian children’s literature, the authors note that “in children’s studies both the literature and the critical discourse will remain ‘environmentally informed’ rather than ‘ecocritical’ if ecocriticism is assumed to preclude all forms of anthropocentrism”.⁶² Significantly, the authors of the volume return to the narrative structures that often determine and constrict the progression of children’s literature, as they analyse the precluding of more deeply engaged environmental texts:

⁶⁰ Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens & Robyn McCallum, *New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 2.

⁶¹ Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2008, 5.

⁶² Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2008, 91.

Children's texts remain constrained by the intrinsic commitment to maturation narratives – narrative structures posited on stories of individual development of subjective agency, or of bildungsroman. This tends to ensure that any environmental literature remains anthropocentric in emphasis, rather than engaging with the biocentrism of 'deep ecology'.⁶³

Again, literary narrative structures, or strictures, preclude deeper, more complex engagement which continues to have far-reaching implications for children's literature which aims to be 'transformative' in some way. The kind of 'shallow environmental' mindset of texts that aim to "raise consciousness and offer avenues for practical action available to children as well as adults"⁶⁴ is alluded to in this previous comment, and in effect, the volume designates specifically realist texts for children as only going so far in instigating a more profound kind of ecological engagement that goes beyond an engagement at the level of 'issues'.

Meanwhile, the perhaps unattainable ideal of effacing anthropocentrism, as one of the most desirable ways of effecting a more meaningful consideration of the boundaries that the ecocritical raises, is an issue of significance for the ensuing literary analyses in this chapter. This ideal becomes central to, and even drives, the search for a conceptualisation of "how it might be possible for children's literature to imagine alternative futures in which anthropocentric modes of looking at humankind and its relation to the world might be creatively transformed".⁶⁵ While such an effort may be desirable, the authors of *New World Orders* also note its impossibility, commenting that "in practice, effacement of the human is impossible, and the most that can be expected is an uncentered, unhumanised perspective, as ecocritics concede".⁶⁶ Instead, however, an important concession is made for the literature which endeavours to traverse the multiple issues which coincide with the "normative assumptions in children's literature concerning personal growth and development", and to focus on the intersection of such traditional issues in children's literature with issues of environmental destruction and race relations.⁶⁷ Such texts simultaneously challenge literary modes which appear to

⁶³ Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2008, 91.

⁶⁴ Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2008, 96.

⁶⁵ Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2008, 99.

⁶⁶ Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2008, 99.

⁶⁷ See Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2008, 100.

present the world ‘factually’ through the genres of fantasy and magical realism. A particularly significant focus for this chapter is the intersections and crossovers effected between what is newly articulated in critical terms – ecocriticism, on the one hand, and alternative or new media on the other – and that which forms a traditional, and oftentimes conservative presence in children’s literature – configurations of home and the family.

One last article is of relevance here: Reimer and Bradford’s article, entitled “Home, Homelessness, and Liminal Spaces: The Uses of Postcolonial Theory for Reading (National) Children’s Literatures”, which usefully, and specifically, further complicates ideas of home in children’s literature. As suggested by the article’s title, the authors take their analytical cue for the exploration of the traditional pillar of home in children’s literature from postcolonial theory, arguing that “the problematization of the idea of ‘home’ in recent theory offers critics of children’s literature an opportunity to return to this dominant idea in our field and to consider how the alternate spaces and mappings of postcolonial theory might allow us to read children’s literature in more politically nuanced ways”.⁶⁸ While the authors note that “postmodern (adult) literature has embraced metaphorical homelessness as an ideal”,⁶⁹ ‘homelessness’ in children’s literature typically takes on a different taint: “A mobile subject is at the centre of much children’s literature, but the trajectory of children’s texts is typically to home the child subject, both the subject inside the book and the subject outside the book”.⁷⁰ This trajectory seems remarkably close to Rose’s conjecture that children’s fiction works to fix the child, again both within and outside of the text. Reimer, focusing on Canadian children’s literature in particular, argues that “not only has children’s literature continued to issue the call to ‘make it home’ to its readers, but often to do so in thematic and narrative terms that explicitly refuse homelessness”.⁷¹ This refusal can be read as an anxiety, in yet another mode, to keep children’s literature within the strictures of the conservative or traditional. Reimer’s discussion of Janet Lunn’s

⁶⁸ Mavis Reimer and Clare Bradford, “Home, Homelessness, and Liminal Spaces: The Uses of Postcolonial Theory for Reading (National) Children’s Literature”, in *Children’s Literature Global and Local: Social and Aesthetic Perspectives*, Emer O’Sullivan, Kimberley Reynolds & Rolf Romøren, eds., (Oslo: Novus Press, 2005) 201.

⁶⁹ Reimer & Bradford, 201.

⁷⁰ Reimer & Bradford, 201.

⁷¹ Reimer & Bradford, 201.

Shadow in Hawthorn Bay, a work of “‘symbolic capital’ in Canada”,⁷² in many ways, makes plain such a refusal of homelessness.

Rather than assert the idea of ‘homelessness’ within this almost canonical Canadian children’s text as one which radically undoes some of the notions associated with the concepts and framing of home, Reimer suggests that such a concept, in this case, often works in a conservative way, detailing the ways in which the text sets up different kinds of refusals of homelessness throughout. Such a conservative trajectory effectively means excluding ‘homelessness’ in various ways, setting up ideals of what ‘homelessness’ is *not*. This involves, for the most part, a reinscription of what is not traditionally associated with the home, or by extension, confirming idealisations of comparably ‘pure’ notions of the child and childhood. Reimer argues that this involves establishing ideals of propriety in terms of property and sexuality, favouring the rural over the urban,⁷³ placing emphasis on the idealisation of children and childhood, as the main character maintains her purity and secures her future through children. However, Reimer argues that at the fringes of the story are the exclusions that linger and haunt the sense of home that otherwise might be uncomplicated. What is significant in Reimer’s analysis is that this text retains its somewhat controlled or conservative narrative core, while its haunting must exist on the margins of the text, in its “metaphorical structures”. Though a significant step in complicating the narratives of the creation of home, such an instance is yet presented as marginal or indeed excludable.

In the second part of this article, Clare Bradford takes up the notion of liminality, a term sometimes glossed with a comparatively celebratory colour in postcolonial theory, and applies this to a number of Australian and Indigenous young adult texts. Significantly, the analysis of this concept picks up on the recurring idea of ‘limits’ in relation to children’s literature, and appears to work from the premise of the significance of these ‘limits’, in order to complicate and enliven ideas of the creation of home. Beginning by critiquing Bhabha’s use of the term liminality, with its connotations of ‘space’, uninscribed with historical and material difficulty, Bradford poses the specificities of ‘place’ in opposition to this, suggesting that “a helpful metaphor here is the concept of place as *palimpsest*, a site on which ‘traces of

⁷² Reimer & Bradford, 201.

⁷³ See Reimer & Bradford, 202.

successive inscriptions from the complex experience of place, which is itself historical' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 182)".⁷⁴ This idea of 'palimpsest' is potentially productive, again in terms of offering a more complex deployment of ideas of place in children's literature. Particularly in terms of the various and compressed meanings of a single place, "place as *palimpsest*" may offer a mode of considering place in children's literature without conceiving of it as "topophilia" (Wolf), or just in terms of a colonial encounter (Bradford, *UN*). In terms of the concept of liminality, Bradford's awareness that liminality is not by any means a 'standard' feature of cross-cultural children's texts, guards against potential reduction of *all* postcolonial children's texts into these terms. Conversely, Bradford also notes the ways in which typically liminal spaces, such as schools in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous students meet and mix, offers only "a homologue of the nation, whose multicultural mix conceals its settler origins and its colonial foundations".⁷⁵ Rather the authors conclude that "if the concept of liminality is to be useful for an appreciation of how intercultural relations are represented and advocated in settler society's children's texts, it needs to be fleshed out through examination of the dynamics of symbolic exchange as they unfold through textuality".⁷⁶

From Reimer and Bradford's work, particularly welcome is the destabilisation of narrative in these readings, which becomes a focus for disruption and difference, rather than the assimilative purposes it is often inscribed in children's literature. This final refrain, and examples of how this concept may be considered in the selected Australian Indigenous and non Indigenous texts through their textuality, constitutes the crux of Bradford's argument, and she suggests that such modes of textuality should be used to place an emphasis on "*how* texts works, to the discourses circulating within texts and to the ways in which such discourses produce meanings".⁷⁷ Thus, both Bradford and Reimer's examinations of children's texts focus on 'middles' in terms of the textual object, in addition to the middle space of liminality. In this way, both authors foreground the processes involved in the exploration and constitution of home in children's literature, rather than the perhaps more limiting or conservative conclusions, which reinforce conservative or traditional concepts. This chapter will execute a similar

⁷⁴ Reimer & Bradford, 207.

⁷⁵ Reimer & Bradford, 210.

⁷⁶ Reimer & Bradford, 213.

⁷⁷ Reimer & Bradford, 215.

focus, in that it aims to explore the processes through which home is examined in *The Armenian Champa Tree* and *The Why Why Girl* by Mahasweta Devi, and *Luka and the Fire of Life* by Salman Rushdie. Rather than being restricted to Wolf's idea of whether it is possible to be "at home in the world", the following textual analyses will consider the borders and boundaries between the most intimate realms of the home and that which falls outside the home, and the unexpected relevance of margins to the expression of the home.

4.3 Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi is a well-known figure in terms of her political activism and work with marginalised tribal groups in India, in addition to her literary work, largely on the same subjects. She is perhaps best known in the west through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's situation of her literary work at the crux of her own theoretical framework, by extension rendering Devi's work as an important feature of burgeoning postcolonial theory more broadly.⁷⁸ Devi has "over a hundred books to her credit, including novels, story collections, children's books, and collections of plays",⁷⁹ and is lauded for her "trenchant, powerful, satiric fiction [which] has won her recognition in the form of the Sahitya Akademi and Jnanpith Awards, amongst several other literary honours".⁸⁰ In recent years she has published a picturebook for children entitled *The Why-Why Girl* (2005), while her earlier children's fiction, including *The Armenian Champa Tree*, which was originally published in the Bengali children's magazine *Sandesh* in 1968, has been republished as part of "The Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi" series by Seagull Books. The publication context of the 2009 version of *The Armenian Champa Tree* is explained in an introductory blurb:

⁷⁸ See for example, Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories*, translated and introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), Section III "Entering the Third World".

⁷⁹ Susie Tharu & K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India 600 B.C To The Present Volume II: The Twentieth Century*, (London & New York: Pandora Press, 1993) 235.

⁸⁰ Amar Nath Prasad & S.K. Paul, eds., *Feminism in Indian Writing In English* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2006) 217.

we have conceived a publishing programme which encompasses a representational look at the complete Mahasweta: her novels, her short fiction, her children's stories, her plays, her activist prose writings. The series is an attempt to introduce her impressive body of work to a readership beyond Bengal; it is also an overdue recognition of the importance of her contribution to the literary and cultural history of our country.⁸¹

The weight of Devi's authorial and activist status is undeniable, and undoubtedly worthy of such substantial recognition. Yet what is interesting in terms of Devi's most recent foray into the domain of children's literature in *The Why-Why Girl* is the role this sense of authorial authority plays within this colourfully illustrated text. In *The Why-Why Girl* the indefatigable 'whys' of a young tribal girl named Moyna are detailed through text and image. Moyna's position as a member of a marginalised tribal community is made evident from the outset, and largely through the interjections of the voice of Mahasweta Devi herself, who proclaims her presence in a text box carried by an illustration of a bird, and separated from the main text: "The 'I' in the story is Mahasweta Devi herself. She works a lot with tribal groups".⁸² This self-conscious narratorial intervention is curious, particularly when the purpose of these text boxes, called 'Wordbirds', as explained at the back of the book is taken into account: "Wordbird Books feature traditional and contemporary stories emphasising the similarities and differences in this, our one world. Unfamiliar words and ideas are explained with the help of Wordbirds that streak across the pages, giving readers access to a multicultural, multilingual vocabulary".⁸³ Interestingly, the two 'Wordbird' text boxes that feature in the book both concern Devi, as the second 'Wordbird' explains that "Samiti is the group Mahasweta Devi worked with, along with the local tribal people".⁸⁴ Furthermore, both 'Wordbirds' appear in the opening pages of the book, and these early interjections appear to compound, perhaps even confine, the narrative trajectory that might otherwise be propelled by the child's formulation of questions. Moreover, given the role of explaining multicultural and multilingual vocabulary assigned to the text boxes, coupled with the overall ethos of the publishing series, Devi's authority might appear to bear on the text rather too restrictively, and in a

⁸¹ 'The Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi', in *The Armenian Champa Tree* trans. Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, (Calcutta, London & New York: Seagull Books, 2009). Hereafter will be referred to as *TACT*.

⁸² Mahasweta Devi, *The Why-Why Girl* (Chennai: Tulika Publishers, 2003) 2. Hereafter will be referred to as *TWWG*

⁸³ Devi, *TWWG*, 23.

⁸⁴ Devi, *TWWG*, 4.

manner that not only makes clear that this narrative voice is the one driving the text but also containing the suggestion of ‘utilising’ the figure of the child to bind and expound these concerns. Coupled with the nature of the early questions posed by Devi’s character Moyna, which centre on the everyday material world with all its inequalities of work, gender and power, these blatantly stated interests seem to confine unnecessarily the subject and feeling of the book.

The Why-Why Girl is a slight text, and so the accompanying risk of building a heavily interpretive argument on these few words is ever-present.⁸⁵ Yet the way in which the text and its narrative are founded on boundaries and divisions, whether those inserted by Devi’s narrative intrusion, or the divisions Moyna considers, is evident from the outset. That Moyna is nicknamed the why-why girl by the postman, who moves through different domains and spaces, circulating mailed material, is in itself significant, promulgating the idea of a circulation through and around communities, in addition to borders and boundaries. The first reference to Moyna as “the why-why girl”, curls the text of this new name into the form of a question mark, from which the remainder of the book unfolds and is shaped by this new reference, establishing the basis for the passing on of knowledge from Moyna to her peers later in the text, and furthering this sense of expansion. Another effect of Moyna’s concerted questioning from this point in the book is the demonstration of the complex interface between and running through these internal and external domains of everyday life, which are not simply elided or sidelined by the overt positioning of the political activist author at the beginning of the book. Moyna continues her questioning through the everyday life of a Sharbar, who the narrative voice explains are “a poor tribal group, and they owned no land”.⁸⁶ Moyna’s extension of the space of the home into the hut in which Devi was staying is an important narrative hinge, and this extension allows this child character to create her own space in a sense:

That October, I stayed in the village for a month. One morning, Moyna declared that she would move in with me.

⁸⁵ The book’s many illustrations, which extend on which the text is placed, will not be explicitly considered in this analysis; the vast body of insightful and incisive critical studies on children’s picturebooks and the role and function of illustrations are beyond the scope of this analysis. Furthermore, the illustrations are not created by Devi, and the relationship between Devi and the illustrator Kanyika Kini, and the basis for the inclusion of her illustrations is not known.

⁸⁶ Devi, *TWWG*, 8.

“No,” said Khiri.

Why not? It’s a big hut. How much space does one old woman need?”

Moyna said, referring to me, of course.⁸⁷

This movement into a different, removed, and adult space, facilitates a learning from this very space; as Moyna continues to question, questions of why the boys cannot graze the Babus’ goats,⁸⁸ move into questions obliquely tinged with issues of voice and perspective: “Why can’t fish speak? Why do stars look so small if many of them are bigger than the sun?”⁸⁹ Thus, Moyna’s structuring of her world through questions about the everyday, gradually delve deeper into more metaphysical realms, pointedly conjoined with issues of material justice by Devi.

However, the questions, particularly the way in which they are framed, also demonstrate the ways in which they cut across divisions, which gradually expand as Moyna extends her knowledge to that found in books. Once Devi has replied that “books have the answers to your whys”, the domains of the everyday material inequality and musings of a different kind gradually converge, and move beyond divisions that may be easily made. Ideas of the natural world, and idea of the planet recur, as demonstrated in these questions, but patterns of renewability and reciprocal behaviour also feature, as Moyna tells her siblings “You cut one tree and plant another two”. Furthermore, in the extension of her questions to others, such as the instance when she transfers the knowledge gleaned from her own questions to her siblings as a child, and which continue as Moyna becomes grown up and finally a teacher herself:

Moyna is 18 now. She teaches at the Samiti. If you pass by, you are sure to hear her impatient, demanding voice, “Don’t be lazy. Ask me questions. Ask me why mosquitoes should be destroyed, why the pole star is always in the north sky.”

And the other children too are learning to ask ‘why’.

Moyna doesn’t know I’m writing her story. If she did, she’d say “Writing about me? Why?”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Devi, *TWWG*, 10.

⁸⁸ Devi, *TWWG*, 12.

⁸⁹ Devi, *TWWG*, 14.

⁹⁰ Devi, *TWWG*, 22.

Classifications abound in this picturebook from the outset, as when Devi marks out the narrative voice at the beginning, clearly marking a territory that seems, at first, to be heavy-handedly drawing attention to the political activist currents of the text, and drawing attention of the adult audience to her well-known profile. The ethics of literature, in the mode that Rose raises, namely as a function of maintaining a cohesiveness of writing, and clear distinction, resonate in the conclusion of this story, particularly in Moyna's ultimately straightforward understanding of the world and the narrative's resolved conclusion. However, what is most significant in terms of Devi's text is not so much a concern with this rigorous need to define narrative voices stringently as identified by Rose; such issues take on a different agenda, as suggested by the definition of Devi's authorial presence in the early pages of the book. Perhaps more pertinent here is what Rose identifies as the problem of "the constant association of language in all its forms with a register of truth".⁹¹ Devi's clear narratorial distinctions, in addition to allowing the questions, particularly the 'big' questions of inequality and injustice, to circulate through the text, bring its protagonist to a powerful place, not by providing pat answers but by encouraging questions. Here, a different longing for cohesion may be identified in such texts as *The Why-Why Girl*; one where the literary text for young children, in a sense, becomes an arena for the staging of an ethic, though with a definitive and definable outcome.

Mahasweta Devi's haunting story *The Armenian Champa Tree* enacts a comparable narrative trajectory in that it focuses the weight of its attention on a child's reordering of the world, and of the margins that are traversed in the process. However, the way in which it is apparently targeted at a more advanced audience, despite, and indeed partially because of the youth of its protagonist, contributes to its more layered complexity. The story begins by detailing the world of a Bengali community stricken by famine. Though the horrors of famine, mass migration and death are invoked, these tragedies display a perpetuity that has not faded:

In the year '76 – that is, 1176 by the Bengali calendar – there was a terrible famine in this land of Bengal, as you all know. Surprisingly, what happened then was exactly what happens in a famine even now. Just as they do today, 200 years ago, too, people consumed whatever they could – paddy, rice, pulses, the leaves and roots of trees. Just as they do today, people sold off domestic utensils, cows, calves – everything.⁹²

⁹¹ Rose, 140.

⁹²Devi, *TACT*, 1.

The invocation of the Great Bengali Famine of 1770 (Bengali year 1176) positions the narrative voice as one that is both knowledgeable and endowed with retrospection, while also bringing the realities of the past into relation with the present, emphasising commonality. Furthermore, Devi's continual practice of listing of various kinds is instructive, as it establishes a coherency that ultimately proves false. The listing of practices that enable survival among the poorest of the community, the seemingly banal listing of animals in the jungle, work that must be completed or foods that are eaten, contrasted with the list of meats that are eaten by the Sahibs, constructs a semblance of an ordered 'adult' world. Tellingly, the exploitative practices that govern and structure the community are also contained within lists – most ferociously the list kept by mahajan, or moneylender, Janaki Singh, of the paddy distributed amongst the people during the famine under the pretence of being a gift, aggressively demanded back the following year.⁹³ Thus the world set up from this adult point of view is one structured by the unending list of work undertaken by Mato's mother, the exploitative and deceptive systems practiced by moneylenders, and increasingly, further exploitative predictions of the *kapalik*, a tantric mystic that has come to the village, based on the fears of the villagers.

In contrast, and significantly before the exploitation of the villagers through a pervasive sense of superstition comes to the fore, Mato is introduced. Pitted in contrast to the hard and continual work carried out by Mato's mother, her practicality, respected ferocity and natural leadership, Mato presents an inversion of the simply ordered but complexly layered exploitative practices of the 'adult' world around him. Mato is described as fearful, a boy who “trembles at the sight of blood. He is the kind of boy who won't even look at the sacrificial animal offered during a puja”,⁹⁴ nor is he “adept at any of the traditional skills that Buno boys have, such as weaving bamboo mats or weeding grass”.⁹⁵ From the outset, then, Mato is depicted as not being able to fulfil the roles expected of him. More significantly, however, is the way in which Mato appears to understand, and even structure his world, in an alternate manner. Beginning with the way in which he represents the living but non-human world through his disparaged

⁹³ Devi, *TACT*, 3-4.

⁹⁴ Devi, *TACT*, 9.

⁹⁵ Devi, *TACT*, 10.

habit of making clay dolls, the narrative voice, focalised through Mato's mother, mourns his difference:

O Mato, why do you make dolls?... And if you have to make clay models of birds, cats, dogs, calves, squirrels and the like, then why don't you show them as they are? Who has ever heard of a green blackbird or an orange cat? Mato's mother feels like crying.⁹⁶

There is a tension present here between ways of seeing and comprehending the world, and particularly, Mato's seemingly irreconcilable vision of the world which does not endure against its 'reality'. Mato's seeming inability to understand the world in the terms in which it is presented to him is sustained throughout the story, but significantly, this supposedly adult world becomes less and less ordered and sensible as the narrative progresses. Following immediately from the quoted passage above, a sense of Mato's alternative construction of the world is furthered, as his relationship with the non-human world is continued through his relationship with his pet goat:

Go and look around the Buno quarters, there is not a single Buno like him. He's either roaming in the jungle or sitting under a tree. If you feed him, he'll eat; if you don't, he won't ask for food. Always accompanied by a pet black kid goat with brown patches. Called Arjun. It was born under an Arjun tree, so its name is Arjun. It is doubtful if there is a goat naughtier than him in this area. But when the wife of the brahman cook tried to complain about him, pat came Mato's reply, Your sons have eaten four cucumbers with puffed rice and chillies. What's wrong if my Arjun eats one?⁹⁷

Thus Mato's relationship with his pet goat Arjun can be seen to differentiate his conceptualisation of the world, through the way in which this relationship places Mato in different connective structures to those which order the rest of the community. This trend of treating Arjun the goat in a similar manner to humans, utilises claims to an equality in entitlements that stretches across categories of human and animal, as demonstrated above in the logic used to defend Arjun's eating of the wife of the brahman's cook's cucumber. That the reader is made firmly aware of the human insult

⁹⁶ Devi, *TACT*, 10.

⁹⁷ Devi, *TACT*, 10.

taken at this animal's transgression, is further significant in terms of the way narrative crisis emerges from Mato's ready blurring of these boundaries.

The placing of Arjun in the category of the human, or even above the category of the human, continues throughout the text; indeed, this is one of the issues Mato's mother finds most worrying about Mato, and is presented as most indicative of his improper status in the community. In fact, Mato's relationship with Arjun deepens his mother's sense that something is not right, and seeing "Mato sitting quietly with his arms around Arjun", Mato's mother decides to "ask the sannyasi that evening how to instil good sense into the boy".⁹⁸ Compounding Mato's mother's superstitious suspicions, she sees a snake, described as an "ominous omen" for the family, and further bolstering Mato's links with the non-human world. Tellingly, this relationship with the non-human world is constructed by Mato through close relationships with animals and an intuitive, almost reciprocal relationship with the land, which will be discussed later. Conversely, the rest of the community constructs this relationship with this non-human domain through superstition and a mindset typified by the inflammatory accusation above.

The main body of the text centres on Mato's journey away from the conflict engendered by these opposing world views and perceptions. When Arjun the goat, and Mato by extension, are pitted as the centre of evil by the *kapalik*, who pronounces that a goat fitting Arjun's description must be sacrificed in order to prevent great flooding and destruction, this prompts Mato's journey away from home to what he perceives as the safety of the Armenian Church grounds, and the particular attraction of its champa, or magnolia, tree. The declaration of the need to rid the community of Arjun and Mato also facilitates the beginning of a denial of the child's voice, as both Mato and his friend Uddhav, who tries to speak up against the *kapalik*, are silenced. This refusal to listen to children and their clearly logical claims presents a world view which is both an inverted version of the 'real' world and entirely more sensible than that which the adult world presents. Significantly, Mato's journey does not culminate in the fabled return home, but ends in the grounds of the church, which are shown, at the story's conclusion, to be in a constant cycle of renewal, as well as being endowed with various shape-shifting patterns in this almost mythical ending. This atypical ending, where home is

⁹⁸ Devi, *TACT*, 11.

not returned to or rediscovered in new form, effectively extends the reach and scope of the journey, yet not altogether relinquishing the possibilities contained within certain imaginings of the home.

These oppositional modes of structuring, ordering, and comprehending the world are explored in greater detail on Mato's journey to the Armenian Church to secure safety for Arjun. What may immediately appear as the typical narrative plot of the children's text which follows the home-away[from]-home plot structure, as Mato leaves home with his goat, reveals itself as the section of the story where hypocrisies are exposed, intricacies worked out, and primarily through this boundary condition enabled by being away from the home. However, the boundaries that are explored through this journey often surpass those that might typically figure in this 'away' section of a children's text, reaching beyond an exploration or discovery of the self and past a desire to save the home or to return home. In particular, the multiple and varying states of liminality that Mato's position encompasses compel a closer attention to these very margins. Mato is situated both as a kind of medium of non-human worlds, rather than interpreting between the human and the non-human, because his status as a child prevents such a mediation. On the other hand, Mato always occupies another kind of complex liminal space, as he is posited in various ways as between reality and the otherworldly.

Tellingly, within this story, at least two versions of home are established: one set down and bounded by Mato's mother, and the other shaped by Mato, and significantly shaped on his journey *away* from home. Mato's mother is at once practical in her construction of home as a place where functionalities are accounted for, and is significantly referred to as "Mother of Mato", and also a "natural leader"⁹⁹ in these pursuits. For example, when she raises a question about why Janaki Singh needs to keep a record of who he has given 'gifts' of rice to the locality,¹⁰⁰ she is presented as one who interrogates external powers in a manner which is linked to the repeated reference to her as "Mother of Mato" in this scene. The way in which the notion of domestic ordering transcends these boundaries attests to the way in which a clichéd separation of spheres is refused by Devi. However, the manner in which the mother accepts Janaki

⁹⁹ Devi, *TACT*, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Devi, *TACT*, 3.

Singh's pat answer suggests a questioning that does not extend as far as it might, and demonstrates an acceptance of some modes of authority that are deeply ingrained. In more concrete ways, Mato's mother maintains a bounded and traditional sense of the home – the practicalities of proper food preparation and cooking are emphasised,¹⁰¹ for example. However, interestingly, in the rendition of these chores and pleasures of home life, is layered with the taint of exploitation by those in power. In Mato's mother's explication of the need for protection of her ducks, the dangers of the jungle are formulated thus:

There are jackals, foxes, civet-cats, wild cats and whatnot in the jungle. And Mato's mother makes a substantial earning from these ducks. The sahibs of Banjantia or the barracks buy both ducks and eggs. Not just duck, they eat the meat of all sorts of birds like the partridge, hariyal, dove, gallinule and others.¹⁰²

This idea is furthered through the formulations of the way Mato's mother works within the community, extending this protector status out from the home to the wider Buno community where she is known as 'tigress':

Everyone calls Mato's mother 'tigress'. The Bunos cannot do without her. During festivals, the Bunos get summons from the upper-caste Brahman, kayastha and baidya families.

Hundreds of people are to be fed. These Bunos go and clear underbrush, build thatched shelters, collect firewood and banana leaves. They carry piles of spinach-brinjal-radish-pumpkin-gourd-chillies in yoked baskets, on their shoulders. The guests arrive on bullock-carts, rice and pulses also arrive in wagons from Bhagwan's barn. It is the Bunos who tend to the oxen, give them water and fodder. There are other jobs, too.¹⁰³

Suggested here, in an extension out from the inner and more intimate realms of the home, are similar processes within the wider community and world, which form particular patterns of conformity, and with this, exploitation. The caretaking and provision activities of the home extend to, and are replicated within, the domain of enforced labour and the maintenance of division. Attendant with this is an inability to imagine the work of the home, and its enforced extension outwards, any differently. This is not to condemn the character of Mato's mother, or to elevate the character of

¹⁰¹ Devi, *TACT*, 8.

¹⁰² Devi, *TACT*, 8.

¹⁰³ Devi, *TACT*, 9.

Mato, but merely as a means of pointing toward the need for a reordering of the world from the most intimate realm out.

In contrast, Mato continually evades the roles set out for him, primarily defined by the home. Early in the narrative, his defiance of boundaries set out by the Buno community is clear, and considering the weight that the Buno community carry in terms of the construction of the home, as mentioned above: “He’s either roaming the jungle or sitting under a tree. If you feed him, he’ll eat; if you don’t, he won’t ask for food. Always accompanied by a pet black kid with brown patches. Called Arjun.”¹⁰⁴ However, the most significant ways in which Mato negotiates an idea of home take place on his journey away from this traditional sense of concept, that is partially maintained by his mother and her various activities. Significantly, these explorations build on relationships with the non-human world, and emphasise processual discoveries. Firstly, Mato’s journey, to a large extent, eschews the importance frequently allotted to place in children’s literature, or at least place in a traditional sense of the comforting, snug and cosy places, even when outside the traditional form of the home as house.¹⁰⁵ Mato’s journey instead emphasises movement and survival, both of which are predicated on escaping the adult community. Instead of maintaining notions of the ‘snug and cosy places’, inherently defined by their bounded and exclusionary nature, Mato maintains an intuitive relationship with the environment, which is at times uneasy due to the adult presence he endeavours to escape. His reciprocal relationship with the non-human environment is most clearly exemplified through instances of a listening, facilitated by the surrounding environ. In his efforts to evade capture by those who are looking for him, Mato effects a certain type of listening:

He was jolted awake by the sound of drumbeats and loud shouts. Immediately on hearing it, Mato ran out, forgetting all about Arjun. Tell me, which little boy can sit quiet on hearing the sound of a beaten drum? There may be a Jatra performance on somewhere or the songs of *Lakhinder Bhasan*.

You know how far sound travels in an empty field. Nearing the bamboo forest, Mato spotted a man beating a drum and other men escorting him down the road, in a steady stream. Like a procession of puppets.

The month of Bhadra. No breeze at all. The whole atmosphere was like the thick starch of newly harvested rice. Now Mato could distinctly hear what the man was shouting.

¹⁰⁴ Devi, *TACT*, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Wolf, 54.

There is a boy named Mato. I'm warning all of you that he has run away with a goat promised by the village as a sacrifice to the deity. It is no ordinary goat. It has to be ritually sacrificed to prevent the great flooding of the Padma River. Or else, not a single paddy field or village will remain in this entire area. Everything will be submerged and Mother Ganga astride her *maker* will swallow up everyone. Janaki Singh has promised to give a gold mohur to whoever captures the boy.¹⁰⁶

A moment much later in the narrative is connected back to this moment through the same motif of listening, and of an awareness of the natural environment enabling such listening. Mato is still endeavouring to escape the capture of the angry mob from his village, and Mato clearly overhears a conversation involving him:

Come on, everyone is looking for him tonight; where will he escape to? someone said loudly. Mato heard him clearly. Near such still waters, you can hear voices and conversation from far, far away.¹⁰⁷

The knowledge gleaned from such reciprocal practices allows Mato to gain more knowledge than the crowd, and also allows him a particular understanding of that world, such as their fears of dark nights, ghosts, and snakes,¹⁰⁸ while this community, including Mato's mother, fails to gain a further understanding of Mato's world.

Mato's uniquely or individually acquired knowledge is also one which may be termed 'sustainable', both in the engagement he maintains with surrounding non-human environment as noted above, and in particular, is as part of a process. In perhaps the most explicit reference to what may be termed an ethic of sustainability, and a speculation that is brought on by Mato's feeling of weakness,¹⁰⁹ Mato's thoughts begin the process of connection back to the idea of home more explicitly:

In this season, the ponds and pools are brimming with water. When it rains, it seems as if white jasmine flowers are pouring down and bursting into powdery dust. This is the time to release fish-eggs and young fish into the waters. Then sit back and feast on fish all through the year.

¹⁰⁶ Devi, *TACT*, 18.

¹⁰⁷ Devi, *TACT*, 34.

¹⁰⁸ Devi, *TACT*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ "Now Mato felt as if his body was slowly becoming uncontrollably weak". Devi, *TACT*, 23.

Mato knows that those who eat fish throughout the year do not churn up the water with large casting nets. They use small nets and catch just enough for the day's consumption.¹¹⁰

In this particular musing, Mato evidences a respect for such patterns and cycles, as well as an agreement that fosters a mutual relationship between human and environment. Tellingly, such ecologically based musings are bound to or interspersed with Mato's memories of home. Immediately previous to this, is a reflection by Mato's mother on Mato's congenital defect and the way this condition surpasses his mother's efforts to keep him safely enclosed within the home: "Mato's mother had said, with her eyes shut, I know deep in my heart that this boy won't be staying long in my house".¹¹¹ This feeling regarding Mato's potentially ephemeral presence in the world is to a certain extent replicated in Mato's memories of home, which are most often and most powerfully centred on transient rituals. A similar pattern is effected later in the story, as Mato's bodily weakness is linked back to a curing of a previous weakness through a mutually maintained relationship between home and what is external to it, and which it sometimes excludes to negative effect:

Now his whole body was trembling terribly. As though he had just recovered from a fever and the fever was coming back. Mato remembered that time when he was running a high fever. His mother had consulted the *kaviraj* and prepared a herbal mixture by boiling different roots and stems. After consuming the decoction, Mato would put some amlaki in his mouth, and drink water. How sweet it tasted! Really, amlaki and hatuki were very good things. Ma used to say that apparently even the gods and goddesses ate them.¹¹²

Such links continually made and remade by Mato are not, then, simply links in memory, but attest to the significance of the role of these 'in-between' processes of provision which straddle boundaries of physical and emotional nourishment. Significantly, these links are paradoxically strongest, or most flexible, despite, or perhaps because of, their ephemeral nature, and their simultaneous and interstitial position. In this manner, the positive elements that Mato associates with home are those which remain part of processes, and are, in various ways, unbounded, in a manner that other associations

¹¹⁰ Devi, *TACT*, 23.

¹¹¹ Devi, *TACT*, 22.

¹¹² Devi, *TACT*, 35.

with the home may not be. This significance of and investment in non-bounded process, in turn, affirms the importance of other boundary relationships, such as Mato's relationship with Arjun and the natural environment.

The final 'place' of Mato's journey ultimately becomes not the home, or a version of it, but the unlikely destination of the grounds of the Armenian church, the security offered by the padre, and the comfort offered by the Champa tree. Once Mato and Arjun have crossed over the railing of the Armenian church and have been taken in by the padre, their traversal of another boundary is also made clear. As the narrator informs the presumed audience that "this is the story of Mato and his kid Arjun", their return from history to the realm of the myth is gradually revealed. A return to the story's beginning is telling at this narrative juncture, as the movement from 'history' to 'myth' is rehearsed in the early pages of the text. The story's opening moves from the details of the Bengali famine of 1770 (Bengali year 1176), to the distinctly mythological story of Mato:

All of you know about this devastating famine. But you don't know about Mato or about the flowering champa tree in the Armenian Church in Baharampur...

It is said that on a moonlit winter's night, when heaped fog the colour of kash flowers swirls across from the river Bhagirathi and a deep darkness descends, the champa tree wears a strange, unfamiliar look.

Sometimes it looks like a small boy, sitting with folded palms. Sometimes it looks like a white-robed padre with his arms outstretched.¹¹³

The story's beginning is now understood differently; the immediacy of Mato's journey and his travails had structured the body of the story, and required a certain relinquishing of this mythical beginning. Mato's return to the quasi-mythical realm is partly mirrored in his mother's questions when she comes to the church, at the narrative's conclusion, looking for Mato:

She asked, O Padre-baba! Have you seen my Mato? A boy of about 10 years. With a mop of curly hair. My Mato weeps if he sees blood. He spends hours sitting in the forest and making dolls. What strange dolls they are! No one has seen such dolls before.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Devi, *TACT*, 2.

These questions reformulate those which his mother had posed earlier in the narrative, in a manner that affirms that her understanding has not increased or moved on; similarly, the padre's response that "Mato had gone to sleep beneath that very tree, just as he used to sleep in his mother's lap as a child",¹¹⁵ suggests a return to this particular mode of ordering the world, and not only as a mode of comforting the adult, but also typically associated with the provision of comfort and the creator of home in children's texts. Mato's mother's final lament for her son attests to this unchanged comprehension:

...come home and you'll find his bed is made. My house is shaded by trees! Such a cool breeze! Couldn't you sleep there, did you have to travel such a long way to come here... Mato, you are my son but I never understood you.¹¹⁶

Significantly, Mato's mother's conceptualisation of home here can be typified as the place offering comfort and excluding the harshness and extremities of the external world. In this way, both the event of Mato's death, and its abstraction into myth, reflect a world that is at odds with Mato's perception; in particular, his investment in nonbounded processes which link home with its wider world, discussed earlier. The flexibility and adaptability at the fore in the main part of the narrative, driven by Mato's journey, is subsumed by the narrative voice which takes over towards the conclusion. That this concluding narrative tone is confined by both the folk belief and superstition that pervades the story and the influence of an institutional, imposed religion of the Armenian church is striking, demonstrating a dually maintained system, which renders Mato's alternative and processual view of the world untenable.

However, though Mato's world is depicted as being incapable of assimilation within the wider 'adult' world, a quality which is, for the most part, rendered productively and positively, the power of these dual systems emerges as a mode of closure from the narrator's perspective. That the child's movement back into the realm of myth is facilitated by both his mother, and the system of folkloric belief she is representative of in this instance, and the padre from the Armenian church, can be read

¹¹⁴ Devi, *TACT*, 38.

¹¹⁵ Devi, *TACT*, 39.

¹¹⁶ Devi, *TACT*, 39.

as indicative of the narrative's overarching directive, to be noted in the final description of the champa tree:

At times, on wintry nights, when the fog merges with the full moon to create a shadowy atmosphere, they say that the tree looks like a small boy. The boy kneels with folded hands, his face raised upwards.

At times the tree looks like an old padre. As if he is standing silently with his head bent, and his hands resting upon somebody's head.

But, as the sun rises, everything becomes clear, everything looks different. On the tree one can only see green leaves and pale yellowish-white champa flowers. As if the tree, basking in the sunshine, is splitting its sides with laughter, swinging its head to and fro. As if the clouds, the wind and the sunlight are having a good joke with it, making it laugh.¹¹⁷

Thus Mato's final mythologisation in the cyclicity of nature is secured, making tangible the forces which maintain this endlessly sustaining myth, and finally attesting to the power of systems which continue to perpetuate exploitation and violence. In this way, the ethical imperative is the story's final note, reinforcing, to a certain extent, the systems which Mato's journey tried to evade.

4.4 Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie's latest work, *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), is a children's literary work in similar vein to his earlier work of children's literature *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), in its exploration of magical, fantastical worlds where adventures are played out, quests are conducted, and questions about the world, political and philosophical, are broached and explored. However, the political context of the publication of the two novels is markedly different: *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* was said to have been directly linked to the limitations imposed on Rushdie as a result of the fatwa imposed upon him at this time. Thus the political context was clear, and that Rushdie's novel made political, and significantly, aesthetic, comment in the realm of

¹¹⁷ Devi, *TACT*, 39-40.

children's literature, endowed that comment with extra resonance. Conversely, *Luka and the Fire of Life*, emerges out of no clear political context, and sometimes appears to have suffered because of this in its reception. For instance, *The New York Times* begins their review of the book by noting that it "arrives under circumstances that are, to put it mildly, less anxious than those that surrounded his first, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*",¹¹⁸ going on to categorise *Luka and the Fire of Life* as "more lighthearted". On a similar note, *The Independent's* largely critical review also compares Rushdie's new children's novel somewhat unfavourably to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, arguing that *Haroun* was a superior work in various ways: "This would have been a moving story at any time, but for Rushdie to have produced such a joyous defence of free speech in the context of the fatwa was heroic and inspiring. Haroun is not just one of Rushdie's best books; it's one of the best books ever".¹¹⁹

Meanwhile, the reviews also demonstrate other concerns, many of which can be categorised as somewhat conservative, and which exert a certain restriction on the domain of children's literature. The suggestion of a lack of moral weight in the novel is posed in the *New York Times* review, which categorised the book as "lighthearted", and this review also critiques what appear as Rushdie's literary choices: "Forced to choose between inhabiting a child's moral decision-making process and adding more slapstick and dazzle, Rushdie knows he's got some easily distracted readers to please".¹²⁰ A comparable desire for this sense of purity can be found in a review from *The Guardian*, written by a father and son. Alexander Linklater, the 'father' in this dual review, appears to like the 'idea' of *Luka and the Fire of Life*: "I liked the idea of a boy trying to revitalise his father...It's a funny old theme: ageing authors, anxious about their fading powers, writing children's books about being redeemed by their children",¹²¹ but yet did not 'like' the novel itself. The 'son' in this review, expresses a comparable sentiment, but emphasises a mutuality: "This story is trying to say: 'Dads, get a life!'"

¹¹⁸ Mark Athitakis, "Review of *Luka and the Fire of Life*: 'Spellbound'", *New York Times*, Sunday Book Review (November 5th 2010) <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/books/review/Athitakis-t.html>

¹¹⁹ Frank Cottrell Boyce, "Review: *Luka and the Fire of Life*, by Salman Rushdie", *The Independent*, (15th October 2010) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/luka-and-the-fire-of-life-by-salman-rushdie-2106651.html>

¹²⁰ Athitakis, "Spellbound".

¹²¹ Alexander Linklater, "Review of *Luka and the Fire of Life* by Salman Rushdie", *The Guardian* (Sunday 5th December 2010) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/dec/05/salman-rushdie-luka-and-fire-of-life-review>

It's also trying to say your children can help you with that".¹²² Thus in terms of the context of this small sample of fairly representative reviews, *Luka and the Fire of Life* is noticeably confined: in literary terms, in regard to its 'lesser' context, and perhaps most significantly, in the various ways the reviews locate a specific ideal of the child and of the 'function' of literature for the child. However, I will argue that it is partly because of this lack of 'context' that the novel succeeds as one which taps into and interacts with some of the most important, sometimes radical, and sometimes traditional, aspects of children's literature.

Though the frame through which *Luka and the Fire of Life* may be read is not explicitly 'centred' politically, the off-centred nature of the novel contributes significantly to its exploration of the contours of the everyday through its negotiation of its boundaries in a fantastical and alternate realm. Furthermore, the very politically off-centred nature of the context facilitates an exploration of boundaries and margins, that is, in a sense, freed from the directed, allegorically laden and potentially didactic nature of this context, one occasionally identifiable in *Haroun*. Rushdie, commenting on the significance of 'home' in his work more broadly, speaks of the idea of 'home' as one which is in continuous flux, and interestingly describes *Luka and the Fire of Life* as centring on "an attempt by Luka to preserve the home".¹²³ While there are obvious comparisons to be maintained with *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* in terms of the preservation of the home, as Haroun, in effect, aims to help his father recover his storytelling voice, while bringing the familial triad back together again, Luka's efforts to save the home emerge from a desire to save the home on a more fundamental level, by preventing his father's death. The manner in which Luka's story deals with this, what may be considered, more fundamental matter of the home, in terms of a parent's potential death, might seem to set the novel up to follow the conventional trajectory of children's texts, particularly those dealing so centrally with the home, of the "home-away-home" pattern. Indeed, to a large extent, the novel is routed in this manner, yet the way in which the home is constructed, and in turn, the possibilities it allows ask for a re-positioning of the home, through the very alternative margins and worlds it explores.

¹²² Linklater, "Review of *Luka and the Fire of Life*".

¹²³ Salman Rushdie, quoted in Ved Mitra Shukla, "Salman Rushdie as Children's Writer: Reading *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010)", *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 2.2 (June 2011) 3.

From the outset, it is clear that Luka's home life is one which is nurturing, while also encouraging certain freedoms and independence, and not an inhibitive space which demands escape. However, the way the home, for Luka, is constructed, relies on a number of inversions from the beginning, as "Luka had first amazed people by just getting born",¹²⁴ by crossing the first threshold into life, to parents whose first child had been born eighteen years previously, termed by his mother as "a fellow who can turn back Time itself, make it flow the wrong way, and make us young again".¹²⁵ In this manner, the creation of the home is based on numerous and continuing inversions, which effectively present the home in a multi-layered and potentially dynamic frame. Two versions of the home emerge throughout the text, which are subtly contrasted and contribute to the chaotic, fantastical and multifaceted world, real and magic, which the members of Luka's family have created or contribute to in various ways. The 'traditional' sense of the home, in its bounded parameters is based on various 'inclusions and exclusions', and is consequently a mode of home which offers certain comforts while excluding various threats. This somewhat conservative mode of 'home' is present in various ways throughout, most notably, and perhaps most conventionally through Luka's mother Soraya in the real world, and his mother's namesake, the Insultana of Ott, also named Soraya, in the world of magic. The more prominent version of home is the one based on the Magic World created by Luka's father Rashid, and which is central to Luka's creation of an alternative reality. While this mode of forming the home is shaped around encouraging adventure and discovery, based upon the fantastical and alternative, it is yet very much a part of an everyday and ordinary reality for Luka. The division of the 'worlds of the home' in this manner is not to suggest a strict division according to maternal and paternal figures, and the continual inversions of that associated with mother and father throughout the story work against the creation of this kind of easy delineation. Instead, they intermingle, alternate, and combine, constructing a notion of home centred on continual questioning and even critique.

Returning to the first inversion presented in terms of the home, where Luka's mother Soraya endows the arrival of Luka as indicative of his power to make time flow

¹²⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Luka and the Fire of Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010) 7. Hereafter will be referred to as *LATFOL*.

¹²⁵ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 8.

in the wrong direction, a sense that the shaping of the home is a reciprocal act and is not an already formed and bounded entity is conveyed. Furthermore, Luka is depicted as having his own distinct trajectory, not always ordained with the harmonious reciprocity of family life, in terms of his frequently inverse reading of the world:

Luka grew up left-handed, and it often seemed to him that it was the rest of the world that worked the wrong way around, not him. Doorknobs turned the wrong way, screws insisted on being screwed in clockwise, guitars were strung upside down, and the scripts in which most languages were written ran awkwardly from left to right, except for one, which he bizarrely failed to master. Pottery wheels wheeled perversely, dervishes would have whirled better if they whirled in the opposite direction, and how much finer and more sensible the whole world would be, Luka thought, if the sun rose in the west and set in the east.¹²⁶

The mechanics of everyday life, and even the narrative in which it insists on being told, thus appear to elude Luka at the beginning of the novel. This inability to master the ‘right’ way of doing things, and Luka’s daydreams about emigrating to a “Left-Handed Dimension”, is also tied to Luka’s lack of success in the practicalities of mathematics and chemistry, which “displeased his mother, who, even though she sang like an angel, had always been the sensible, practical type”.¹²⁷ In addition to this, Soraya also disapproved of the time Luka spends playing computer games, despite this activity directly contributing to Luka’s imagining of alternative realities, and despite the defence of this activity by Rashid, fumes:

‘They are useless skills,’ Soraya retorted. ‘In the real world there are no levels, only difficulties. If he makes a careless mistake in the game he gets another chance. If he makes a careless mistake in a chemistry test he gets a minus mark. Life is tougher than video games. This is what he needs to know, and so, by the way, do you.’¹²⁸

Yet Soraya’s perspective does not equate with an intolerance to such alternative outlooks, and a deeper, almost philosophical outlook is actually encouraged by Luka’s mother as she tells him “ ‘maybe you are correct to believe that the left way around is the right way, and that the rest of us are not right, but wrong. Let your hands take you

¹²⁶ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 10.

¹²⁷ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 11.

¹²⁸ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 13.

where they will. Just keep them busy, that's all. Go left by all means but don't dawdle; do not be left behind".¹²⁹ Soraya encourages this alternative way of apprehending the world, based on busily experiencing and feeling the world, suggesting that the only 'left' that is wrong is the one which does not continually keep moving or updating.

Rushdie's intermittent use of a narrative that is influenced by computer games has been lauded for its vision, in addition to being critiqued for its failure to resound more thoroughly through all levels of the narrative for others.¹³⁰ Though Rushdie's engagement with the alternatives provided by computer game worlds does not initially appear as a thoroughgoing concern, seeming to remain at the level of surface allusion, and thus earning impatient criticisms from his detractors, his use of these worlds represent a complex intervention. In neither an outright rejection nor embracement of the dynamics and possibilities of the virtual space, Rushdie uses this space as another mode of exploring particular disjunctions in Luka's world. In a manner comparable to Reynolds' suggestion that "it is important to be sure that children's literature does not automatically reject IT and other technologies, or cease to offer optimistic visions of future worlds",¹³¹ Rushdie's narrative navigates the connection between the two. Most significant is the possibility created through the idea of 'alternative realities' held within these media, and the way in which Rushdie's allusions to the alternative reality of the world of the computer game allow the novel to move beyond the parameters of a typical consideration of home, whilst simultaneously moving beyond the typicality of the solely quest tropes of such games.

Significantly, the aesthetics of these alternative realities, such as those to be located within domains of new media, is first approached within the book in terms of their heavy commercialisation, in a manner that seems to confront the 'oneness' that this multitude of commercialised forms relating to the production of children's literature has been said to conceal.¹³² The voice of the omniscient narrator intervenes in a manner that balances the potential valorisation of this realm, with the pitfalls of a

¹²⁹ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 10.

¹³⁰ For example, the review of Luka in *The Independent* criticises Rushdie for not embracing "any of the real pleasures of computer games...[and] the fact that the main character is essentially passive and that, because he has lots of spare lives, there is no real jeopardy". Boyce, "Review: *Luka and the Fire of Life*, by Salman Rushdie", *The Independent* (15th October 2010).

¹³¹ Reynolds, 171.

¹³² Rose, 103.

commercialised consumerism: “Fortunately for Luka, he lived in an age in which an almost infinite number of parallel realities had begun to be sold as toys”.¹³³ Yet despite this awareness of the commercialised fare of these parallel realities, the excitement and possibility contained within these worlds is immediately lauded, and the narrator goes on to comment:

Like everyone he knew, he had joined imaginary communities in cyberspace, electro-clubs in which he adopted the identity of, for example, an Intergalactic Penguin named after a member of the Beatles, or, later, a completely invented flying being whose height, hair colour and even sex were his to chose and alter as he please.¹³⁴

Introduced here is an apparently endless proliferating of fantastical worlds and personae, presenting a possibly productive mode of understanding and actively participating in diversity. The term ‘imaginary communities’ is loosely reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s well-known ‘imagined communities’, but the substitution of ‘imaginary’ hints at a lack of actuality of this state of alternative imagination, while also suggesting that this imagination of such states is a preliminary and necessary step to moving these into ‘reality’. These kinds of imaginary communities, and specifically the world Luka connects to through cyberspace and his games console, can be contrasted with a version of commercial capital practice raised later in the novel. This latter type of escapism is presented as stultifying and apathetic, rather the creative and interactive potential of the ‘imaginary communities’:

People wanted to feel good even when there wasn’t that much to feel good about, and so the sadness factories had been shut down and turned into Obliviums, giant malls where everyone went to dance, shop, pretend and forget. Luka, however, was not in the mood for self-deception. He wanted answers.¹³⁵

Such contrasting visions of commercialised practices are centred on practices of interactivity or passivity, questioning and acceptance, in a manner that goes beyond simply constructed dichotomies. Rushdie’s engagement with the technological

¹³³ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 11.

¹³⁴ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 12.

¹³⁵ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 37.

innovations of new media, its potentials and its perils, is characterised by this double-sided interaction throughout the novel. In the novel's refusal to efface virtual realities and the advances of new media, and its simultaneous refusal to locate the solutions to the difficulties of Luka's world there, Rushdie advances an opportunity for critique of these media as the innovations emerge. Contained within such a mode is the possibility for engendering new relations with the home, and the wider world, on multiple levels.

Rashid is presented as a man who is driven by the more traditional aesthetics of his profession of storytelling, yet he defends and recognises the potential to be located in Luka's fascination with the virtual world, through his video game console the Muu:

...so Luka, when he stepped away from the world of mathematics and chemistry and into the Zone of Muu, felt at home, *at home* in a completely different way to the way in which he felt *at home* in his home, but at home nevertheless; and he became, at least in his own mind, Super-Luka, Grandmaster of the Games.

Once again it was his father Rashid Khalifa who encouraged Luka, and who tried, with comically little skill, to join him on his adventures. Soraya was sniffily unimpressed, and, being a commonsensical woman who distrusted technology, worried that the various magic boxes were emitting invisible beams and rays that would rot her beloved son's mind.¹³⁶

Luka, can in this manner, comfortably inhabit other spaces and zones outside the physical home, so important in children's literature. Although Soraya positions these worlds of computer games in direct opposition to the difficulties of the real world, declaring herself "in-console-able"¹³⁷ in her tirade against Luka's game-playing, these electronic worlds are not demonstrated as antithetical to the important world of the 'home', instead asserting their difference. A complex relation between 'homes' and 'worlds' is thus established at this intersection between virtual and other realities. Interestingly, the complexity of the relation between virtual worlds and the world of the home is raised shortly after the conflict between Rashid, Soraya and Luka regarding the value of computer games. In this context, the zone of the virtual world is not merely a zone of escapism, but demonstrates a disjunction:

¹³⁶ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 13.

¹³⁷ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 14.

But now Rashid was not waking up and Soraya really was inconsolable, a word which, as Luka knew, in reality had nothing to do with games, even though right at this moment he wished he was inside some other, fictitious version of reality and could press the Exit button to get back to his own life. But there was no Exit button. He was at home, even though home suddenly felt like a very strange and frightening place, with no laughter and, most horrible of all, no Rashid. It was as if a thing that had been unthinkable had become thinkable, and Luka did not want to give that terrifying thing a name.¹³⁸

Here, the appeal of temporary virtual realities is desirable, and Rushdie emphasises Luka's fear and pain through his longing for these worlds where things are easily resolved, and without real danger. The presumed comfortableness of the 'real' home is taken away and the comfort of virtual reality is longed for. Yet, in Luka's journey through the world of magic, the difficulty of the journey is not erased by the virtual dimension. Rather, the journey undertaken is eased through this dimension, providing Luka with extra 'lives', which can be 'saved', in order to work out various difficulties. This feeling of terror and helplessness propels Luka into the world of magic, a place where difficulties can be worked upon without simply being transcended, and where dimensions that fall distinctly outside of Luka's home world are encountered.

Reynolds has commented on the suspicion often levelled at technology, often in the form of cyberspace, which "stems from the fear of what is not understood and so is constructed as threatening to a human-centred view of how the cosmos should operate".¹³⁹ In Rushdie's trajectory, this displacement of a "human-centred" perspective is multiple, but subtle, and extends beyond the parameters that Reynolds seems to assign to the innovations of new media in its current state.¹⁴⁰ Here, Rushdie effectively broadens the terrain for innovation, challenging, or moving forward some of Reynolds' ideas about the potential of new media in children's texts. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Reynolds cites the potential of new media to circumvent some of the debilitating discourses previously a feature of children's literature which pitted 'bad' technology against 'good' nature, but does not attempt to explore or reconfigure these dichotomies in any substantial manner. Conversely, a critical interrogation of these very dichotomies is provided in Rushdie's work, as the worlds driven by new media that Luka inhabits (both in 'reality' where interaction with such media has become the norm,

¹³⁸ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 18.

¹³⁹ Reynolds, 165.

¹⁴⁰ Reynolds, 164.

and in the magical world created by Rashid's stories that is also partly structured by the influences of an innovative new media), do not entail the neat distinctions of previous configurations of such features. Importantly, in the space that Luka enters, it becomes possible to inhabit multiple realities, incorporating a form of anthropomorphism, which I will argue, in some ways, goes beyond the sometimes 'shallow' anthropocentrism that can only understand the animal world in 'human' terms, but which yet goes some way towards positively undermining, rather than threatening, a simply "human-centred view of how the cosmos should operate".¹⁴¹ Such a manoeuvre thus demonstrates the text's ability to effect a reconsideration of the assumptions made regarding new media, in addition to promoting and enlarging variant modes of interacting with the nonhuman world.

At the moment of Luka's transmogrifying boundary crossing into an alternate world, the world of magic, Luka's adored father Rashid reappears in the form of his empty and life-draining doppelganger Nobodaddy, an eerily (dis) embodied manifestation of Luka's fears of his father's demise. Furthermore, the entire domain of the home has shape-shifted, altering itself slightly yet palpably:

As he ran out of the front door with Dog and Bear, Luka had the strangest feeling: as if they had crossed an invisible boundary; as if a secret level had been unlocked and they had passed through the gateway that allowed them to explore it. He shivered a little, and the bear and the dog shivered, too, although it was not a cold dawn.¹⁴²

However, Luka's pets, 'Dog' the bear, and 'Bear' the dog, have existed as inversions even before Luka's crossing into the world of magic. These inversions within the animal order are suggestive of an attuned sense of the natural world and its lack of fixity, and of the failed attempt to impose a form of control on this nature in that Dog and Bear are both escapees from a cruel circus. Indeed, Luka's cursing of the ringmaster, for his malicious treatment of the animals, heralds the beginning of Luka's adventure, as his older brother Haroun recognises.¹⁴³ Furthermore, although Luka's desire to hear Dog and Bear's stories and to speak to them is revealed by Nobodaddy,

¹⁴¹ Reynolds, 165.

¹⁴² Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 25.

¹⁴³ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 6.

when the animals do gain anthropomorphic traits in the world of magic, and tell their stories of their previous lives as humans, Luka is disappointed.¹⁴⁴ Suggested in this disappointment is an urge to avoid reduction of every mode of being to the human, and, to a certain extent, circumvents some of the easy evasions anthropomorphism is sometimes said to encompass in children's literature, whence anthropomorphism is equated with a pervasive anthropocentrism. Additionally, an attuned connection to this nonhuman world was arguably present prior to Luka's crossing over into a 'virtual' or magical world, most palpably present in the acceptance of the lack of fixity in Dog the bear and Bear the dog's roles. In the same manner that the rest of Luka's world is transformed in the traversal of this boundary, Dog and Bear's assumption of anthropomorphic traits can be read as part of this wider change, rather than complicit with more typical modes of anthropocentrism, in their normative role of eschewing a sense of deeper engagement with the natural and nonhuman world.

Though nothing appears to have visually altered, Luka feels this change of atmosphere, and this continues as the spatial dimensions of Luka's neighbourhood are faintly distorted:

something quite unprecedented began to happen to the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood that wasn't Luka's real neighbourhood, or not quite. Why was the sun silver, for one thing? And why was everything too brightly coloured, too smelly, too noisy? The sweetmeats on the street vendor's barrow at the corner looked like they might taste odd, too. The fact that Luka was able to look at the street vendor at all was a part of the strange situation, because the barrow was always positioned at the crossroads, just out of sight of his house, and yet here it was, right in front of him, with those oddly coloured, oddly buzzing flies buzzing oddly all around it.¹⁴⁵

That this is his neighbourhood, but not quite, constitutes an attack on both Luka's senses and on his perspective and perception, compounding the confusion Luka continually feels towards the figure Nobodaddy. Nobodaddy, like the change in the neighbourhood that Luka feels, replicates the figure of his father exactly, yet is an altered and sinister figure who wants to remove his father from the real world. Indeed, the likeness between Luka's father Rashid and Nobodaddy is so uncanny that Luka has to continually remind himself not to succumb to feeling comforted by his presence:

¹⁴⁴ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 35.

He looked, walked and talked like the Shah of Blah, but that didn't make him Luka's father. Maybe Bear and Dog had been right: Nobodaddy was not to be trusted an inch. Or maybe there was an argument raging inside him, maybe the Rashid-ness he had absorbed was at war with the death-creature that did the absorbing. Maybe dying was always like this: an argument between death and life.

'Who wins that argument is a matter for another day,' Luka thought. 'Right now, I've got to stop thinking of him as my dad.'¹⁴⁶

The appearance of Nobodaddy in Luka's father's imagined and created world takes on an added significance, in that he appears, in some ways, to defeat this 'other' world so enthusiastically imagined by Luka's father. The suggestion is thus made that even the world of magic created by Luka's father and from which Luka has drawn creative and innovative strength throughout his childhood, cannot be cosily maintained only because it owes its creation to the world of Luka's home. Luka is stranded in a world created by his father, and by extension, the home, and yet the way in which the home itself is not fully safe becomes increasingly clear.

Luka's mother, Soraya, does not make quite as easily a linked appearance in the Magic World as the figure of his father. However, the figure of the "Insultana of Ott" is the Queen of the land of "Oh-Tee-Tee", whose inhabitants are "devoted to all forms of excess", and who are

without any question the rudest creatures in the world. But it's an equal-opportunity impoliteness; the Otters all lay into one another without discrimination, and as a result they have all grown so thick-skinned that nobody minds what anyone else says. It's a funny place, everyone laughs all the time while they call one another the worst things in the world. That lady up there is the Sultana, their Queen, but because she's the most brilliant and sharp-tongued abuser of them all, everyone calls her the "Insult-ana".¹⁴⁷

Presented here is a world familiar from that created in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*: a vociferous plurality of voices in competing and unending dialogue. In part because of this continual conversation and proliferation of free speech, it is an equal world. Luka discovers that the Insultana of Ott shares the same name as his mother, and his

¹⁴⁶ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 126.

¹⁴⁷ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 77.

discovery of this fact was prompted by reminiscences of home and his mother. Interestingly, the Soraya who appears in the Magic World has put herself in charge of the fight against the “Respectorate”, a domain which puts the World of Magic “in danger of being strangled by an excess of respect”.¹⁴⁸ Though the Insultana of Ott bears no physical resemblance to Luka’s mother, her namesake reaffirms the link with Luka’s home, as the Insultana is driven by principles of busy and constant movement, as well as an ability to see things in an inversion of the conventional, thus making the link between the two female figures extend beyond the allocation of names. Furthermore, the Insultana Soraya is depicted as providing many typical modes of what may be deemed maternal comfort as they journey through the world of magic:¹⁴⁹ she provides Luka with warmth, saves Luka’s progress in the game when he became distracted allowing him to advance a level, provides food and drinks for everyone, and distracts Luka from his worry by having him help with what is akin to a household chore in an effort to “inject a note of normalcy into the scene”.¹⁵⁰ In keeping with the inversions wrought by this magical world, Soraya the Insultana becomes a vital part of the journey through the magic world, as an ‘other’ reality, of which, in its entirely fantastical dimension, Luka’s mother Soraya would likely have disapproved.

In contrast, the other foundation from which the concept of home is enabled in *Luka and the Fire of Life* is suffused with the magical, fantastical, and virtual. Luka’s very ‘left-handed’ nature encourages this interest in alternative realities, and it is bolstered by the input of other family members:

Maybe because he dreamed about emigrating to a Left-Handed Dimension, or maybe because his father was a professional storyteller, or maybe because of his brother Haroun’s big adventure, or maybe for no reason at all except that was the way he was, Luka grew up with a strong interest in, and aptitude for, other realities.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 82

¹⁴⁹ A further layer, of note here, is the way in which the predominant female figures in *Luka* are maternal figures (Soraya, Luka’s mother), or desired love object (Soraya, the “Insultana of Ott”), or a demonstrating a combination of both traits, as seen in Soraya the “Insultana’s” character.

¹⁵⁰ See Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 96, 103, 110, & 113, respectively.

¹⁵¹ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 10.

This envisioning of the unconventional is encouraged in a manner that also imagines an extension that goes beyond the confines of the domestic and familial. Indeed, this proximity to the potentiality contained in other worlds is depicted as being an inherent part of everyday life, becoming so conversely ‘ordinary’ that it becomes a kind of reality. Though the influence of the family and the home remains large throughout Luka’s journey, it comes into increasing interaction with external pluralities within this Magic World. The characterisation of the gods, who initially block Luka’s way, is significant here. Initially, the multitude of gods block Luka’s way to attaining the “Fire of Life”: “Amaterasu, the Japanese sun goddess”, “the flaming child Kagutuchi, whose burning birth had killed his mother, Izanami the Divine”, “Sutr with his fiery sword and at his elbow his female companion, Sinmara, also bearing a sword of lethal sword of fire. And Irish Bel. And Polynesian Mahuika...”¹⁵², are just some of the presences from this ‘old’ world, of a history that has passed, that stand in Luka’s path. Yet Soraya’s advice that these are “ex-gods”, is telling, in that she designates them as “ ‘stuck in their old stories’”,¹⁵³ and so are easily outsmarted. Luka’s eventual navigation of his own path through the cacophonies of the multinational gods, by discovering the “Left-Hand World”,¹⁵⁴ is also noteworthy in this regard.

Though the influence of the family and the home remains large throughout Luka’s journey through the Magic World, at a certain point in his journey, Luka is required to leave behind the Insultana Soraya, a partial representation of a maternal figure in this world, and simultaneously loses sight of Rashid’s impostor, Nobodaddy. Of further significance, is the fact that every mistake Luka makes after this point will cost him one hundred lives, serving to underline further his vulnerability. Remembering the advice of his father, and refusing to choose the easy way out of this difficulty by relying on winged creatures to get him to his destination, Luka continues on his own throughout various obstacles. Luka’s arrival at the Mountain of Knowledge is the central episode in Luka having to chart his own path by finding the Left Hand Dimension, and is central for a number of reasons. Following numerous dangerous attempts to find this dimension, and losing hundreds of valuable lives in the process, Luka eventually follows the simple intuition of a left-handed squirrel in a further

¹⁵² Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 148.

¹⁵³ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 149.

¹⁵⁴ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 173.

crossing of boundaries following an intuitive cue from the nonhuman world. Deepening the significance and connection inherent in this nonhuman world, the squirrel is one of Soraya's followers, and warns Luka of the Fire Gods and Guards who guard the Fire of Life: "Nowadays, the squirrel explained, the job of guarding the Fire of Life had been given to the most powerful Guard Spirits from all the world's dead religions, aka mythologies".¹⁵⁵ This warning is symbolic in terms of the further difficulties Luka is to face, which will be discussed below.

The centrality of the family and the home in promoting and facilitating such an alternative imagining of the world is resumed at the culmination of Luka's journey to steal the Fire of Life in order to give it to his father. Strikingly, Luka's challenge to the various Gods and Supernatural Beings extends to almost three uninterrupted pages of the novel, beginning thus:

'...This is my father's World... the World of Rashid Khalifa, the well-know Ocean of Notions, the fabulous Shah of Blah. From start to finish; Level One to Level Nine and back again; lock, stock and barrel; from soup to nuts, it's his.

*'He put it together this way, he gave it shape and laws, and he brought all of you here to populate it, because he has learned about you, thought about you, and even dreamed about you all his life. The reason this World is the way it is, is because, Right-Handed or Left-Handed, Nobody's World or the World of Nonsense, this is the World inside his head! And I know about it – probably that's why I was able to stumble to the right and step to the left and get here – because I've been hearing about it every day of my life, as bedtime stories and breakfast sagas and dinner-table yarns, and as tall tales told to audiences all over the city of Kahani and the country of Alifbay, and also as little secrets he whispered into my ears, just for me. So in a way it's now my World, too.'*¹⁵⁶

In this way, the family and the home are placed at the intersection of the world and the continual questioning and creation of this vision of the world. The intimacies of the home, and the politics of an alternative world's vision, its "shape and laws", are inextricably intertwined here, and are mutually reinforcing in a way that surpasses ideas of boundaries and the repeated routines of the domestic. Luka's obstacles and difficulties are not removed following this speech, but his world is extended in another way, signalled by the way in which the characterisation of the gods Luka encounters.

¹⁵⁵Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 175.

¹⁵⁶Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 180-81.

Their sheer multiplicity in nationalities, powers and voices attests to a plural and globalised sense of what has been staged as, to this point, largely a reconciliation of Luka's own world.

Finally, however, the conglomerate of wind gods rally behind Luka, when they break away from the powers of the Aalim, uniting in a way that they had not before in order to help Luka home.¹⁵⁷ The multivocality of the gods ultimately ensures that Luka reaches home in time to return the fire of life to his father, yet such a return home does not signify a strictly typical ending of the 'return home'. The Magic World is not one free of difficulty, nor does it allow an easy circumvention of difficulty. Most powerfully, Luka's temporary habitation of this world allows him to defeat the entrenched "mythologies" of the gods of dead religions, and of further significance, is the way in which Luka's progression is aided by his gaining of support from the multinational Wind Gods, with their connotations of change. In this manner, the fabled 'return home' is expanded in a manner that, in certain ways, transgresses mythology and incorporates the difference of multinational vocality.

4.5 Conclusion

Within the terrain of literary activism more broadly, there is a tendency to lapse into retrospective diagnostics. This seemingly unavoidable feature of literary activism, its propensity for adopting a retrospective position effected through a temporal lag in terms of bringing a specific event into the literary, has been a particular feature in the chapter on ecocriticism. Within the domain of children's literature, such inclinations are arguably intensified, especially by the way in which, as this chapter has discussed, the figure of the child, and by extension, children's literature, have often been constructed as either point of pure origin or future utopia. Both of these constructions can resonate and emerge from a type of facilely wrought literary intervention. What further encourages the assumption of such a 'diagnostic' position in relation to the literary is the inclination to think of a particular work of children's literature in relation to adult literature also written by that author; a position which is increasingly deployed in critical studies of Mahasweta Devi's and Salman Rushdie's children's literature. Devi

¹⁵⁷ Rushdie, *LATFOL*, 204.

and Rushdie are, in different ways and of varying consequence to social, political and cultural issues, two of the most prominent and incisive literary figures from contemporary South Asia. Though each of these texts eschews such retrospective diagnostics in various ways, this is not to suggest that the texts are idealistically unblemished.

Instead, each of these texts, in different ways and to varying degrees of success, interacts with persisting dichotomies in children's literature. Mahasweta Devi's *The Why-Why Girl* demonstrates the powerful and liberating act of asking questions, and in its best moments, demonstrates how the child character's movement from constricted traditional space to removed, adult space is reflected, to a certain extent, in the act of Moyna's questioning. Moyna's questions move from those tinged with material and gender inequity – discussions which, as the chapter has argued, are tinged by Devi's narratorial presence – to more oblique questions of voice and perspective. Yet the resolved ending of this book, all the more pertinent in that it is aimed at very young children, returns the open act of questioning to the closed domain of a staging of Devi's particular ethical and political concerns. Conversely, Devi's *The Armenian Champa Tree* enacts a more complexly layered engagement with the traditional structures of both children's literature; notably, the child character's perspective, for a large portion of the narrative, compels the rethinking of the 'adult' world through Mato's alternative conceptualisation of and relationships with the world. Significantly, Mato does not reject notions of home in this reordering or reconceptualisation of the world, but instead engenders flexible, adaptable and reciprocal links, centred on nonbounded processes with the nonhuman or more than human world, as the narrative, at least prior to its closing moments, compels a reconsideration of margins and boundaries that construct notions of home and the world.

Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life*, through an innovative use of new media and virtual worlds, and a tangible and thoroughgoing concern with natural and animal worlds, avoids reinscribing the worn dichotomy that persists in much children's literature between a 'bad' technology and 'good' nature. Thus in Rushdie's use of new media, and Devi's emphasis on unbounded processes, these literary texts enact an exploration of what may be usefully termed a production of new relations, rather than a more simple interaction with the elements which structure the narrative, whether the

proliferations of new media or the processes of the natural world, thus staging ways of thinking about relations between human and nonhuman worlds. This, in turn, can engender new formulations of ethics, aesthetics and politics in literature, and in particular, children's literature, while avoiding the tendency of a primary or sole focus on aesthetic form to confine children's literature to "a diagnostic position, identifying problems as a first step towards formulating solutions".¹⁵⁸

However, some differentiation of these texts is also necessary. The central text in the analysis of Devi's children's literature, *The Armenian Champa Tree*, for example, stages a transferring of the child back into what can be termed the realm of myth in the final stages of the narrative. Mato is placed within a cycle of narrative, in addition to the cyclicity of the image of nature in which he is placed in the conclusion. The conclusion tied to myth is in turn tied to the adult world which ultimately perpetuates Mato's initial journey away from the home, namely the exploitative structures of folk belief, and its co-existence with institutionalised religion. Conversely, the other text of central analysis, Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life*, does not allow its traditional thematic of the journey from the home and back again, to constrain its widening and reconfiguration of these normative boundaries. Significantly, in the final moments of Luka's journey, an extension into the vast and plural world is effected. Of further thematic importance is the way in which Luka overcomes myth in his habitation of this alternate realm, which culminates in Luka being helped in the final stages of his journey by a multifarious and multinational presence, securing his place at once in a changed world *and* home.

This analysis of Devi's and Rushdie's texts has demonstrated the way in which the various difficulties within children's literature, as raised by the specific theoretical genealogy invoked at the beginning of the chapter, are not easily resolvable. Ultimately, what has become apparent is that the pervasive dichotomies and persisting instances of conservatism and normalising impulses within children's literature cannot be wholly addressed by moving into a new aesthetic mode. In terms of what this particular literary analysis has shown, Rose's claim that children's literature is itself a fiction, because of the fiction of stability and imposed coherence it maintains, can, at least, be thoroughly challenged. A more complex question is the manner in which these texts advance

¹⁵⁸ Reynolds, 15.

Rose's claim that children's literature is determined by limits. However, as the analysis of these texts has demonstrated, children's texts productively work *from* limits: the limits and boundaries of the home, and the limits of the literary. From this position at literature's limits, questions formulated within the domain of children's literature can be productively posed in the realm of the literary more widely. In a direct reversal of Rose's claim that the kind "of aesthetic which sets up literature as something which can save us from what is most socially and culturally degenerate, is in the process of gravitating down to the nursery",¹⁵⁹ these texts have demonstrated the way in which children's literature can pose questions that only proliferate outwards.

¹⁵⁹ Rose, 43.

Conclusion

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The analysis of the selected literary texts in this thesis has demonstrated the various ways in which these contemporary works answer and complicate the categories relating to literary engagement set out in the introduction. Through often complex negotiations of these categories, these texts have, crucially, located new ways of navigating the interrelations and interdependencies of previous discourses of home and active literary engagement within the arena of South Asian literary production. Though this project began with a primary interest in literary activism, the home, as an intricate locus of active engagement in contemporary South Asian literature, emerged resolutely throughout the course of analysis. The forms of activism, engagement, and consciousness-raising from the ‘smaller’ spaces of society, and the way in which these engagements not only extended activist perspectives outwards into the larger reaches of the world, but significantly, inwards to its own negotiations, became the core nexus through which the thesis examined notions of an active engagement. Through this refraction of modes of activist thought through the home, an engaged literary presence emerged, intensified in different ways, through its navigation of the recesses of the home, the family and the self.

Significantly, the trajectory of my analysis, beginning from the identification of home and its associations as the site of a continually emerging, engaged and often reflexive literary mode, has enabled an evaluation of the efficacy of analytical categories being deployed within this domain. Worn modes of considering the intricacies and particularities of home, particularly an idea of the home in light of ‘worldly’ or ‘external’ issues have, in certain ways, surfaced in the analysed texts. For instance, oppositional categories of home and world, even “home-in-world” and “world-in-home” (terms suggested by Bhabha), have, to a certain extent, persisted within the texts analysed and, more significantly, these formulations have been restaged in some previous critical analyses of these texts. The particular cul-de-sacs encountered by such modes of consideration are evident in the way in which they facilitate a channelling of the texts’ complexities into often narrow positions which espouse a “politics of loss”,¹ or laud an aesthetic which solely traces the nexus of relations

¹ I use Ronit Frenkel’s term for describing *The Inheritance of Loss* here.

between home and world. Despite the allegiance of such critical positions to a destabilisation of boundaries and categories, they tend inevitably to ‘fix’ the domains of home and world in another place or category; effectively making the text inhabit a new category albeit while advocating destabilised boundaries.

Similarly, limited and limiting concepts of ‘identity’ continue to persist in critical analyses of texts which focus on the realm of the home and its particular configuration within the world. Though the importance of the focus on the singular within these micro locations has been underlined in various ways throughout the thesis, a concentration on the configuration of a particular, or even multiple *identities*, may have the effect of fixing or limiting the discourse of home within certain boundaries, and by extension, a limiting of the literary text. Though this analytical category continues to be of significance and insight for a body of literature led by largely diasporic concerns, in the case of texts espousing an active and various literary engagement, such a category may encourage a narrow limiting of the place of the home to an idea of origins. A notion of home as recovery or discovery, no matter how diverse and unstable these concepts might be, invariably entails particular modes of placement; imperatives which the thesis has sought to eschew in various ways.

Crucially, the selected texts have, in various ways, centred upon ideas of micro narratives: of “small things”, the “small warm space” of personal relationships, and “the stories of small people”.² Yet simultaneously, the centrality of these ideas, and the very sufficiency of these narratives is called into question: within the texts, relationally across texts, through their placement in new relations within the thesis, and through the modes of analysis employed. For example, I have shown how Kiran Desai’s focus on individual stories, read through the deployment of ‘things’, continually undoes the primacy of personal memory, yet these ‘things’ also exceed a full sense of being bound within a global or national circulation of commodities. An analysis of Roy’s essay “The Greater Common Good”, informed by a literary close reading of *The God of Small Things* and the particular ecological aesthetic this work can be said to advance, reveals various difficulties consequent on a narrative focus on small detail across formal

² From the title of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*; Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 161; Indra Sinha, *Animal’s People*, 3.

boundaries. This cross-formal analysis is illuminating in the aporiae my reading reveals in Roy's nonfiction work, where the tension between a complicitous use of techno-scientific detail and the continuing valorisation of the "small story" is, as I have argued, not resolved with a sufficient degree of self-reflexivity on Roy's behalf. Sinha's novel, in some contrast, indicates an explicit mode of reflexivity from the outset through the use of external narrative frameworks, yet the proliferation and circular questioning of the value of the small story throughout the novel and into the virtual domain further attests to the powerful circularity of this domain, and the difficulty of dislodging such complicities. Mahasweta Devi's children's literary texts, in different ways, invoke the continuing perils of recuperating the child in order to stage the ethical concerns of adults; while Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life* demonstrates, at times, an apparent reverence for individuality and its seemingly straightforward accommodation within a multinational reality.

Of central significance is the way in which these "small places" of micro narrative have surfaced, in many cases, as the 'hinge' between the relations of home and a mode of literary activism or engagement, and perhaps more significantly, as is demonstrated by the list above, a 'hinge' that is continually exposed as being under pressure, as one which is cracked and flawed, and which itself requires active engagement and re-engagement. In this way, the small and personal place of the home marks the beginning of an impetus for rethinking an engaged mode of the literary, while also functioning as the source of a continual confounding of an easy relation between the domains (in terms of complicity and aestheticisation, for instance), or more importantly, of a productive, interactive and mutual relation across domains. Thus in different ways, though these texts begin with or move through some of the aforementioned categories, whose active analytical value is from one perspective potentially depleted, these points in the texts serve as moments from which new analysis can begin and from which new sets of relations can emerge.

Put more positively, therefore, one of the centremost concerns of this thesis has been to examine the way in which the selected texts move beyond limits in various ways, including the limitations inherent within their own narrative structures. Moving outwards to the broader dimensions of the thesis momentarily, this study has thus demonstrated how the texts have challenged previous definitions, in large part by

refocusing on what may be termed the ‘limits’ of the home. Through a consideration of ‘home’ at its margins or pushed to its very limits, a particular source of engagement is compelled within, and indeed through, these texts; one which is not linear, sequential, or with wholly discernable or specific end-goals in mind. Beginning with the early twentieth-century case study of Cornelia Sorabji’s *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* and its reception, I have shown how this text suggests a literary discourse of the domestic or private realm in an actively engaged mode, albeit one that was not without internal conflict, pushing against its contemporary confines. Through this example, the thesis demonstrates a longer genealogy to its concerns, and specifically demonstrates a particular literary and ideological entanglement being brought to its brink in its contemporary moment, that is in turn productive in pushing recent theory to its limits. The following chapters build upon this idea of a productive limit, extending the political and narrative discourses within which Sorabji’s early twentieth century volume of short stories operated, and were positioned, with their oscillation of narrative sympathy and endorsement, and use of melodramatic and melancholic modes in relation to the differently politicised issues of reform and emerging representations of Indian women’s subjectivities.

In Section Two, a diverse focus within the modern and contemporary (and thus continually emerging) South Asian literary scene can be garnered.³ This refocus to the aforementioned ‘limits’ of the home, stretches the typical boundaries of the domestic, as well as the borders of a literary imagination and engagement through its consideration of nonhuman or more-than-human worlds. In this manner, my close readings of the various literary texts reflect and interact with the particular analytical frameworks deployed, which focus on processual analyses and their ethical implications variously defined. I have argued that, most powerfully, the texts move the home beyond the space of the neatness of a personal/political divide, and the apparently productive blurring of personal *and* political, in favour of a transversal analysis, which maintains consideration across such categories, resisting the privileging of horizontally and vertically constructed categories in this manner. In order to bring to light the modalities of a new literary activism, in and through its particular interrelations with a new frame

³ In the case of Mahasweta Devi’s *The Armenian Champa Tree*, originally published in 1968 in a Bengali children’s magazine, its translation and republication within a ‘Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi’ series, mark its resonances with a more recent literary scene in various ways.

of home, this thesis has drawn from the influence of a concept of ‘transversal’ analysis;⁴ yet one maintained by attention to specific, selected ‘processes’.

Specifically, the later chapters have brought together the dynamic processes of the world of material culture with an ecologically framed ethico-aesthetic (chapters 3 and 4); through the traversals of and relations with nonhuman, more-than-human, or virtual worlds in the children’s literary texts (chapter 5), it has asserted a moving past the literary confinement and surveillance of the child within children’s literature, as suggested by Rose. That each of these texts provides various navigations through and around boundaries that are no longer definitive and no longer stable, is perhaps an accepted and indeed expected premise of contemporary literature which can be loosely categorised as ‘postcolonial’. However, within the various literary texts and forms, and the text’s occupation of fictional and nonfictional worlds, or somewhere between these categories, such an expectation takes on new vigour as each can be seen to occupy or be informed by their relationship with nonhuman or more-than-human worlds, which thwart the stability of mapped human activity in different ways. Each chapter thus attests to the way in which understanding of the text is altered through a focus on the espousal of a nonhuman or more-than-human world within the text; relatedly, the theoretical approach adopted in relation to each chapter exerts further analytical pressure on the unfixed potentials offered by these worlds, in turn troubling previously and variously ordained dichotomies. Demonstrating this, Chapter Three takes Kiran Desai’s use of material culture as its focal point and examines the way in which these ‘things’ of the material world are not looked *through* for what they can reveal, but rather the way in which these ‘things’ are in continual circulation throughout the narrative, important in evading the limited progressions of the dichotomies and interstitialities of ‘home’ and the ‘world’. This analysis of Desai’s novel further underlines the way in which the home, through a focus on its newly defined and continually emerging ‘material’ life, moves ‘home’ from a potentially exoticised space of complicity for the diasporic author, to an actively engaged authorial position.

⁴ Transversality entails a non-hierarchical mode of thinking, and is “a dimension that strives to overcome two impasses: that of pure verticality, and a simple horizontality. Transversality tends to be realized when maximum communication is brought about between different levels and above all in different directions”. Félix Guattari, quoted in Garry Genosko, *Felix Guattari: A Critical Introduction* (London & New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 51.

Chapter Four focused on the ecocritical interventions of Arundhati Roy and Indra Sinha, the multiple textual forms considered in this chapter testament to the diverse and interactive space of contemporary South Asian ecocriticism. My deployment of Félix Guattari's transversal consideration of 'ecologies' across ecologies of the individual, the socius and the environment, allows the variant modes of ethical and aesthetic reorientation compelled by the texts considered to emerge fully, importantly compelling the consideration of categories in motion and flux. One of the consequences of the analysis provided in this chapter is a sense that an emerging literary aesthetic in this particular domain is one based not on a sense of ecological connection and continuity, but one of discordance, discontinuity and aporia, calling into question apparent connection. Significantly, this is most cuttngly registered by discourses of home and the domestic, the presence of which continues to provoke questions, disrupt continuity and underline gaps in apprehension. The discourse of home, placed and situated in its typical sense, is extended to its greatest limits in the texts discussed in this chapter, and in its very lack of fixity becomes the source of most potent engagement.

Chapter Five began from the consideration of a limit of another kind, those of literary limits, particularly the ethical limits imposed on the literary. In a manner that compares to the concerns of Chapter Two and the literature of Cornelia Sorabji, which marked a particular historical moment in the consideration of the ethical limits of the literary, imposed on Sorabji's text by her contemporary audience, this chapter on children's literature has considered the literary limits of children's literature, which Rose has argued is a domain which has, from its beginning, morphed into questions of ethical limits. Within the domain of children's literature, particularly in terms of an actively engaged children's literature, the propensity to reaffirm conservatisms, to lapse into retrospective diagnostics or project visions of future utopias, is perhaps most present, as Chapter Five has demonstrated. Children's literature, in this regard, is perhaps the most difficult domain within which to navigate the terms of an active literary engagement, presumed innovative or radical in some way, while considering the presumed conservative centre of children's literature in the form of the home. Yet the way in which both Devi's and Rushdie's texts remove their focus to the consideration of nonhuman worlds – the natural and animal worlds in Devi's *The Armenian Champa*

Tree, and the virtual and animal worlds in Rushdie's text – also demonstrates the dynamism of such a refocus in terms of an ethical and aesthetic reorientation. Arguably, however, such worlds have maintained a constant presence in children's literature, putting the claim to innovation in this case under further pressure. The processes of these texts, however, embodied by the child-centred journeys which dominate the works, enable a significant reorientation of ethical and aesthetic boundaries not only in the more visibly activist work of Devi but also in Rushdie's nuanced children's text.

Most powerfully, the new relations into which these literary works have been placed, in terms of theoretical analyses and the relation with texts from other categories, forms or genres, has signalled a possibility for innovation. Crucially, the theoretical practices and analyses outlined throughout the thesis have offered a simultaneous opening-out and a deepening of various issues: an opening-out into various nonhuman worlds, and a moving inwards to consider the import of subjectivity, and a crucial mode of self-consciousness and reflexivity. The volume entitled *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011) can be read as a marker of recent developments within the field; additionally, it serves as an indication of the domains of analysis that are still emerging and being extended, and to which the possibilities of the analyses provided by this thesis can contribute. One of the volume's concerns outlined in the introduction is the formulation of an "ecocritical postcolonialism [which] attempts to imagine something beyond the confines of our human story, an imagination that is essential to modes of sustainability".⁵ Furthering this, I would argue that a reinvigorated and newly historicised postcolonial studies needs to incorporate a wider frame of material analysis: one which can intervene within the practice of environmental degradation and destruction, in addition to engaging with its possibilities for furthering thought, but also extending this perspective to include the world of material culture in its varied perspectives.

Furthermore, this inclusion involves a new means of situating the literary, as part of and contributing to this world of material culture, and one which requires a close and self-reflexive attention to the function of the literary, as proffered in this thesis. As

⁵ Elizabeth DeLoughrey & George B. Handley, eds., "Introduction: Towards an Aesthetics of the Earth", in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25.

also demonstrated, the ways in which literary objects are subjected to various processes of cultural and social circulation, in addition to various processes of commodification, can further illuminate the study of the material world in this regard. Additionally, such an attention can allow a productive literary interaction with the ecologies of the nonhuman world that remains attuned to these processes of commodification. Finally, as my study of children's literature has shown, the continuing configuration of ethical formulations within the literary, makes visible some key issues (including those of commercialisation and commodification) which remain acutely relevant to a wider literary domain.

Finally, one further insight from the *Postcolonial Ecologies* volume reinforces my appraisal of comparable issues raised by this study, as key concerns of the contemporary moment and challenges for the future. The authors, drawing on recent comments made by Dipesh Chakrabarty, suggest "that we still need the hermeneutics of suspicion that postcolonialism offers but...we must not conclude that our human experience and our human responsibilities can be reduced to the self-understanding that historical knowledge produces for us".⁶ This call has resonance for the invigoration of the domain of an active literary engagement, garnering its analytical strength from the nonhuman world in its various and multiple facets, channelling these insights into a reinvigoration of the literary. With this in mind, a return to Guattari's notion of "creative autonomy", as one which resonates with an idea of a regained or renewed ethical and aesthetic perspective, is valuable, providing "the catalyst for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity's confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level",⁷ and illuminating in terms of the potential for literary, critical and theoretical practice. In an echo of, and indeed, partial answer to Adorno's "autonomous" works of art, a creativity which denies the rigidity of form, including forms of 'high' culture, and extends the possibilities found in emerging aesthetic practices to a broader spectrum is asserted and rendered possible. Specifically, and significantly in this context of theoretical and academic practice, such an idea of creative rejuvenation extends its possibilities to the potential role of the humanities, as an active domain whose

⁶ DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011, 29.

⁷ Guattari, 45.

significance continues to be considered.⁸ In the case of this study, a re-engagement with and through the place of the home in contemporary South Asian literature has itself signalled a mode of rejuvenation which, significantly, extends across domains; a revitalisation which does not remain in a small or ‘removed’ place, but engages with various and multiple worlds.

⁸ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discussion of her forthcoming work *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization* in Cathy Caruth, “Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak”, *PMLA*, 125.4 (2010): 1020-1025.

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