

Reading Beyond the Diaspora:  
A Responsible Reading of Recent North American Fiction  
Outside the Ethnicity Frame

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Berlin, 05. März 2019

Elisabeth Chavez



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## Abbreviations

<i>BB</i>	Rakesh Satyal, <i>Blue Boy</i>
<i>CHNC</i>	Anita Rau Badami, <i>Can You Hear The Nightbird Call</i>
<i>FV</i>	Abha Dawesar, <i>Family Values</i>
<i>MS</i>	Saleema Nawaz, <i>Mother Superior</i>
<i>RF</i>	Mohsin Hamid, <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i>
<i>TSIP</i>	Abha Dawesar, <i>That Summer In Paris</i>
<i>UA</i>	Jhumpa Lahiri, <i>Unaccustomed Earth</i>
<i>WTBR</i>	Shauna Singh Baldwin, <i>What The Body Remembers</i>

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# 1 Introduction

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact, you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services. (RF 1, emphasis in the original)

These are the first lines the reader encounters in Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, following the provocative title on the book-cover. A distinct voice addresses a person he identifies as American, reads him, if you will, his emotions of alarm and fright, reassures him, and offers guidance through an unfamiliar cultural terrain. Yet, the speaker also emphasizes that the other already approached this landscape with an agenda, that he "seemed to be on a *mission*". The two attitudes are furthermore juxtaposed by the tone of voice, which is suffused with a teasing irony. An irony maybe not yet fully apparent in these first few lines, as the reader cautiously enters the text, not yet sure of where it might take him or her. But the irony becomes obvious, if not dominant, as we become more familiar with the narrative voice, prompting the reader to call everything stated into question, adding layers of ambiguity to a seemingly straightforward tale.

Embedded in the tale of the encounter of an American and a Pakistani in the bazaar of Lahore is the narrator's tale of his years as a student at Princeton University and later as a successful junior analyst at a high-profile financial valuation firm. Changez, the protagonist, lived the prototypical immigrant success story, but was eventually disappointed by the unrequited love to a classmate. At the same time as Changez struggles with this personal rejection and starts to have ethical concerns about his role in global capitalism, the attacks of September 11 change the attitude of mainstream America against Muslims. Changez molds himself into the role of a victim, eventually leaving the U.S. to relocate back to Pakistan. There, he allegedly is not only a teacher, but possibly also an agitator for anti-American sentiments, which is what may have brought the American to Lahore in the first place.

Aside from content and tone, the text is also marked by a second central juxtaposition, that of cultural identity assumptions versus characters' self-perceptions of their individual identity. It is a tale of suspense, of underlying violent threats towards the respective other, based on assumptions of this otherness. The Pakistanis' appearance, the body size and bearing of individual characters, even simply their number, seem to intimidate the American, who in turn has the build and bearing of a soldier, is likely to carry a weapon, and may, as the reader learns, actually have been sent to kill his self-assigned host – a threat to his life which the narrator seems to be well aware of. Consequently, the story can also be read as his attempt to wiggle his way out of it, by

changing the rationale on which the American's decisions or orders are based, complicating the political narrative with his individual one.

At the same time, the fact that the novel is presented exclusively through the one-sided dialogue of the protagonist, Changez, results in a distinct, authoritative, and controlling narrative voice. The American is directly addressed but not given voice, his reactions, even his apparent occasional comments, are all rendered through Changez. Moreover, by directly addressing the other in the second person singular, the text inevitably pulls the reader into the narrative. In our reading experience we time and again feel addressed, often in an uncomfortable way, as the addressing pronoun includes us on the side of the opponent, the alleged aggressor, yet within this dialogue, on the side of the disenfranchised one, the party not given a voice.

The practice of interpellation, or addressing *as*, dominates especially the first pages of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as outlined above. By juxtaposing two conversational partners or opponents from two different sides of the cultural divide in the war on terror and by narrating the memory of a failed assimilation of a model immigrant, Hamid's novel, at first glance, may seem to invite a classification as 'ethnic' literature on the mere plot level. Indeed, the novel is suffused with ethnic markers and cultural identity discourses. Yet, through its form and structure, the text disallows such a simple classification. It demands closer attention from the reader on multiple levels and forces the reader to take in the complexities and ambiguities created through the narrative voice and juxtaposed narratives. First, the text emphasizes the epistemic and systemic violence of address and collective identity assumptions. Second, at closer examination, what one might all too readily accept as cultural identity negotiations turn out to simply be a list of common stereotypes on the topic, and the narrator deprecates and mocks the reader for too easily falling into the traps he had laid out. The text, then, expressly rejects being read as representative of any ethnic position, first through the critique of such an approach on the plot level, second, and even more emphatically, foreclosing such a reading through the ironic tone of the narrative voice. The true enemy is not cultural difference, but global capitalism, and in this context, the protagonist Changez is both a victim and perpetrator. The lines become blurred, and any attempt at classification is as much applicable as it is inaccurate or misleading. To read *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a novel of collective identity negotiations relegates us into the limited corner the American in Hamid's text occupies in the Lahore market, with his back to the wall, unable and unwilling to step outside of his preconceived notions and arrogant assumptions of righteousness and superiority.

In a variety of ways and on various levels, the novel raises and challenges questions of agency, interpellation, collective identities, and responsibility; revealing in how far the very notion of a “collective identity” is an oxymoron – and, what is more, that the assumption of a collective identity is neither neutral nor inconsequential, but laden with epistemic<sup>1</sup> and systemic<sup>2</sup> violence.

In fact, the very idea of collective identities structurally subverts the meaning (at least in the post-modern conception) of identity as such. With the emergence of psychoanalysis and, later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cultural studies, the original idea of a unified (and obtainable) entity ‘identity’ has been thoroughly dismissed. Individual identity came to be recognized as the subject’s perception of a vague sense of wholeness that is constantly changing and becoming. Notions of collective identity – especially through social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of ‘identity politics’ – underwent a reverse course in their development. With the increasing dissolution of predefined social positions throughout modernity, group memberships as a form of social belonging increased in relevance. To construct social cohesion, groups have to create narratives of belonging, historical trajectories that claim to result in shared values that give meaning or structure to the group’s current existence. Such ‘collective identities’ are oriented towards a (re-)constructed past and by necessity rest on institutionalization to a certain degree, suggesting stability and unchangingness.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, such a construct is effected and evoked not only as a form of belonging, but for strategic, political, ideological purposes and in so far has a future oriented function.<sup>4</sup>

This function of collectivity, constructed to mobilize people, has been conclusively investigated by Ernesto Laclau in his study *On Populist Reason*. He claims three elements are necessary to construct group cohesion and to mobilize people into a shared agenda: a) discourse, b) the power of the empty signifier that requires a certain vagueness for individuals to feel recognized in their unmet demands, and, as a third pillar, c) rhetoric, as mobilization needs

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<sup>1</sup> In her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Spivak employs Foucault’s notion of epistemic violence to talk about the silencing of marginalized groups, emphasizing the harm inflicted on subjects through discourse which is based on systems of knowledge that pertain to those in power and override those of other subjects. At the same time, Spivak points out that an attempt from the outside to give them a ‘collective voice’ will result in assumptions of cultural solidarity and consequently again being spoken for (by Western intellectuals), while in essence being silenced. Kristie Dotson in her essay “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing” picks up Spivak’s idea to investigate the silencing of others (intentionally or not) on a broader scheme with respect to testimony. She highlights that based on Spivak’s and other philosophers’ works, the fact that “members of oppressed groups can be silenced by virtue of group membership is widely recognized” (Dotson, 236).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. George Lipset, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.

<sup>3</sup> “Suggesting” is the imperative term here, as not only are especially cultural / ethnic collective identities of migratory communities highly artificial / invented traditions, but also, inevitably, changing over time. Yet they need to suggest stability to be perceived at all as the basis of group affiliation, and with the growing instability and uncertainty of the global social, these fulfill the additional function of suggesting a degree of safety.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion of the constructedness, limitations, and inherent violence of collective identities.

language to address people but also for the reiteration by group members to build an ever larger – and thus supposedly commonsensical – basis.<sup>5</sup> Group mobilization, according to Laclau, relies on interpellation<sup>6</sup> into a group and therefore a sense of obliterating the individual for a common cause that, in its normativization, is violent, without recognizing itself as such. Group formation, as his study shows, is based on the exclusion of an element from the totality of the social. A difference has to be expelled so that other differences become equivalent in their shared exclusion of the one. “But equivalence is precisely what subverts difference, so that all identity is constructed within this tension between the differential and the equivalential logics” (Laclau 2007, 70). Laclau emphasizes the violence of exclusion in the act of collective identity formation as well as the implicit violence of obliterating other differences within the group, of homogenizing characteristics for group cohesion around vague – because necessarily empty – signifiers.<sup>7</sup>

Group cohesion is always cohesion at the expense of individuality, it is based on homogenization and exclusion, therefore constituting a violent act. Nevertheless, group cohesion has been seen as a necessary precondition for social action. Although there is a general awareness of this ambivalence, practitioners of social change through collective action (e.g. “identity politics” or “projects of recognition”) argue that the ills that arise from group cohesion are necessary in order to achieve their goals. Yet, the last decade(s) still saw the failure of such projects, and I would like to argue that this is due to the deeper structures of violence in the concepts within which we operate – that is, the form of violence the discourse of collective identity perpetuates.<sup>8</sup>

Even though this deeper epistemic violence is widely acknowledged, it remains largely unaddressed in everyday politics and social existences, as it would – and I think should – problematize social interaction on a far larger scale, in the very form of address, or as Althusser called it: interpellation. Both, Louis Althusser and Emmanuel Levinas have, in their investigations of address, highlighted the violence of any form of naming, approaching, interpellating. Althusser’s focus was on the Ideological State Apparatus, the normalizing of societies that from the earliest stages interpellate individuals into social beings, with the dominant discourse as a means to guarantee the reproduction of the means of production. As he put it: “all ideology hails

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, New York: Verso, 2007, esp. chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Louis Althusser’s argument on interpellation in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation).”

<sup>7</sup> Examples of such vague empty signifiers he mentions would be democracy, freedom, but also culture, heritage and tradition fit that category.

<sup>8</sup> Mobilization of groupisms and the problems of group action and exclusion, as well as the failure of identity politics for social equality are widely dealt with in scholarship from Werner Sollors’ studies *The Invention of Ethnicity* and *Beyond Ethnicity* to Georg Lipsitz’ *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* to the polemic work of Walter Benn Michaels’ e.g. in *The Trouble with Diversity*.

or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.” (Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 162). By interpellating the individual, the social creates subjection, the individual conforms to the role/roles s/he is addressed by; and even where resistance emerges, it does so within the discourse of interpellation, as a reaction to address, as a challenge to address, yet never free of it.

Levinas, too, considers the individual always already interpellated, but his focus is on the responsibility this creates. The interpellation here originates not so much from the state apparatus or the larger social structures, but from the individual other. The gaze of the other puts us under a responsibility, or obligation, to not harm the other. In her essay “Precarious Life”, Judith Butler takes up Levinas’ idea that to be addressed implies a demand from the Other. The question of who addresses, who can address, and how we are addressed constitutes our individual agency and our subject positions in society. But by the very fact of address, in its implicit demand, it is also always already a moral obligation. Outlining that the possibility of survival first and foremost depends on being acknowledged as a life, Butler employs Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of the face. The face implores us and puts us under the moral obligation of ‘though shalt not kill,’ and in so doing posits the other’s right to existence – even above my own. Such knowledge of the precariousness of the ‘Other’ and the address even predates interpellation or discourse.

What both, Althusser’s and Levinas’ positions problematize is the question of representation, because the self is always already implicated by ideology and the demand of the other, both as an individual and as a social being. Consequently, representation of the self is an impossibility as it always already occurs in response to forms of address and is always already predefined by and locked into frames of discourse.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, these frames are all we have, as we cannot already ‘know’ the other when we initially address / are being addressed. We can only approach him/her through what we know, and by all practical reasons need to work with categories like gender, ethnicity, class. But categories are not only *not* sufficient to embrace the complexity of (individual) identity, more importantly, they are never value-free. Each label we use carries meanings and comes from within

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<sup>9</sup> In a similar way, Stuart Hall also stressed that what we perceive and understand as ‘identities’ is only possible as ‘representation:’ “Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. . . . Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.” (Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, London: Sage Publications, 1996, 1-17, here 4). While Hall’s emphasis is on the ideological function of the category ‘identity’, he also implies the question of how representation works and by whom, and that it is being determined by discursive frames.

our value system. Address is always a value statement. If we, then, employ these categories with an identitarian understanding (as is commonly practiced), the violence of addressing is amplified as it sets out to *define* the addressed within our hierarchies. The epistemic violence of address lies in the fact that we are always already addressed and addressing others *as*, and this *as* is an assumption derived from appearance or social practices that are considered so-called identity markers, practices that are interpreted as iterations of collective identities. By addressing, we impose frames of representations that we subsequently assume as given, if not even true.

Like Hamid's novel, each of the texts that make up the main part of this thesis rejects the label of ethnic literature in one way or another, while at the same time running the risk of being classified under that category by the literary market. In fact, the genesis of this thesis was my intention to investigate recent developments in ethnic fiction by contemporary (emerging) writers of South Asian heritage, living, working and publishing in the USA and Canada. Yet, my reading experience repeatedly disrupted and challenged this original intent. A large number of the texts I approached (mostly published after the year 2000) in one way or another rejected or fell outside the standard realm of ethnic literature. This is, of course, not to say that there is not also a large number of literary texts that lend themselves to such an approach; texts that even aim at being read as representative of the experience of an ethnic group, that negotiate cultural differences and questions of race and racialization. My interest, however, was sparked by those novels that resisted such a classification and thus forced me to reconsider reader expectations I may have held when originally approaching these texts.<sup>10</sup>

Since its inception and development into a dominant research focus, as well as its institutionalization at universities and research institutions, the category of ethnic literature, closely linked to postcolonial studies, has evoked, provoked and investigated a wide array of important, socio-political questions. These include, for example, the relationship between symbolic and political capital, the negotiation of competing social, aesthetic and political values in the formation of an identity-based canon, and, most importantly, the conceptualizing of race, racism, and racialization as well as questions of disenfranchisement. However, such a research approach to a literary text inevitably instrumentalizes that text in an attempt to gain an understanding of ethnicity as a social relation and a historically dynamic process. It results in literature being read *as* representative. It is essentially an approach that interpellates the text, addresses it through a preconceived category, even if that is done with the intention to give voice

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<sup>10</sup> Ethnic literature and its subgenre diaspora literature consequently still mark the point of departure for my research; they will briefly be outlined in chapter 4 and will still serve as a category against which to position the text of my case study and my reading practice.

and representation to marginalized minorities. While such a systemic reading is highly valuable for a great variety of texts and research foci, the practice has by now become so widespread in academia that it seems to be the dominant, if not only, approach to texts by authors of ethnic blood-lines.

The present study by no means intends to diminish the important and valuable work of ethnic studies, its insights into race relations, racism, diasporic experiences, cultural differences, their historical developments and social realities, and negotiation of these in the arts. On the contrary, it is very much informed by research in the field, but proposes a critical rethinking of our reading practice, in particular when reading contemporary literary texts that may be too easily grouped under a minority label based on an author's ethnic background and/or the presence of certain ethnicity markers in the text. In trying to avoid such an instrumentalized approach, I shall rather focus on what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus called *surface reading*,<sup>11</sup> or on an act of responsible and creative reading in the sense of Derek Attridge,<sup>12</sup> involving "a suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the work's inaugural power." (Attridge, *Singularity*, 80). Such a focus on the reading experience will result in a more descriptive than interpretative study, analyzing form, structure and themes.

The present study is not an exercise in close reading, nor am I primarily interested in an analysis focused on aesthetics. Taking ethnic and diaspora studies and their focus on collective and cultural identities and identity politics as my point of departure, my reading is very much informed by an awareness of literary negotiations of socio-cultural realities. However, themes arising from a responsible reading of the texts that make up my case study frequently do not fit the patterns of identity politics and may at times even be critical or weary of these, as the above initial discussion of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows.

By putting reading experience at the center of my approach, and focusing on textual structure, narrative voice and tone, as well as on genre, reader engagement, and narrative mode, the analysis of the individual texts illustrates how these elements and techniques serve certain purposes or agendas in the storytelling. By concentrating on the surface of the selected texts, I shall distill their respective particularities. As Lennard Davis' compellingly demonstrates in his study *Resisting Novels: Ideology & Fiction*, no part of a novel, no utterance or description in a fictive text, is arbitrary. Everything in the text is carefully arranged to serve a purpose and realize the underlying agenda of the text. No matter to what extent the reader may experience a text as "realistic" or "authentic," it remains carefully constructed towards a goal. However, although the

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<sup>11</sup> Best, Stephen and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009). Special Issue: The Way We Read Now. Ed. *ibid.*, 1-21.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Attridge, *Singularity*, esp. chapter 6.

text itself can never actually display or reflect a reality, the aim of this constructedness may still be to tell us something *about* the reality of life. But in order to be relevant, the text has to engage the reader, to stimulate the reader's imagination. To achieve that, there has to be some relation between text and social reality that the reader can relate to. For a political text that aims at being *representative*, this will likely entail negotiations of diversity, difference and collective identity realizations.

Many of the more recent texts by authors of ethnic heritage seem to no longer occupy themselves within these once dominant themes. Yet, they are no less political. Their political engagement is realized in significantly different ways, the specifics of which this study will collect through its particularistic, descriptive approach of responsible reading.

The first chapter will outline the relationship between reader and text by taking a closer look at Davis' ideological argument, the concept of mimesis as used by Erich Auerbach and Christopher Prendergast, and at Rita Felski's analysis of the use of literature, which she sums up in four modes of engagement: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. A focus on reader engagement is not about that which is hidden and has to be uncovered, but about the impact of the text in the reading experience, which requires an approach like surface reading as advocated by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best.<sup>13</sup> While "symptomatic reading" has been the dominant practice particularly in postcolonial studies and ethnic literature, paying attention to possible latent, deep meanings, surface reading focuses on the immediate experience created by the textual strategies of any given narrative. That is not to say that the results of such a responsible or surface reading cannot show significant similarities with the results of an instrumentalized or symptomatic reading. In practice, the distinction between both reading practices may be more in degree and reader attitude than in a significant difference of results or conclusions drawn. Yet, where a symptomatic reading approaches the text with concepts and questions to test against, the responsible reading practice will investigate currents and resistances in the text. It will aim to avoid preconceived frames of reference and focus on the particularities of each text. As a result, a study based on such a practice cannot have a single set of theories and methodologies that will fit each text within the case study. On the contrary, the research focus of the present study has emerged from the texts' very resistance to an original attempt of being read *as* ethnic literature. As a result, a wide variety of studies and research foci have emerged from the individual reading experiences and suffuse the present project.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009), Special Issue: The Way We Read Now, ed. *ibid.*, 1-21.



However, the types or themes of resistance I encountered in several of the texts assembled here oscillate around certain larger agendas, albeit in a wide variety of different ways. While these texts object to being read as representative of collective identity discourses or ethnic literature, they draw the reader's attention towards issues like fragility and precariousness, greed, corruption, and neoliberal imperialism, but also individualization and agency, or a celebration of cosmopolitan global mobility. Individually, these themes may not seem to have much in common, nor do I want to group my texts together under a new category, simply relabeling them. However, in terms of mimesis as a form of tacit knowledge about the world, these texts, unmistakably and all in their own way and with a different focus, address some key factors of the socio-cultural dimensions of globalization. To better follow the discussion of such aspects in the analysis of the individual texts, it seemed pertinent to include a brief discussion on globalization in general, and its impact on the social and cultural spheres in particular in chapter three. The selected novels and short stories are not to be read against theories of globalization, but a deeper understanding of the impact of globalization on the individual may support and enhance the reading experience.<sup>14</sup> What emerges from such a reading are characters exposed to, aware of, and/or negotiating a changing social reality, but also in a more abstract way, fictions centered around themes like transience, the complexity of individual existences, intimacy, questions of conviviality, fragility, and powerlessness, and how despite such seemingly bleak concerns there emerges a general optimism and *joie de vivre*.

As my case study emerged from a body of texts based on the ethnicity of the author, and in order to showcase in how far the selected texts resist a representative reading as ethnic literature, a brief look at diaspora as a central concept of ethnicity based on collective identity constructions seemed relevant, especially with regard to sociological developments in the era of globalization.

To complete the picture of the canon or reading practice that the texts discussed here resist, South Asian Diaspora Literature will briefly be outlined in chapter four and contextualized within these larger developments of globalization. Subsequently, the individual texts will be introduced in order of their degree of resistance to these issues.

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<sup>14</sup> Globalization as a research focus or new field has entered the discourses of cultural and literary studies in the past decades, as evident from publications like James Annesley's *Fictions of Globalization* (2006), Suman Gupta's *Globalization and Literature* (2009), or the Routledge Literature Readers Series' *Literature and Globalization* edited by Liam Connell and Nicky Marsh (2010), to name but a few. While Annesley's work focuses on the economic dimension of globalization and on "contemporary culture's relationships with, and responses to, globalization and consumer culture" (Annesley 8), Gupta foregrounds globalization in literature as a theme and its impact on the institutions of literature and literary studies. Connell's and Marsh's reader focuses on the question of definitions of globalization and provides readings with a focus on themes prevalent in globalization studies, from environment to capital and markets, technology and cyber-culture, migration and labor, and finally worldliness and cosmopolitanism. In contrast to studies like these, the present project will not focus on the changing conditions of the literary market and literary studies or on literary texts as *representations* of a globalized social. My interest is rather in the socio-cultural impact on the individual as a global/globalized condition and changing (self-)awareness.

First, I shall take a closer look at prominent genres in ethnic literature and their being repurposed in contemporary fiction. One such genre is historiographic fiction, which for decades has been highly productive for cultural identity narratives and which has been artfully employed to question hegemonic discourses and challenge narratives of the past. Both, Shauna Singh Baldwin's gripping postcolonial novel *What the Body Remembers*, and Anita Rau Badami's tragic novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* are at first glance deeply rooted in their geopolitical and cultural heritage and would generally be considered ethnic literature. Yet, despite their setting in a more or less distant past – Singh Baldwin's novel is set at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to India's partition, while Badami's novel looks at Sikh history over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century culminating in the uprising and brutal suppression at the Golden Temple in India in the 1980s – both these examples show a deep concern with contemporary socio-political developments of globalization and highlight the inherent violence of collective identity discourses rather than reaffirming these. Insofar, both might still be classified as ethnic fiction, but they decidedly step outside the frame of diasporic literature, of inscribing and manifesting a collective identity idea. Instead, both texts show the absurdity of a sense of belonging and of divisions through society along the lines of cultural or religious identities, as well as the brutal violence that can ensue from such identitarian constructs.

Although Rakesh Satyal's novel *Blue Boy* strikes a much lighter note, its argument also returns time and again to the absurdity of collective identities. *Blue Boy* is not a historiographic novel, but an example of another prominent genre in ethnic literatures, the Bildungsroman. The Bildungsheld on a quest here is a young boy in his early teens who does not fit in with his peers and repeatedly attempts to explain his status as an outsider through cultural otherness. However, through the dramatic irony that characterizes the text, the reader picks up on markers of a queer identity as well as a still fairly infantile and naïve world view which would likely make him the object of ridicule in any young peer group, regardless of a cultural otherness.<sup>15</sup> The humor that suffuses the entire text, then, lies first and foremost in the incongruence between Kiran's lived experiences and perceptions and the readers' and narrator's adult perspective. The text includes no explicitly marked distinction between the two temporal levels of voice and character, which is enforced by the fact that the novel as a whole is narrated in present tense. Yet, a narrative and highly ironic distance defines the text stylistically. However, readers will experience vicarious embarrassment, as they are keenly aware of the multiple forms of Kiran's non-conformity and how that would increase the exclusions he faces. Kiran's repeated attempts to explain otherness

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<sup>15</sup> The novel is set in the 1990s, when cultural recognition and diversity discourses had not yet arrived in the center, or in the novel's case in suburbia. It would therefore be safe to assume that the ethnic kid in the classroom might have been targeted for his otherness, as Kiran concludes in the novel.

through collective identity cannot but fail, and after a flamboyant performance at the school talent show, he concludes that for the time being he was an island of one, but that his present was but temporary and of not much consequence for his future.

Jhumpa Lahiri's later works present another interesting case in point, widening the gap between contemporary fiction and traditional South Asian North American ethnic literature even further. Lahiri's early fiction, the short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* or her most prominent work, the novel *The Namesake*, are firmly rooted in a diasporic imaginary, negotiating and reaffirming cultural identities and hybrid existences. In contrast, the short stories collected in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and in particular the short story cycle "Hema and Kaushik," are a celebration of a cosmopolitan global mobility that finds the support of or belonging to the ethnic community stifling. The course of the characters' lives is marked by agency and mobility. The text, despite being a love story and full of loss, enforces a striking distance between plot and reader through its detached, observing style, even though the second person pronoun is used as address, similar to Hamid's text.

The label of ethnic fiction may still hold some meaningfulness for the texts selected so far – even if mostly due to their complicating and challenging of identity politics. However, for the next three texts, Abha Dawesar's *That Summer in Paris*, Saleema Nawaz's short story collection *Mother Superior* and Dawesar's novel *Family Values*, such a classification adds nothing or very little to reading experience or understanding of the texts and would more likely result in rather misleading interpretations.

Where Lahiri's text keeps the reader at bay with its reporting, distant mode of narration, Abha Dawesar's *That Summer in Paris* deeply enchants the reader in its sensual mode of narration. The book oscillates between four central interlinked themes: art, sexuality, food, and death. Collective identity assumptions are completely sidelined here, as the transience of human existence is juxtaposed to the immortality of great art. While the text enchants the reader by appealing to all five senses in its descriptions of art, music, food, and the erotic, it at the same time keeps the reader at bay through constant deferment, which only further heightens reader anticipation. The novel, a love story between an aging Nobel Laureate and a young emerging writer, furthermore transgresses every social taboo, yet without shocking or truly appalling the reader. Through this setup of a most unusual love story, as well as the number of taboos that are broken without much concern or repercussions, Dawesar's novel already forecloses any representative reading. This is also manifested through the social circle these characters belong to. They are all artists, mostly writers, who enjoy the lifestyle of a privileged global mobility.

Ethnic backgrounds are hardly mentioned and rendered meaningless when confronted with the timeless relevance of the arts.

Where Lahiri and Dawesar celebrate global mobility, Nawaz' stories stay very close to home. Her collection *Mother Superior* tells stories of unsuccessful attempts at 'mothering', from biological mothers who are – for various reasons – unable to fulfill their role or are themselves too shattered to provide their children with a healthy environment, to failing surrogate mothers, to sisters trying to act in the absence of mothers, to a reversal of the situation in a little girl trying to care for her mother, to total strangers trying to provide shelter to a drunken prostitute. These stories negotiate universal issues of human coexistence, mostly through a very personal perspective and intimate setting, with little or no openly political or ideological agenda, drawing the focus even more to the individual characters' positions in relation to others and to their dependencies. The theme of her collection, as indicated by the title, is caregiving or what often turns out to be a failure or lack of it. Most of the characters populating these stories are in rather precarious states. The stories revolve around loss, abandonment, or loneliness, a lack of comprehension, paranoia, and incompleteness.

Dawesar's *Family Values* also focuses on family but shows the intricate interdependencies of the individual (or nuclear family) with the larger social realm and at the same time the lack of agency in effecting positive change or ethical consciousness in a society that is governed by greed and corruption. Insofar, it highlights the disenchantment with politics Anthony Giddens' outlined in his small volume on globalization *Runaway World*. In addition, the text's stylistics enforce disenchantment also on the discourse level. The imagery from the realm of the object is reminiscent of social taboos and moral (value) standards, while the plot level's emphasis on how everyone was eventually implicated in nepotism and preferential treatment of one's own and thus contributing to the disenchanting social, invites the reader's reflections on questions of social consciousness.

This novel is not only set in a deeply corrupt environment of illegality and exploitation, but through satire and irony as well as consistent defamiliarization distances the reader, making him/her an observer and eventually a judge in questions of ethics. While initially, in the dark picture painted of the society, this seems like a clear-cut and in its narrative mode diverting task, the plot increasingly complicates the boundaries between right, necessary, and wrong. With a focus on the dysfunctional, the setting is steeped in medical sickness and decay, only to be juxtaposed against the real dysfunctional body, that of the social depicted.

In reading the novels and short stories analyzed in the later part of my study, the radical changes to the social fabric that scholars of globalization have detected<sup>16</sup> come into play in a variety of forms. While Lahiri's "Hema and Kaushik" detaches the characters from the ethnic community of their upbringing, having them thrive in the mobility created by globalization, Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* looks at the flip-side and can rather be seen as a study in manufactured risk. Nawaz's stories largely ignore any ethnicity references and dive through a number of more or less untraditional family configurations, touching on the question of caretaking or the impossibility thereof. Satyal's *Blue Boy* and Dawesar's novel *Family Values*, too, look at family, however, while Satyal's novel unveils the complex issues inherent in identity classifications and the shortcomings of collective identities in the process, Dawesar shows the shortcoming of collective belonging as such through the dysfunctionality of the family and the larger social in which the text is set.

In their resistance to categorizations, or interpellation *as* diasporic or ethnic literature, these text demand a focus on their individual singularities, which necessitates reading them responsibly and staying on the surface of the text. In a first step, this results in a descriptive analysis that foregrounds reader experience. What emerges from such an approach in the end, is a certain mood or *Zeitgeist* the texts carry as a tacit reflection of the social condition.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. the cursory discussion of the topic in chapter 3 below.

## 2 The fallacy of representative reading

Every reader of fiction knows of the pleasures of entering into the world of a novel, of being drawn into a story and its universe, the interactions between the characters, their trials and tribulations. While the same can be said to a certain extent for other arts, the solitary activity of reading results in a much more intimate and as a result more meaningful engagement of the reader with the world of the text. A fictional text demands a high level of involvement from the reader, because so much of the world it is set in is left to the imagination. And while any consumer of fiction will always be aware that the texts they are engaged with are not fact-based, texts that capture our attention are usually meaningful beyond the entertainment value of reading. They relate to us or we relate to them in a way significant for and relevant to our real lives. Such relevance is independent of whether the text in question was realist fiction or not. Qualities intrinsic to literature open a space in which meaning is being created through the reader's interaction with the text.

'Meaning' is a tricky subject, when discussing fiction. While the very existence of our academic field Literary Studies is testament to its existence, much of the research done focuses on where to find it or in what ways fiction bears relevance for our socio-political and socio-cultural realities. In the following I will take a necessarily condensed look at several contemporary positions on the relation between fiction and reality, and on approaches to reading, to outline how reading practices shape the production of meaning.

Literature, including realist fiction, is not, nor claims to be a mirror of social reality; it does not represent the 'real world'. This point is comprehensively detailed in Lennard Davis' study *Resisting Novels: Ideology & Fiction*, first published in 1987. Following Davis' argument, the novel form in and of itself is ideological and is an instrument of ideology, in so far as it offers the reader insights into (created) worlds that may stimulate resistance, yet the act of reading, and novel reading in particular, is a solitary act that at the same time keeps the reader isolated and immobilized, instead of instilling actual social radicalism. Thus, the novel is a medium that "by and large preserves the status quo" (Davis, 225).

I may not wholeheartedly support the full extent of Davis' claim on the ideological implications of the novel form,<sup>17</sup> yet his supporting evidence provides insights into what is

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<sup>17</sup> I agree with Davis' general argument that a fictive text is carefully constructed and nothing in it is left to just chance or coincidence, but rather there for a reason and imbued with meaning. I furthermore agree that "all novels are inherently ideological and in that sense are about the political and social world" (Davis, 224). However, his argument that the inherent ideology of the form (with only a few exceptions) will always only reinforce passivity and the social status quo (cf. Davis 225 ff.) seems a bit overreaching to me. It is true that hardly a political movement (if any) can be traced to a novel and that the act of reading a novel more than any other literary form will result in a secluded and passive activity. However, a text will have an impact on the reader and can have an impact other

seemingly obvious yet often not fully considered in the analysis of a literary text. Davis compellingly demonstrates how no description or utterance within a literary text is without agenda. The composition is far from arbitrary or random, any alleged complexity serves the plot and/or character development. As he puts it,

life is a pretty vast and uncoordinated series of events and perceptions. But novels are pre-organized systems of experience in which characters, actions, and objects have to mean something in relation to the system of each novel itself, in relation to the culture in which the novel is written, and in relation to the readers who are in that culture. (Davis, 24)

Every element comprising the text is carefully arranged, and serves one or multiple functions (or in Davis' argument *ideological* functions). Put another way, if an element - a location, a description, an item, an utterance - does not serve a purpose in the system of the text, it has no room there.

Structured around the discussion of location, character, dialogue and plot, *Resisting Novels*, shows that as the world of the novel can only exist in the interplay of words and the reader's imagination, everything in the text serves to create that world. A location, even if modeled after a real space, a city like London or Paris, is still imaginary, and the level of detail of the space (or 'thickness' to use Davis' term) feeds into its ideology. A space is never merely a location, but a social milieu, a hierarchy, a setting that positions characters, that holds relevant clues for the reader to enter this imaginary world and understand relations or actions.<sup>18</sup> The same is true for characters, these are not historical personae (even when modeled after actual living beings), every detail is described or left out for a reason. Personalities are necessarily simplified and created only to the extent that they serve the text. Similarly, dialogue in novels serves to create psychological insights into the characters. Dialogue does not follow natural speech patterns, yet readers are conditioned to accept the carefully woven language of dialogue as conversation, even though it is devoid of the 'um's and pauses that characterize actual speech patterns. Moreover, as Davis argues, in our own perception of natural speech we tend to obliterate these micro-disruptions and think of our conversations in the polished mode of exchanges in written text.

Finally, plot structure, the speed with which it develops, chronology or linearity, all serve a purpose that contributes not just to the creation of a fictional world but creates specific reading experiences. Plot elements may heighten anticipation through deferred action, suggest causalities

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than just to reinforce a status quo. It may not always be possible to trace political action directly to a specific reading act, as this is not the primary function of the form. But it may create awareness for certain forms of injustice, or lay a groundwork on which change may later be effected. Such change, furthermore, need not be on a broad political or social level, but can be contained within the individual realm of the reader. The novel may not be the medium of radicalism or revolutions, but that does not preclude it from having a stake in evolutions and personal developments.

<sup>18</sup> See for example the brief discussion of the Boy's living space in Abha Dawesar's novel *Family Matters* in chapter 7.2.

through juxtapositions of chronologically unrelated events, and transport the reader across time and space in the course of a sentence.<sup>19</sup>

However, even though, novels are consciously constructed narratives, formally different from reality in every aspect, narratives' potential to evoke in the reader the illusion of a life-likeness, suggests that they do have something to tell us *about* life. Following Davis, "even overtly apolitical novels have embedded in their structure political statements about the world and our organization of our perception about the world" (Davis, 224). While Davis argues that the novel is far from portraying reality in its individual components - location, character, dialogue, plot - he also emphasizes that the literary text, despite its constructedness, relates to and conveys information about the real world.<sup>20</sup> The way in which literary text, especially realist fiction, may relate to real life, however, transcends Davis' argument on the ideology of the novel. A reader's acceptance of characters as (fictive) personae and the way in which characters interact with their surroundings as relate-able has a much broader basis in the general mimetic qualities of a text.

Mimesis, as the study of the topic throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century from Auerbach, to Ricoeur<sup>21</sup> has repeatedly emphasized, does not simply signify "imitation" (the Greek translation of the word), especially not in the contemporary narrow sense of imitation as copying or replication.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Davis' discussion esp. of dialogue and plot, focuses less on the function within the particular novel, but rather on the ideological impact of the novel on social existence. He argues that novelistic dialogues serve to instruct the reader in conversation, or rather that while the printed conversation has little to do with natural speech, it became the accepted idea of conversation. That is to say that in general speakers would perceive most conversations they had as significantly more coherent and refined than any true transcript would show them to be, and that by extend the presentation of natural speech in a novel would not seem natural to the reader, because the genre of the novel and the use of dialogue in narratives has conditioned us differently.

Plots, essentially the commodity of the novel, suggest experiences relevant to the reader to the extent that the reader is willing to spend money buying the book. Moreover, plots, especially of realist fiction, are teleological. Davis argues that the rise of the novel, in fact, impacted our real life understanding of the course of events, both in terms of teleology, and in terms of 'changing plots' in our lives. Davis' ideological argument with regard to the role of the novel in the ideological development esp. of Western societies is fascinating and holds merit, though it may at times be slightly overstated. However, for the purpose of the present study, I deliberately limit my discussion of his analysis to his emphasis on the conscious constructedness of all elements of the literary text to demonstrate that fiction, even realist fiction, does by far not represent or mirror reality.

<sup>20</sup> However, as the discussion on modes of reading below will emphasize, even though Davis makes a compelling argument on the ideological entanglements of and in literary text, an ideological approach to the text also bears the risk of a specific, selective perception of the text.

<sup>21</sup> A differentiated discussion of the concepts of mimesis from its origins in Plato's and Aristotle's arguments to contemporary positions go beyond the scope of the present study. For an early critical discussion of the topic see, for example, Erich Auerbach's seminal work *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (originally published in German as *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* in 1946), as well as Christopher Prendergast's study *The Order of Mimesis*, briefly discussed here. The Routledge New Critical Idiom Series has also published a volume on the subject in 2006: Mathew Potolsky, *Mimesis*. Potolsky, however, not only leaves out Prendergast's work, but also Paul Ricoeur's influential dissection of the concept into three different aspects which he simply calls mimesis 1, 2, and 3 in his three volume work *Time and Narrative*, whereby mimesis<sub>1</sub> refers to prefiguration or practical experience, mimesis<sub>2</sub> or configuration is creative emplotment and mimesis<sub>3</sub> or transfiguration refers to the culmination or effect of 2 on 1, meaning the actual reading of a text and consequently its effect on the reader. Stephen Halliwell in his seminal work *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* also provides a critical historical development of the concept.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, p. 14 ff.



Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (originally published in German as *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* in 1946) is widely credited as the major work that brought the concept into the center of literary studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through 20 chapters, each focused on a different historical period from antiquity to Virginia Woolf, Auerbach's *Mimesis* traces the development of realist writing using one or two examples for each period to exemplify what accounts for realist writing for that time in terms of style, syntax, and historical context. He does not so much provide or arrive at a critical definition of the concept of mimesis, but rather focuses on forms of literary engagements with everyday life "in which that life is treated seriously, in terms of its human and social problems" (Auerbach 342). The format of his study is essayistic and not focused on theoretical considerations or discussions, which is largely due to the circumstances of the book's creation as Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* during his years in exile in Istanbul in the early 1940s where access to works of literary criticism in a language he was familiar with was limited.

Although poststructuralism and deconstruction, then, largely dismissed mimesis as a category of aesthetic criticism, the 1980s saw the concept resurrected as a highly ambivalent, complex tool for analysis. A main contributor in this resurrection was Christopher Prendergast with his seminal study *The Order of Mimesis*. In it, Prendergast analyzes works by Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval and Flaubert in relation to conceptualizations of mimesis in 4 central chapters of the book. But, more importantly, he reconstructs and critically dissects the theoretical engagement with the concept throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century from Auerbach to Lyotard. Prendergast's analysis skillfully outlines mimesis as an inevitable and integral constituent of literature, in particular the novel. He emphasizes the concept's ambiguity that results from, on the one hand, its normalizing and even repressive function, while the mimetic narrative at the same time also holds a potential for subversion and transgression.

Prendergast's approach resembles a tour the force through arguments and theories on the concept, emphasizing the vigor of each but also exposing their shortcomings before arriving at a position from which mimesis can continue to operate as a productive tool in literary criticism. He starts out by juxtaposing Plato's claim that mimesis was essentially poisonous for society (in its potential to disrupt the order of the republic through a proliferation of images and representations that put identity and classification at stake), with Barthes' finding mimesis 'sickening' not because it was disruptive, but on the contrary, because it confirmed and reinforced an existing social order, which made it complicit in hegemonic suppression. Against both dismissive, if contradictory, arguments on mimesis, Prendergast then positions a more embracing approach stemming from Aristotle's conceptualization of mimesis as an activity that was not only relegated to art, but

moreover “a congenital property of man’s natural mode of constructing and inhabiting the world” (Prendergast 19). Mimesis in this respect is a social act linked to the pleasure of recognition of the familiar.

The relationship between mimesis and the object world is a referential one, “between linguistic expressions and what they stand for in the world” (Prendergast, 61). The mimetic text facilitates a process of recognition, “whereby the reader connects the world produced by the text with the world of which he himself has direct or indirect knowledge” (ibid). Although, as semiological analysis, e.g. in the work of Barthes and Derrida, emphasized in its critique of mimesis, the sign cannot actually refer to an object world but only to other signs and moreover an imaginary text can hardly refer to the real world, the reader still recognizes such references. Mimesis, insofar, is based on “a set of agreements between a ‘mimetic author’ and a ‘mimetic reader’” (Prendergast, 74). Mimesis then, as Ricoeur argued, is an act created by ‘productive reference’.

In his approach to reclaim mimesis as a useful category, Prendergast stresses its dialectical character and calls on Wittgenstein’s notion of the language game which he then links to Ricoeur’s conceptualization of mimesis as prefiguration – configuration - transfiguration. Wittgenstein’s ‘language game’ underlines that in order to partake in communication, or to ‘play the language game’, one has to be part of it. Language is social practice, generated by a community of speakers. Similarly, Ricoeur’s levels of mimesis are each a form of *praxis*, characterized by dynamism, whereby prefiguration denotes the social context as a dynamic process. It is the location where Wittgenstein’s ‘language game’ comes to play, where ideology and resistance delimitate the spectrum. Prefiguration is not a given, but has to be seen “as itself a form of active work upon the world, as a mode of *practice*” (Prendergast 78, emphasis in the original). It constitutes a ‘tacit knowledge’ – which is conceptually similar to habitual knowledge, yet less limited to passive repetition and more inviting to creativity and change. Configuration then is the author’s creative work of production, while transfiguration is the active work on the side of the reader that incorporates the text into his/her tacit knowledge.

Mimesis in literature, then, is an inherently ambivalent discourse fed by and suffused with the tacit knowledge of social practice, negotiating characters’ interaction with each other and the world created around them. Moreover, according to British classicist Stephen Halliwell’s review of discourses on mimesis from its origins in Greek philosophy to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, mimesis can take two fundamentally different approaches to depicting the world. On the one hand, there is the notion of mimesis usually found in traditional realist fiction, which is an illumination of the world as it exists outside of art, to which art may relate due to elements that are known and

knowable. On the other hand, mimesis can also be understood as the creation of a world of its own that, however, “may still purport to contain some kind of ‘truth’ about, or grasp of, reality as a whole” (Halliwell, 5), and insofar contain and communicate an essence of the world or being in the world. Mimesis can mean both, “world-reflecting” or “world-creating”.<sup>23</sup>

Neither conception of mimesis, though is to be understood as a *representation* of the world. Mimesis in narrative is always, as evident from Davis’ argument above, carefully structured and imbued with ideology. Halliwell’s distinction simply adds to that argument that such an ideological narrative, in its relation to the world, can be either relating to the actual social world directly, or create a world that in its structure and ideology is recognizable for the reader as relating to the world or the social at large.

Both these positions, Davis’ analysis of the ideology of the novel, and Prendergast’s and Halliwell’s reinstatement of mimesis as an inevitable and relevant element of fiction that relates a tacit knowledge of social practice, serve well to be considered when looking at the immense proliferation of postcolonial, ethnic, and other minority literatures in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both, mimesis and ideological investigations provided a fertile ground for arguments of representation and representativeness in and of minority literatures.

The growth of these genres is directly related to social and political movements of the time, as a format to give voice and to gain voice for disenfranchised groups. The subsequent mushrooming of academic chairs and departments in these fields naturally emphasized this political aspect of texts, and a reading practice that considers texts, their subtexts, and/or omissions in texts as cultural or historical informants, in addition to and sometimes even above their literary qualities.<sup>24</sup> The resulting practice of symptomatic reading accounts for an emphasis on ideological elements of and in texts, as well as a text’s modes of representation of a depicted social group.

However, contemporary scholarship on mimesis strongly cautions against ‘representative’ interpretations of texts, especially of realist fiction - and even more so in the case of ethnic literature. At its core, any literary text is first and foremost marked by ambiguity. It does not serve any one function, nor have a specific meaning or message. What is more, any meaning is not inherent to the text, but created in the experience, in the relation of the text to the socio-cultural reality and situatedness of the reader. In its inherent ambiguity, the novel refuses and forecloses a

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Halliwell, p. 22ff.

<sup>24</sup> I do by no means intend to slight these academic practices and approaches, on the contrary, contemporary literary and cultural studies, philosophy, and intellectual discourses in general owe their present state of the art to the theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from New Criticism, Marxist theories and formalism to deconstruction, or postcolonial, queer, or cultural studies, and the subdivisions within such fields. Although these theories are often predominately concerned with what - strictly speaking - would at least in part be considered to lie outside the literary text, like history, issues of identity, class, or gender, literary research has greatly benefitted from these extensions of the field’s horizon.

clear direct message, it opens possibilities and perspectives that can provoke and stimulate. In doing so, the text effects different and multiple responses from the reader, both rational and emotional.

Consequently, it serves well to approach the analysis of a literary text not from any notion of its essence or message, but through reading experience,<sup>25</sup> that is to say what effect a text has on a specific reader. In her comprehensive study *Uses of Literature* (2008) Rita Felski collects such effects into four “modes of textual engagement”: recognition, knowledge, enchantment and shock.<sup>26</sup>

In her introduction, Felski proclaims to have written a manifesto for reading but against theological and ideological styles of reading. She advocates an approach to literary texts that allows for affect and emotional responses. Felski’s acknowledgment and valuing of the ‘seemingly irrational phenomena’ of art is one expression of a larger debate in the study of literature that vigorously turns its focus back to the aesthetic particularity of texts. That is not to say that ideological concerns and psychoanalytical approaches have been ousted from the debate, but instead of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’<sup>27</sup> that dominated scholarly investigations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the last decades saw a renewed interest in the surface of literary texts.

Felski calls for a refocus on the central feature of literature, the relationship of text and reader. She argues, that to focus on the text and the act of reading does not obliterate its potential political significance, nor is it a call to ignoring historical and social contexts, but “any ‘textual politics’ worth its weight will have to work its way through the particularities of aesthetic experience rather than bypassing them” (Felski 11). In focusing on the particularities of the individual experiences as well as the multi-layered complexity of literary texts, Felski contests master concepts and generalizing mythologies and approaches to text.

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<sup>25</sup> A focus on the reader is of course not a new approach in the study of literature. Reader response has seen increasing attention and scholarly research in both the U.S. and Germany since the 1960s and 1970s Cf. the body of work by renowned academics from C.S. Lewis to Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser or Hans-Robert Jauss.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Felski 2008, 14.

<sup>27</sup> The term ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ stems from Paul Ricoeur’s study of *Freud and Philosophy* (1970) where, in a comprehensive subchapter on “Interpretation as Exercise of Suspicion”, he outlines how, after Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, the “three masters of suspicion” (Ricoeur 33) we have started to doubt consciousness, and thus “[b]eginning with them, understanding is hermeneutics: henceforward, to seek meaning is no longer to spell out the consciousness of meaning, but to *decipher its expressions*” (ibid.). Though Alison Scott-Baumann in her recent study *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* argues that this often quoted phrase is usually used in a curtate form, misrepresenting Ricoeur’s work, using it synonymously with his outline of the ‘masters of suspicion’ which essentially amounts to “the failure to connect the phrase convincingly with Ricoeur’s work beyond his analysis of the masters of suspicion and to acknowledge or analyze his subsequent abandonment of the term” (Scott-Baumann 4). The reference to the term in this study may also fall within the frame of this criticism, as my interest here is to investigate contemporary theory’s deliberate move away of what has usually been referred to as ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ without going into that dialogue as such.

Felski's first category of reader experience or 'mode of textual engagement' is recognition. The question of recognition *in* the act of reading is one of the most enduring ideas in investigations, especially of lay reading. The notion of 'identification' with a fictional character suggests a sense of familiarity. However, re-cognition is not only about 'knowing again' but also about negotiating the unfamiliar with or into the familiar, it is thus also future oriented in the desire to learn more, while at the same time, this unknown is molded into or recognized through the frames of the familiar. Both aspects, familiarity and difference are part of this recognition process, resulting in self-intensification. Recognition as a mode or level of engagement with a text is thus comprehension of both the unfamiliar and the self.

Identification with literary characters in the reading process then always has a somewhat narcissistic element to it. Of course, 'identification' does not mean the actual imagined transposition into the text or the characters' lives. That would be a pathological mode of reading that can be found as a literary subject in such classical texts as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. On the contrary, through narrative techniques and especially vocalization, readers form structural alignments, sometimes even with unethical characters. However, they do so without being naive or uncritical towards either such characters' actions or their bias or justification narratives woven through the text.<sup>28</sup> This differentiation between fiction and reality, which is an intricate component of the reading process, is also stressed by Felski's use of the term 'recognition'<sup>29</sup> rather than 'identification.'

Recognition in reading, as Felski emphasizes is not only or even primarily about perceiving certain characters and situations as meaningful, and about comprehending a story. Rather, the effect in reading is that of being recognized by the text. That is to say, of feeling understood. Furthermore, there is a collective angle to this type of recognition, though that may be more obvious in other narrative media like film: the fact that others too consume this narrative and share this experience of recognition implicitly creates a sense or illusion of (momentary) communion with (anonymous) others. Recognition as an element of the reading process

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Felski, p. 44 "Matching up the identities of readers and characters, assuming that recognition requires direct resemblance, means, in essence, denying the metaphorical and self-reflexive dimension of literary representation". Famous examples for literary works that result in reader identification with unlikeable characters or those of questionable morale would be the protagonists of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, as well as most central characters in Philip Roth's novels or those of his Canadian counterpart Mordecai Richler, especially the protagonist of his last novel *Barney's Version*.

<sup>29</sup> Felski also clearly distinguishes between two meanings of recognition. The one she employs in her study is based on "comprehension, insight, and self-understanding" (ibid. 29), which in the reading experience results in illumination and a better self-understanding through the knowledge gained by recognizing the familiar and negotiating the unfamiliar. In contrast, the widely used political terminology refers to recognition not as knowledge, but *acknowledgement*, "a claim for acceptance, dignity and inclusion in public life" (ibid.). Such 'acknowledgment,' furthermore, is not just the acknowledgment of someone's existence but rather also always entails an affirmation of value (cf. Felski 47).

establishes the ambiguity of literature, it shows us (our) limits as it “oscillates between knowledge and acknowledgment, the epistemological and the ethical, the subjective and the social” (ibid. 49).

Yet to have any effect on the reader, the text first must grab their attention - or as Felski calls it ‘enchant’ the reader in the reading process. This ‘enchantment’ is “characterized by a state of intense involvement” (ibid. 55), it is a “sensuous and joyful immersion” (ibid. 58). Yet, in literary scholarship, the notion of ‘enchantment’<sup>30</sup> is frequently frowned upon and comes under severe scrutiny because criticism is understood to be a distanced, reflective, rational approach to the text. The critic’s role is to explain the text and its deeper meaning and composition, not to be seduced by it. However, “there is something elusive about aesthetic experience, an ineffable and enigmatic quality that resists rational analysis” (ibid. 56). This enigmatic quality of an artistic experience affects both, the critic and the lay reader, even though the mode of this affect and its effect differ significantly.<sup>31</sup> Enchantment, it should be pointed out, does not suggest texts of a fairy tale or mystical quality, on the contrary, realist fiction may hold an even stronger potential for intense enchantment of the reader than other types of texts, as the higher degree of recognition facilitate a more intense transposition. Yet, just as readers who recognize themselves in a character or story remain aware of the difference of fact and fiction, “we remain aware of our condition of enchantment, without such knowledge diminishing or diluting the intensity of our involvement” (Felski, 74). Explaining this awareness, Felski employs W.E.B. Du Bois’ term of double consciousness in our experience of art, of being aware and enchanted at the same time.

Enchantment, however, is not limited to story or characters or locations and objects in a text. On the contrary, literary enchantment is first and foremost situated on the level of language use, in a certain phrasing or the employment of literary techniques and tropes. Literature captures us by its defamiliarization<sup>32</sup> created through language and style. For example, a commentary or ironic narrative mode, while creating distance between the reader and the story level, can at the same time be the main source of the reader’s enchantment with the text.<sup>33</sup> Enchantment then is the

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<sup>30</sup> Again Felski differentiates between the use of the term to refer to an individual’s capacity to experience artistic transposition and a socio-political use, as in the Weberian sense of “disenchantment with the world”; cf. Max Weber’s famous diagnosis of the modern world as dominated by rationalism, intellectualism and disenchantment, argued in his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (originally published in German as a twofold essay in 1904 and 1905).

<sup>31</sup> In a similar fashion, Gabriele Schwab had also investigated the act of reading in the theoretical framework that informs her study *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen*, published in 1996. She focuses on reading as a transcultural and transhistorical engagement with ‘otherness’ in a general sense. Discussing the effect of literature on the individual reader (including the critic) she highlights that any interpretation is also informed by our subjectivity. Referring to the work of the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, Schwab states that reading as an “unconscious aesthetic experience . . . brings us in contact with various forms of internal otherness” (Schwab 26).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Victor Shklovsky’s influential essay “Art as Technique”.

<sup>33</sup> Among the texts in the case study selected for this study, an example for such an ironic narrative mode would be Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Another, even more striking example of defamiliarization can be found in Abha Dawesar’s novel *Family Values*, as the text refuses proper names and substitutes all of those with distinct

oscillation between the familiar and the unknown in the reading experience, as we relate the world we are enchanted by to our own social realities through “structures of pre-evaluation, including contextual clues, institutional norms, and ingrained expectations” (ibid. 75). Which leads to Felski’s third mode of engagement: knowledge.

Knowledge in this context means literature as a form of social knowledge, much in the sense of Prendergast’s notion of mimesis discussed above. Felski’s argument on this issue is close to the recent developments the mimesis debate, and she summarizes key positions on the topic in her analysis.<sup>34</sup> As Felski points out, the literary narrative does not merely reflect or mirror social knowledge but creatively reshapes it and distills, and thus has an impact on the reader which then again shapes subsequent experiences (both in reading and in life). Furthermore, the social knowledge of the text does not simply exist as content, or facts of a story, on the contrary, the communication of such knowledge, or the reader’s reception very much depends on form. The ambiguity of the literary text, the tropes, metaphors and stylistic elements employed on the language level all shape and form the reader’s perception.

The worldly insights we glean from literary texts are not derivative or tautological, not stale, second-hand scraps of history or anthropology, but depend on a distinctive repertoire of techniques, conventions, and aesthetic possibilities. Through their rendering of the subtleties of social interaction, their mimicry of linguistic idioms and cultural grammars, their unblinking attention to the materiality of things, texts draw us into imagined yet referentially salient worlds. They do not just represent, but make newly present, significant shapes of social meaning; they crystallize, not just in what they show but in their address to the reader” (ibid. 104)

The knowledge of literature is thus, as Felski summarizes, not to be located in its tension between fact and fictionality, but rather found in its ambiguity that carries options and insights that can at the same time mislead or mystify. Literature does not mean to proclaim knowledge but to carry tacit practical knowledge in plot, style and form.

On the question of *how* literature transports knowledge Felski emphasizes focalization. A limited perspective in a narrative voice does not signify limited knowledge. On the contrary, focalization seemingly grants the reader access to interiority of characters, and in so doing has the ability to broaden the reader’s perspective, adding a different point of view. Felski divides the modes of knowledge acquisition from literature into three categories: deep intersubjectivity (drawing the reader into the character’s point of view), ventriloquism (the use of language and speech patterns, like dialects and sociolects that convey milieu or cultural environments), and linguistic still life (the relevance of objects in the text). Insofar, literature is rarely a vehicle that

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descriptive markers. While both techniques may initially seem to create distance between text and reader, they in fact create a particular bond of intensified engagement.

<sup>34</sup> Felski especially goes into detail regarding Paul Ricoeur’s theory and his notion of *pre-figuration, configuration and transfiguration* or Mimesis 1, 2, and 3, cf. *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols.

proclaims knowledge, but rather one that carries social knowledge embedded in plot, style and form. This knowledge, then, is not so much actively acquired, but rather absorbed in the course of the reading experience. It follows, that literature often finds itself delivering knowledge that is emotive rather than factual.

Felski's fourth mode of engagement, shock, too relies on this emotive bond between reader and text. As with the previous categories, we need to differentiate between two forms of shock in relation to fiction. On the one hand, there is a narrated experience of shock, or trauma, and on the other hand, the text itself has the capacity to shock the reader, to unhinge us temporarily. Being confronted with characters who are shocked is different from being shocked as a reader. Shock is a re-action, usually both a physical and a psychological one. It is an authentic and immediate experience.

The most prominent genre of the first group of text, meaning fiction that deals with shock on the content level, would be the well-researched field of trauma literature. Narratives in this group convey the experience of shock in a fictive character. While we may classify the events and effects of events on a character as shocking, reading about these need not result in an experience of shock for readers.

The focus of Felski's study is not on the content level, but on reader experience. Shock as a mode of engagement means the reader's actual experience of shock in the course of his or her engagement with a text, a text's ability and way to unhinge the reader, even if only momentarily. Felski points out that the dismantling of many taboos and conventions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in our "blunted sensibility" (ibid. 107).<sup>35</sup> That, however, does not mean that the literary text lost its capacity to shock. Simply the topics, textual traits or modes of narration that induce shock may differ over time, just as they differ between cultures,<sup>36</sup> yet our general capacity to be shocked remains. It may even be heightened, because, as Felski states with reference to the work of the sociologist Georg Simmel, "[t]o be modern, it seems, is to be addicted to surprise and speed, to jolts of adrenalin and temporal rupture: to be a shockaholic" (ibid. 121). We have come to "a glamorizing of transgression" (ibid. 110) in our desire for the ever new.

Works of art can bring home, with exceptional vividness and graphic power, psychic dramas . . . Rather than serving up suffering at a distance, they allow us to witness it close up, magnified . . . What they lack in factual truth they more than make up for in emotional force. (ibid. 114)

But, the impact of shock for the reader in a psychological sense is always already limited by the very act of reading, as Felski herself suggests calling on the idea of double consciousness. While

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<sup>35</sup> Felski here builds her argument on Frederic Jameson and especially his essay on "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in the collection *Postmodern Culture* edited by Hal Foster.

<sup>36</sup> Shock in this respect is very much like the notion of the abject analyzed in detail by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, which is discussed in more detail in chapters 7.1 and 7.2.1 below.



we are momentarily halted by a phrase or event in the text, we are simultaneously always also aware of our act of reading. We never fully lose sight of the fact that the shock is only fiction. The unhinging effect of shock cannot strike us in a profound way, as we are aware of our ultimate safety. Shock in literature thus has the immediate effect of rattling yet cannot emulate the full impact of shock.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, shock as an engineered aesthetic experience also treads a difficult path. If employed too cautiously or if it merely reiterates established formats of shock, it may have no shock-effect at all. If it is, on the other hand, too effective it may evoke a revulsion (bodily or psychologically) that will end in the reader's engagement with the text and thus foreclose actual impact.

The unique quality that makes literary texts compelling, then, is that the reader feels recognized by the text, can relate to it in the tacit knowledge of social practice it conveys, and is emotionally engaged through both, enchantment and shock. For us as critics this means that to approach texts via their effect on the reader, it is necessary to recognize "that literature may be valued for different, even incommensurable reasons" (ibid. 135). Such a plethora of reasons and their inherent ambiguities can only be unraveled in an individualized approach that steers clear of preformed categories. Of course, it is impossible, as Felski also stresses, to approach a text without any already pre-figured consciousness. But, to avoid the pitfalls of (especially symptomatic) approaches of literary analysis, we need to be aware of and critically scrutinize any such preconfigurations. At the same time, we need to allow for the enchantment, shock and other emotive reading experiences to impact us not only as lay readers but also as critics, as these point us towards that elusive quality that makes the text.

The question that then arises is 'how should we read?' How should we approach a text, if we are not looking for what is hidden, concealed or the unconscious in the text?

What recent scholarship, in particular Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best's notion of 'Surface Reading', and Derek Attridge's detailed analysis of 'Responsible Reading' suggests are modes of reading that engage with the particular text while consciously trying to avoid or resist generalizing and instrumentalized interpretations. In short, the goal would be an individualistic, reader focused approach with affinities to close reading, but still with an awareness of the reading

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<sup>37</sup> That is to say that shock as part of the act of reading hardly has the psychological consequences of real shock (with the potential to turn into trauma), resulting in a momentary disabling of mind and body, an absence of emotions, an inability to narrate, as well as overtly emotional reactions of fear and feeling threatened (cf. Felski 113 on potential effects of shock, however, Felski here does not clearly distinguish between real shock and being shocked during the act of reading).

practices of the theories influenced by or originating in political and social movements of the past decades.

‘Surface reading’ has only recently emerged in the debates among literary scholars<sup>38</sup> of how to approach text. It sees itself as a reaction to the currently dominant method of ‘symptomatic reading.’ As Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, two of the key scholars in this debate point out, in the wake of poststructuralism and the linguistic turn of the 1970s, linguistics, psychoanalysis and Marxist theory became somewhat academic ‘metalanguages’ influencing and changing many disciplines.

It was not just any idea of interpretation that circulated among the disciplines, but a specific type that took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter. . . . We were trained in symptomatic reading, became attached to the power it gave to the act of interpreting, and find it hard to let go of the belief that texts and their readers have an unconscious. (Marcus and Best, 1)

This mode of academic reading aiming at the uncovering of a hidden ideology has, naturally, been especially dominant with regard to literatures emerging from social movements and political debates, like feminist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies.

Symptomatic readings, according to Marcus and Best, pay attention to potential latent meanings and symbolic elements in the texts, frequently emphasizing absences or gaps and interrogating what such eclipses signify and what power structures enforced them. In a symptomatic reading, “they signify the questions that motivate the text, but that the text itself cannot articulate” (ibid. 3). Surface reading, in contrast, focuses on what is present in the text, on its surface instead of assuming a depth in need of discovery to unveil the text’s meaning. “[W]e take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; . . . A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*” (ibid. 9). Such an idea of reading is, of course, not new, and Marcus and Best continue to outline certain types that qualify as surface reading from close reading that takes surface “*as the intricate verbal structure of literary language*” (ibid. 10) to a focus on materiality and the cognitive processes of reading, or affective reading practices. To these they add three more foci: “*Attention to surface as a practice of critical description,*” (ibid. 11), because depth lies in the text themselves not outside (in the sense of context, horizon, the unconscious or history);

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<sup>38</sup> The discussion gained current from a panel at the 2006 ACLA (American Comparative Literature Association) conference in honor of the twenty-year anniversary of Fredric Jameson’s seminal work *The Political Unconscious* (that had introduced American academia to symptomatic reading) titled “Symptomatic Reading and Its Discontents.” This was followed up by a conference on the topic in 2008 at Columbia University resulting in the special issue *The Way We Read Now of Representations* (108, Fall 2009), edited by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best. The 2010 MLA meeting in Los Angeles also had a substantial number of panels on the topic of reading practices and surface reading, and discussions between the two camps at that conference – symptomatic and surface reading – occasionally turned rather intense.

“*[s]urface as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts*” (ibid. 12) as looking at what is present (in social structures as well as literary patterns) instead of trying to impose generalizations and master narratives for the interpretation; and “*[s]urface as literal meaning*” (ibid. 13) in the sense of just reading, emphasizing the text through description.<sup>39</sup> A more descriptive than evaluative approach subsequently means a more particularistic approach, taking the individual text with its specificities and links into focus rather than fitting it into structures and relationships with other texts and contexts.

Surface reading, which strives to describe texts accurately, might easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are. We want to reclaim from this tradition the accent on immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value), for we understand that attentiveness to the artwork as itself as kind of freedom. (ibid. 16)

By that they mean “to be free from having a political agenda that determines in advance how we interpret texts,” but it also and more importantly means to “not reduce them to instrumental means to an end” (ibid.).

Effectively, surface reading in practice means a very descriptive approach of literary analysis that is interested in the aesthetics of the text, as any ‘message’ a text may aim to convey would be transmitted via this medium. Surface reading differs from close reading, as it comes out of an awareness of power dynamics and art’s unavoidable complicity with the system in which it is created. Surface reading claims that as much as texts may conceal structures, they also embody them. Advocates for surface reading do not proclaim that they want to either replace symptomatic approaches nor that they are able to or even aim at providing general models for interpretation. They just call for a refocusing on the literary text and in so doing, to allow ourselves as critics to be immersed – or as Felski had called it ‘enchanted.’ Our subjectivity in describing may at times prove helpful to see texts more clearly and at other times it may not be beneficial. Yet to stay on the surface of the text means to engage with the presence of the text and thus also with our role as a reader and our unavoidable subjectivity in recounting the reading experience.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>40</sup> The conscious inclusion of the critic’s subjectivity also has repercussions in a different way: the complicity of novels with the hegemonic system discussed at the outset of this chapter. The novel is enmeshed in systemic power networks, and so is the reader. These power relations then meet in the act of reading where they may reinforce, complement or oppose each other and thus influence the reading experiencing. In addition, as highlighted by Prendergast, Davis, or in detail by Joseph Slaughter’s study on the Bildungsroman, this complicity is often masked as a site for resistance. Yet, as Prendergast and Davis outlined, by potentially addressing the desires of the reader in the reading while keeping him/her engaged in this solitary act, resistance is already precluded. Slaughter takes the argument up from there emphasizing that even if novels may call for certain changes, as the novel of formation would be prone to do, they immediately foreclose the emergence of other demands, as all else is presented as natural and thus unquestionable. Both factors then have contributed to the image of the novel not as a site for resistance but rather complacency. A text’s complicity with the system is, of course, not only intrinsic to a novel or story itself, but also extends to the literary field and the market. Especially ethnic literature is marketed along the dominant themes of the exotic and of identity politics. Paratexts create a very distinct angle of approach for the reader, implicitly foreclosing other contexts for the texts reception.

This subjectivity therefore needs to be acknowledged in the interpretation of a literary text, as it constitutes a fundamental element of the analysis. In the vein of reader-response criticism, Derek Attridge points out that any claims or statements made about a text are not about the literary text in itself, in terms of unchanging factual statements, but are rather about the individual experience of the literary work.<sup>41</sup> In his comprehensive study, *The Singularity of Literature* he therefore advertises that we should view literary texts as events rather than art objects. Regarding the text as performance fuses the reader and the act of reading with the text.

While the act of reading is central to Attridge's approach, and I will come back to his argument in more detail below, the main focus of his study is on an age-old question of literary studies: What distinguishes a literary text? - and, how to do justice to a literary text in an analysis or interpretation?

Attridge approaches the topic through the notion of 'otherness': No analysis or critical commentary can ever fully explain a literary text. There is always an element that transcends explanation. Attridge refers to that as 'other', as that which cannot be explained or fully understood by existing cultural norms and configurations. "Otherness is that which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving" (Attridge *Singularity*, 19). Yet it can never be fully other, as it can only be perceived as other through the frames of the familiar. The other is not an absolute other, but an other in relation to the subject. Furthermore, by being incorporated into the subject's ideoculture,<sup>42</sup> it becomes part of that individual's cultural codes and changes his/her cultural horizon.

If such creativity, creating something that challenges the ideoculture, has a wider impact and is a form of creativity that "marks a significant departure from the norms of the cultural matrix within which it is produced and received," Attridge attributes the work to have true 'originality', that is to say artworks that break new grounds. Originality, however, is also somewhat of a historical concept, insofar as the inclusion of what was once 'other' and challenged the established cultural norms, eventually changed the cultural field for all practitioners. Through incorporation into the cultural matrix, it ceased to be other, and thus original. This tendency is, for example, obvious in the historical development of poetry through the centuries.

Yet works of literature possess the quality to disrupt our ideoculture across time and/or space. This power exudes from a work's 'inventiveness'. Inventiveness goes beyond mere originality insofar as a sense of inventiveness is retained, even after the cultural field adapted. A truly original and inventive work of art also engages with and alludes to "the system out of which

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Attridge p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ideoculture, in the way Attridge uses it, means the "totality of the cultural codes constituting a subject, at a given time" (Attridge *Singularity*, 22).

it emerges and which it challenges” (ibid., 48). Furthermore, it will, even if or as it is incorporated into the cultural matrix, spark new inventiveness, because such works of art “*depend* on their resistance to accommodation across time; and it is through this resistance that they make further artistic invention possible” (ibid., emphasis in the original).

Otherness, originality, or inventiveness, however, do not ‘exist’ as entities, they are rather experiences in the act of reading. Literature, according to Attridge, should therefore be understood as an event as it does not carry meaning outside of the act of reading. And while each literary event is only experienced by one individual, and can thus be said to only impact ideoculture, it achieves that status of literature, if a significant number of readers acknowledge its inventiveness.<sup>43</sup>

Here, Attridge’s argument arrives at its core: the singularity of literature.<sup>44</sup> By singularity, he means to conceive of literature as an event, performed each time anew, that challenges the reader through the otherness it introduces and by its inventiveness. Understood as an event, singularity can never be fixed. Any piece of literature I read today and reread tomorrow will change with each act of reading. However, “one defining characteristic of literature is that it remains open to reinterpretation” (ibid. 56). While each event will differ, a work’s otherness, originality and inventiveness may be able to affect the reader, though differently, in each act of reading and re-reading. While the literary object remains the same, the literary work in the event of reading continues to change with each encounter. “Singularity arises from the work’s constitution as a set of active relations, put in play in the reading, that never settle into a fixed configuration” (ibid., 68).

If, as Attridge argues, a literary work is distinguished by otherness, inventiveness and singularity, it follows that it “cannot be apprehended by means of the application of existing norms, or even by an extension of those norms” (ibid., 80). He therefore advocates for a responsible or creative reading.

To read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind’s tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work. It involves a suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the work’s inaugural power. (ibid.)

Such a responsible reading is by definition limited. First, because it can each time only capture the singular act of reading performed, but moreover, because a truly responsible reading, doing justice to the work’s singularity, will also have to show that no explanation or description can

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Attridge 60f.

<sup>44</sup> Attridge uses/coins the term ‘singularity’ rather than uniqueness, as “something can be unique, yet may lack central characteristics of that which defines singularity. Something can be unique yet be fully comprehensible from within a framework of established cultural norms (cf. ibid., 64ff.).

every fully exhaust the work's inventiveness. The pleasure of reading and re-reading lies in the element of surprise, and a lingering sentiment of wonder.

A responsible reading will consciously resist assimilating tendencies, to interpret the work within the framework of the familiar and established cultural norms and processes. It will acknowledge multiplicity, complexities of various simultaneous, even contradicting interpretations and focus on the singular event of reading. The resulting account may likely be a rather descriptive depiction of both, the literary text and the reader's situation, reactions, and ideoculture. Responsible reading is an exercise in resistance to established frames of perception in order to apprehend the singularity and inventiveness.

Moreover, a responsible reading of a literary text, while still collecting that which is unique in form and content for analysis, will always also be a "response to a singularity that cannot be analyzed, yet remains recognizable across all repetitions of reading" (ibid., 87). The pleasure of rereading, then, is not only to re-encounter that which is now familiar; knowing what will happen in the plot does not void the reading experience of its sense of suspense. A literary work does not create suspense in what will happen. It is rather the processes of how tension is created in the text that will repeatedly keep the reader in suspense and enchant him/her. The inventiveness of a literary work could thus be said to be measurable by its capacity to be read over and over again and still create a sentiment of wonder for the reader, because it can never be fully assimilated into the familiar.

While inventiveness on the level of language and form may be the most prominent and obvious kind that comes to mind when talking about literature, it is not the only form of inventiveness we find in literary works. Narratives of fairly conventional form and style, like the mostly realist fictions considered in the present study, may hold inventiveness in other elements, be it the imagery, narrative mode, or the depiction of human interrelations, their presentation of new ideas, or unfamiliar emotions or emotive responses, all of which "depend on the works' specific use of language and come into existence in the event of performance" (ibid. 120).

For example, Abha Dawesar's novel *That Summer in Paris*, surprises the reader in the development of a passionate, erotic love relationship between an octogenarian Nobel laureate in literature and a young, budding female writer. Inventiveness here lies in the text's sensuality. The narrative creates increasing tension in the unconventional love relationship through the use of the characters individual experience and response to the arts - literature, paintings, music, and sculptures - as well as its appeal to all other senses - smells, touches, tastes. The increasing sensuality draws the reader into the characters' web of desire, while the text at the same time also emphasizes the fleetingness and transience of sensual experience.

In contrast, Dawesar's following novel, *Family Values*, focuses on the abject. The text reinforces that underlying central thread of repulsion, as it creates and permanently enforces a distance between the reader and the text through its refusal to use any proper names. Every location and every character are called by a dominant feature or their role in relation to the protagonist 'the boy'. This use of language forces the reader into the position of an observer, through the focalizer protagonist's perspective, while a story of greed and corruption unfolds, set in the slum areas of a major Indian city.

In Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, inventiveness is similarly located in the form of address, however in this case by explicitly including the reader in the address through the use of the second person pronoun 'you'. Suspense is created and increasingly heightened throughout the text by the ironic mode of narration that adds ambivalence to every utterance and event told within the story.

The possibly most conventional narrative of my case study in terms of narrative style would be Rakesh Satyal's comic novel *Blue Boy*. This coming of age novel of a confused early teenage boy compels through its comedy that time and again propels the reader into feeling pity for the young protagonist, while the situational comedy has a high cringe factor, resulting to an emotive response from the reader.

Saleema Nawaz's short story collection *Mother Superior*, finally, is marked by a high degree in fragmentation. The disconnection on the level of form mirrors and thus reinforces the disconnection between characters on the plot level. Nawaz explores a variety of family formations, yet with each one of them reaches the same conclusion of disconnect and the ultimate impossibility to care for and understand the other.

What these fictions ultimately demonstrate is, that "acts of literature do not operate directly upon the political realm" (Attridge, *Singularity*, 119), however, a work's references to historical events, cultural codes, or mental or emotional states, encoded in the literary form still have an effect in the act of reading. "Literature—when it is responded to as literature—is not a political instrument, yet it is deeply implicated in the political" (ibid., 120).

My reading of the selected texts will attempt a responsible reading but focus less on the inventiveness of individual linguistic properties, as the inventiveness and alterity of a realist novel is to be found rather in the interplay of form and content, between unique language configuration and the reshaping of cultural materials. The descriptive analysis emerging from such a reading may at times show similarities with an instrumentalized reading, as socio-political and cultural agendas of the text will naturally come into play at times or within particular contexts. The novel is, after all, deeply imbued with ideology, as Davis compellingly argued. Yet, my analysis will

focus on my reading practice and on the surface of the texts, looking for the singularity of each sample.



### 3 Setting the Socio-Cultural Stage

If, as the previous chapter established, literary texts carry relevance or a relation to the real world in a tacit knowledge of social practice, the social and cultural context in which texts are produced, set, and read, constitutes a pertinent element in the production of meaning. In my reading of the texts in this case study, some considerations of contemporary social developments have emerged as significant, and certain reflections have been triggered by individual texts' particular modes of resistance to an instrumentalized reading as ethnic or diasporic literature. Consequently, some remarks on current socio-economic developments seem appropriate, in order to contextualize my reading experience. The following debate is not intended as a socio-cultural matrix into which the analysis of the individual texts is to be molded or against which these were read. I do by no means try to simply replace categorizations like ethnic or diasporic literature with different labels, based on other parameters. Rather, the following investigation should be seen as an autonomous brief survey of some social developments, in particular with regard to globalization, questions of collective identity configurations, and the role of the individual, as these emerged as the kind of questions, the texts of my case study are entangled with while resisting a categorization as ethnic or diasporic literature.

#### 3.1 The Global(ized) Condition

With regard to the term globalization,<sup>45</sup> we need to differentiate between two dominant uses or ideas of the term. On the one hand, there are economic and political *processes* (like political internationalization, growing economic interdependency, or technological developments, etc.) that have over the course of the last centuries resulted in increased global interconnectivity and interdependence. Over the last decades, these processes, that have shaped modernity, have increased exponentially, resulting in what David Harvey called “time-space compression”<sup>46</sup> that is often cited as a key characteristic of globalization. On the other hand, as especially research

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<sup>45</sup> For an overview and summary of different approaches to defining globalization see, for example, Anthony McGrew's chapter on “A Global Society?” in the volume *Modernity and Its Futures*. McGrew differentiates between mono-causal explanatory models (or process-oriented), and multi-causality approaches, esp. the work of Anthony Giddens and Roland Robertson, that focus on effects of globalization rather than its origins. While McGrew himself acknowledges, that such a distinction was an over-simplification and that no theoretical approach “fit snugly within either category” (69), he holds that the distinction was useful to point out different logics in approaching the theorization of globalization. His survey is of interest as a sketch of the historical trajectory of the debate on definitions of globalization, yet it simultaneously shows the rapid datedness of work in this field.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 1989, esp. p. 240 and chapter 17, p. 284 ff. While Harvey in this study looks at the trajectory of time-space compression and how it shaped the contemporary world since the advent of modernity, the term as such is solely intended as a description of the postmodern condition. I do not mean to imply that Harvey is a supporter of a continuity-approach to defining globalization, regarding it as a stage of modernity.

from social and cultural studies has shown, globalization can also be approached by analyzing the *consequences* (increased mobility and migration, instant interconnectivity, etc.) of globalization processes, which are the observable current status quo in the economy, politics and social systems; and by looking at *manifestations* of globalization in social practice (e.g. transculturalism and transnational links and networks, an awareness of decentralization of power from politics to finance, a certain powerlessness of the individual and consequently a sense of precarity etc.).

A focus on consequences and manifestations of globalization makes apparent that our current era is marked by a changing social consciousness distinctly different from modernity.<sup>47</sup> Such a focus on manifestations of globalization, shows that although processes of globalization may only have changed in intensity, but not essence since the onset of modernity, the impact on the social over the past few decades has a significantly different quality. Globalization, then, is not just a stage of late modernity,<sup>48</sup> but rather constitutes the onset of a new world-system, to use Immanuel Wallerstein's term.<sup>49</sup> Looking at world-systems analysis, a model for sociological inquiry Wallerstein developed in the 1970s and '80s, one needs to distinguish between his methodological approach, and his case study, the modern capitalist world-system. Based on the fact that his case study of the capitalist world-system arrestingly outlines the global economic interdependencies since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, critics have argued that his model focuses predominately on the economic aspects of globalization, stipulating a continuity throughout modernity. However, his approach ought to get greater recognition in the globalization debate not so much for the in-

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. the essay "What is Globalization?" by sociologist Roland Robertson, (one of the major pioneers in globalization studies generally credited with the introduction of the concept of "glocalization" to the English-speaking scholarly debate in the 1990s), and his co-author Kathleen E. White in *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization*. In this article, Robertson and White stress that globalization is not only intensified (inter)connectivity, but "that an increasing global consciousness runs in complex ways hand in hand . . . with increasing connectivity" (56). This aspect is not immediately manifest in observable processes, and thus frequently neglected in mono-disciplinary approaches to globalization. The authors emphasize, inter alia, that globalization was constituted by the four major facets of human life, the political, the cultural, the social and the economic, however not in any distinguishable way, but with these dimensions being heavily intertwined. As a result, an analysis of processes or developments of globalization would be insufficient without at the same time investigating the changes in social and cultural consciousness.

<sup>48</sup> Zygmunt Bauman in his 1993 study *Postmodern Ethics* emphasizes that the great social issues humankind struggles with have not changed so much as our approach to them. For example, modernity brought about secularization and individualization in the dominance of reason since the Enlightenment, yet modernity's approach is to react to challenges "with coercive normative regulation in political practice, and the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations in theory" (Bauman 1993, 4). More recent approaches, informed and shaped by a globalized consciousness and understanding of social processes, acknowledge complexity, chaos, and a lack of determinism.

<sup>49</sup> Wallerstein, an American Marxist sociologist, had not only had a significant impact on scholarship in sociology and economics, but his work is also reflected in the humanities and especially in cultural studies. An example would be the collection *Culture, Globalization and the World-System* edited by Anthony D. King. This volume is based on a one-day symposium held at the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1989. It includes contributions by King, Stuart Hall, renowned globalization scholars like Roland Robertson or Ulf Hannerz as well as Immanuel Wallerstein himself. While the collection is by now fairly dated, it offers an introduction to the globalization debate at the time and the two preliminary essays by Stuart Hall, which argue along the lines of Wallerstein in some ways, comprehensively outline the complexity of the globalization with regard to cultures and social practices.

depth depiction of processes of globalization, but rather because it also provides an assessment of the present as a period of turmoil, the outcome of which is uncertain and inherently unpredictable.

His methodology is constituted by five core aspects: (1) unidisciplinarity; (2) a structural TimeSpace<sup>50</sup> approach, which also results in (3) the idea of ‘historical systems’ rather than societies as the unit of analysis; (4) seeing history as non-teleological with progress being an option, not an outcome; and (5) a questioning of the validity of general scientific rules. In sociological practice this means to foreground a double time structure of cyclical time and the *long durée*, a focus on complexity, and contextualization of the particular. Furthermore, assumptions that sciences (both social and natural) can deduct general laws from the observation of the particular are re-examined. World-systems theory rather suggests the inverse approach, to move from the abstract to the concrete, specific, complex. This last argument has almost prophetic qualities, seeing as the same focus on the particular is now advertised in literary studies, and can also be found in later sociological and anthropological research on the impact of globalization.

In his 1996 study *Modernity at Large*, the Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, for example, proposes a transdisciplinary approach that is similar to Wallerstein’s demands for analysis. Appadurai developed a concept of overlapping -scapes, evoking the metaphor of changeable, unfixed landscapes whose appearance is also a question of the observer’s perspective. Appadurai’s model proposes to look at global interaction via five areas that dominate contemporary societies: ethnicity, media, technological developments, finance and ideologies. However, he does not see these as separable or definable areas and thus adds the suffix ‘-scapes’ emphasizing a plurality, fluidity, and irregularity of shapes by drawing on the imagery of landscape. These conceptual landscapes – ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, technoscapescapes, financescapescapes and ideoscapescapes – are “deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors” (Appadurai, 1996, 33). While these areas depend on each other, coexist, overlap, and influence one another, the complexity in which this occurs is, if at all, only intelligible retrospectively. Appadurai calls for a version of chaos theory as a possibly model for explanations of global cultural flows. Resulting from such an awareness of the intrinsic complexity of existence is not only the obvious necessity to investigate particular individual instances of social (inter)action rather than to develop grand universalizing theories, but moreover the realization that we can only investigate retrospectively and should not assume that one can apply such analysis to predict future developments.

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<sup>50</sup> Wallerstein’s notion of TimeSpace, of course, also reverberates Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope – transliterated as ‘time-space’ (cf. his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” originally published in 1937, published in English in the collection *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: Univ. Texas Press, 1981, 84–258); which can be said to have then be taken up by David Harvey’s concept of ‘time-space compression.’

What both approaches highlight is that the changes to our social consciousness brought about by globalization have replaced the belief systems of progress and general unifying theories that had shaped much of modernity. These have been replaced by an awareness of fluidity, complexity, and the precariousness of the individual.

Although, Wallerstein may have used the capitalist world-system of modernity as his central case study, and thus often been interpreted as focusing on the economic aspects of globalizations, the conclusions he draws from this analysis about the state of the modern world-system at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, actually manifest the end of modernity and the fragile and precarious state of a world in change. He outlines how the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have seen the modern world-system in crisis, as the mechanisms that drive capitalism – labor, input, and taxation – have been exhausting themselves. The global market is running out of peripheries which drives the cost factors to escalate too quickly. Furthermore, the same time period has seen political disillusionment. As Wallerstein diagnosed, “those difficulties ... *cannot* be resolved within the framework of the system, but instead can be overcome only by going outside of and beyond the historical system of which the difficulties are a part” (Wallerstein 2004, 76, emphasis in the original). That, according to Wallerstein, results in a bifurcation of choices or possible future directions which then construes a chaotic social situation where “the system tends to oscillate wildly” (ibid. 90) between options.

This instability can lead to considerable anxiety and therefore violence as people try to preserve acquired privileges and hierarchical rank in a very unstable situation. In general, this process can lead to social conflicts that take a quite unpleasant form. (ibid. 77)

The crisis is further aggravated by the paradoxical situation that the system in crisis clings to its accustomed ways, because people seek “security by persisting in their behavior” (ibid.). Especially this last aspect can currently be clearly observed in societies around the globe with the increase of nationalisms and fundamentalisms as attempts to ‘preserve traditions.’ The crisis or rather the impending end of modernity’s capitalist world-system results in insecurities and instability of the economic, political and social realms that will trigger a spectrum of responses from the global social, from a traditionalist turn to those who embrace it to those who become voiceless victims in the wake of the new system.

One example of a social body that is deeply affected by globalization are diasporic and ethnicity-based group memberships. Due to the high factor of mobility usually found among migrant communities, their transnationalism, and their ability to communicate and live between cultures, diasporas may at first glance look like ideal group constellations fit for the changing

world. However, at a closer look, they turn out to actually be maladapted to the new social consciousness evolving out of manifestations of globalization.

### 3.2 The Problem of Diaspora

Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the term diaspora was fairly unproblematic in so far as it was used almost exclusively within discourses around the dispersal of Jewish, Greek or African people. But, late modernity and globalization have intensified new compositions of social groups around the globe, reshaping modes of group memberships and the concept of collective identities. With migration as a major force behind these changes, the term diaspora has seen an immense proliferation in academic discourses since the 1980s, a proliferation that prominently manifested itself with the establishment of the academic journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* in 1991. With the term quickly embracing not only groups whose affiliation was founded in a shared geographical and cultural origin left behind, but also group memberships based on sexual preferences, gender, and eventually almost any minority or disenfranchised collective,<sup>51</sup> the debate around the term's definition naturally has also remained central to such academic debates, with two main approaches. Especially in the earlier debates, taxonomies and lists of characteristics, dominated the field.<sup>52</sup> Faced with the obvious shortcomings of such classifications less rigid, more dialectical models emerged. In the following, I will briefly discuss one central example from either camp to illustrate the benefits and shortcomings of these in defining diaspora, and furthermore try to establish why diaspora should – in our time of a globalized social – be regarded with great caution. This includes the label of diasporic or ethnic literature that the market applies all too easily to writing by authors of ethnic heritage. Such labels, be it based on regional origin, religious affiliations, certain political associations or ethnicity-based groups, shape and limit the discursive field in which they are situated. Far from neutral, the act of labeling, as much as an adherence to such classifications by group members, are political acts that bear the potential of violence via exclusion/inclusion, which also makes such groups an ideal target for populist mobilization. Our current transitory phase of globalization palpably illustrates the paradox of on the one hand an increasing awareness of the oppressive violence of group membership labels, and

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<sup>51</sup> Proponents of the diversification of the term, like Floya Anthias, even saw the situatedness of diaspora exclusively within an ethnicity context as a restriction, as such an understanding of diaspora “fails to examine trans-ethnic commonalities and relations and does not adequately pay attention to differences of gender and class” as she points out in her 1990 essay “Evaluating ‘Diaspora’: Beyond Ethnicity?” published in *Sociology* 32:3 (August 1998) 557-580.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. for example William Safran's influential essay “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” in the inaugural issue of *Diaspora* where he established six core characteristics. Safran's definition became the starting point of discussion for many later attempts at defining ‘diaspora,’ as evident, for example, in James Clifford, 304f., or Robin Cohen, 1998, p. 21ff. as well as 2009, p. 6.

on the other hand the individuals' search for stability and belonging that draw us towards group affiliations. Diaspora, with its origin in migration, dispersal or displacement may at first glance seem to not only share the positive characteristics of group memberships by providing stability and community, but also be ideally situated in a globalized world, providing a space and voice for minorities. Yet upon closer investigation such an assumption of affinity between diaspora and globalization as mutually supportive is misguided. On the contrary, diaspora discourses may have turned against the groups and keep them disenfranchised by locking them into their difference.

The two different types of diaspora definitions to be examined in a bit more details here, before turning to a critical evaluation of the benefits and threats of diasporic identity assumptions in a globalized world, are the taxonomy approach of Robin Cohen, a British sociologist and director of the International Migration Institute at the University of Oxford; and studies that focus more on social and political networks the diaspora is located within, giving more emphasis to particularities as well as the lived experience of diasporas, as for example in the approach of James Clifford.

Robin Cohen's seminal study *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, first published in 1997 and published as a revised second edition in 2008 offers a comprehensive historical overview of the term and of groups that have traditionally been considered a diaspora. Throughout these case studies or chapters, he applies and adapts a set of characteristics that he stated at the outset as the core characteristics that define diasporic collectives.

The second edition even more than the first one, addresses itself to university students and beginners in the field.<sup>53</sup> The study is well structured and informed, however, the very objective, to provide a conclusive taxonomy for the phenomenon of diasporas globally and throughout history, is rather overly zealous. While the chapters dealing with more historical forms of diasporas are comprehensive in their scope and presentation, the closer Cohen gets to contemporary phenomena, the more troubled his analysis becomes. This is inevitable, as the processes he describes are far from settled. It is hardly surprising that the last chapters on what he called 'cultural diaspora' in the first edition and terms 'deterritorialized diaspora' in the later version, as well as the chapters on globalization and on the futures of diasporas are the ones that received most of the revision work between the editions. This need for revision is somewhat obvious due to the contemporary nature of these still ongoing social developments that necessitate

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<sup>53</sup> This intended readership may explain some of the more objectionable similes or metaphors Cohen uses in his description of various phenomena, especially those from horticultural analogies to overused images like the strands of a rope in his conclusion.

the incorporation of changes that occurred in the decade in-between the editions. Yet, it also signifies deeper conceptual issues as the concluding section below will show.

The strength of Cohen's study lies in its attempt to encompass all variants of diasporas up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while at the same time giving credit to particularities and allowing space for differences. In order to be able and carry out such a project, Cohen, in the introduction to the second volume, explicitly emphasizes that, as a scholar, one needs to work with a critical toolkit. It is not enough for any social formation to claim being a diaspora – as a purely emic form of definition – nor for researchers to only investigate groups with respect to diasporic characteristics. Cohen stresses, that we need a set of methods from the social sciences to conduct proper research and he suggests “four tools of social science . . . (emic/etic claims, the time dimension, common features and ideal types) to help us find a middle path in delineating a diaspora” (Cohen 2008, 15).

With regard to common features, Cohen has taken up William Safran's taxonomy and elaborated it from six to nine key features<sup>54</sup> to define the term diaspora, emphasizing that no particular form of a diaspora would likely meet all the criteria nor would they be stable over time. Like Safran before him, his claim is rather that in order to qualify as a diaspora at least several of these would have to be met. At the same time, having such a set of features should counter an all too vast dispersal of the term into a variety of new fields of discourse.

Where Safran listed a dispersal from an original 'center' to two or more foreign regions, Cohen suggests to break this key characteristic into two options: a) violent dispersal that would often be linked to trauma, and 2) migration in pursuit of economic gain. By implication, he regards 'dispersal' not so much as an act than an outcome. From such a reading of Safran it is clear that most of the non-trauma related diasporas of Cohen's classification would not easily fit into Safran's grid. Consequently, Cohen adds the additional diaspora feature of “expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions” (Cohen 2008,

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<sup>54</sup> Cohen's full list reads: “1. Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions; 2. alternatively or additionally, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions; 3. a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, suffering and achievements; 4. an idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation; 5. the frequent development of a return movement to the homeland that gains collective approbation even if many in the group are satisfied with only a vicarious relationship or intermittent visits to the homeland; 6. a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate; 7. a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance of the possibility that another calamity might befall the group; 8. a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement even where home has become more vestigial; and 9. the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism” (Cohen 2008, 17 and Cohen 1997, 26 with a variant of 4 and shorter version of 5.).

17).<sup>55</sup> Cohen's other additions to Safran's original list of features include "a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries" and "the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism" (ibid.). The increased connectivity as well as giving room to the possibility that the idea of return may lose its desirability are two concessions to account for contemporary developments in migrant communities.<sup>56</sup>

Cohen's list stresses the notion of homeland as essential to the diaspora and in most of the features he lists, this homeland seems geographically definable. However, here too, the changes between the editions highlights the developments in diaspora discourses over the last decade. While in the first edition, Cohen only listed the "idealization of the putative ancestral home" (Cohen 1997, 26), the later version explicitly allows for both, "the real or imagined ancestral home" (Cohen 2008, 17). Secondly, the revision also altered the significance of return for the self-perception of a diaspora, as it allows that "the frequent development of a return movement to the homeland . . . gains collective approbation even if many in the group are satisfied with only a vicarious relationship or intermittent visits to the homeland" (Cohen 2008, 17). These two shifts on the homeland idea, including the imaginary homeland as a possibility, and making the idea of an actual return optional or non-permanent, illustrate both the increased variety of groups who claimed the diaspora label over the last decades, as well as the growing complexity of academic discourses on the issue. Ironically, Cohen's elaboration of Safran's list of characteristics results in a more exclusivist and thus more static frame of definition. While it may be more precise in differentiating among current phenomena, it at the same time offers little room for new developments of transmigration and other forms of transnational networks.

With the increased spreading of the term to describe new migrant (and even non-migrant) collective identities, and a growing academic engagement with the subject, a need for a critical definition of the term was inevitable.<sup>57</sup> However, the objective of any definition should be to design a model that would be both open enough to accommodate new developments and conceptually specific enough to keep the term productive. Yet, Cohen's almost descriptive

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<sup>55</sup> By not qualifying 'dispersal', Safran's taxonomy may actually prove to be more useful in this aspect, as it keeps the concept more open. Defining motives for migration may possibly limit future usability or require adaptation to include / exclude causes not yet within this frame.

<sup>56</sup> However, Cohen's exclusive stress on co-ethnics as "fellow members of their diaspora in other countries" (Cohen 1997, 186) instead of a wider understanding of ethnic and/or other minorities in general, neglects to also account for cross-ethnic or cross-minority support networks and empathy.

<sup>57</sup> With regard to Cohen's approach of defining a list of features (in addition to the 3 other criteria he emphasizes), it is hardly surprising that he starts such a list based on Safran's existing taxonomy, as it was likely the most established prior definition available.



elaboration on Safran's diaspora characteristics opens the field just enough to encompass the contemporary developments he observed, while at the same time imposing new limitations.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to Cohen's expansion of the features list, the US-American sociologist Rogers Brubaker in his essay "The 'diaspora' diaspora", which similarly deals with the proliferation of the concept,<sup>59</sup> suggests a more condensed approach of only "three core elements that remain widely understood to be constitutive of diaspora. . . . The first is dispersion in space; the second, orientation to a 'homeland'; and the third, boundary-maintenance" (Brubaker 2005, 5). Brubaker stresses the various possibilities for dispersion, as well as the variety of homeland discourses and how this idea has shifted and become more attenuated. The third of these characteristics, 'boundary-maintenance' refers to the mechanism of diasporas to maintain (and/or construct) borders of inclusion and exclusion, which are reiterated in cultural and social practice, in order to continue being a diaspora. With regards to a diasporic (collective) identity, 'boundary maintenance' then becomes the key feature, as it not only refers to the shared cultural or territorial origin the group membership is based on, but more importantly the ongoing negotiation of cultural differences between the group and the majority culture at the place of residence. These three aspects allow ample interpretative space to comprise all or any of the features compiled by Cohen without the rigidity and specificity that limits his taxonomy, yet they are specific enough to frame and delimitate the concept productively.

Any attempt of definition via features in general, and Cohen's too detailed list in particular, would elicit critique, and although Cohen's attempt at a universal definition of diaspora may be lacking, the main focus and merit of Cohen's study lies not in his definition of the term but a classification into five types of diasporas, which are discussed in chronological order. The categories Cohen devices are 1) victim diasporas, predominately Jews, Africans and Armenians; 2) labor diasporas, like indentured laborers from South Asia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also Turks and North Africans coming to central Europe in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century; 3) imperial diaspora, meaning the collectives of colonizers settling abroad; 4) trade and business diasporas like East and South Asian migrants settling in the economic centers of the West; and 5) what Cohen

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<sup>58</sup> However, both Cohen and Safran allow that their list could always only describe an ideal type and that no actual diasporic community would meet all criteria, nor meet the same ones throughout its history. In Cohens list of characteristics this is evident as his two origins of dispersal are diametrically opposed if not to say mutually exclusive.

<sup>59</sup> Brubaker also stresses that the proliferation was not simply one of an increase in diasporic groups or groups claiming to form a diaspora. The dispersion of the term was actually threefold: semantically, conceptually and disciplinary. Semantically in so far as the term included new formations of dispersed people, the term no longer encompassed only the classical victim diasporas; disciplinary in terms of a growing academic engagement with the phenomenon, and conceptually in the expansion of the term itself - aside from the noun 'diaspora' new terms were coined to describe the condition, processes, fields of inquiry, etc. (cf. Brubaker 2005, 4).

originally had termed ‘cultural’ diaspora but renamed as ‘deterritorialized’ diaspora in the second edition and which in his system would encompass groups like the Caribbean peoples, Parsis, or Sindhis, for example.

Although Cohen’s presentation of these groups follows the pattern of a historical outline of the various migrations supported by empirical data, he emphasizes the complexity of the actual movements, often juxtaposing them with various reductive diaspora narratives in circulation by and about these groups. Cohen’s study continuously points out the discursive constructedness of diasporas, showing which aspects of the various narratives and histories were highlighted, for what purpose and thus also whether it was an emic or etic discourse. Furthermore, Cohen repeats at the outset and in the conclusion of his study that this typology has to be seen in terms of Max Weber’s ‘ideal types.’

The key point . . . is not to take an ideal type too literally, but to assume that deviation is normal because the real interrogates and deflates the ideal. The ideal is a yardstick, an abstraction, a simplification, a means of showing up similarities and differences in trying to encompass an array of possibilities. (Cohen 2008, 161)

This is evident from the very outset, as already his discussion of the Jewish diaspora, which he as many others regards as the originary or model diaspora, puts the emphasis on its “multi-faceted, multi-located history with a genetically complex set of roots” (ibid. 35).

Overall, Cohen’s study is a well-balanced analysis that cautions against generalizing readings of social experiences in the diasporas or tendencies to see any such group as homogeneous. Groups may fit in more than one category or switch. His classification provides an important initiative in grappling with a growing and changing social complex phenomenon, accounting for the large variety of origins, reasons for and conditions of migration as well as the situation in the various host communities.

In contrast to the above-discussed scholars in the social sciences, who devised taxonomies and types to categorize the growing phenomenon of diasporic communities, their colleagues in cultural studies took a more discursive approach, focusing on hybridity and cultural exchanges. A prominent example would be the seminal essay “Diaspora” by cultural anthropologist James Clifford published in 1994. He outlines the field with a concise overview of the early debate, starting from Safran’s approach, including Paul Gilroy’s important work on the African diaspora and the influential contemporary inquiry into the Jewish diaspora by Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin. He then proposes a conceptually different take on the project of definition, by approaching the term through a diacritical specification of the discursive field, looking not so much at what diasporas are, but what they are not and what they define themselves against. “Rather than locating

essential features, we might focus on diaspora's borders, on what it defines itself against" (Clifford 1994, 307). At first glance this requires defining diasporas in relation to nation-states as well as indigenous peoples. More importantly, however, such an approach methodologically means definition via relationality, and this results in particularistic approaches that account for transitions or change over time. Clifford's notion of 'defining against' is not to be understood as exclusionary approach that creates an 'other' but rather a focus on the basis upon which collective identities are formed. "[W]e might ask, what articulations of identity are currently being replaced by diaspora claims? It is important to stress that the relational positioning at issue here is not a process of absolute othering, but rather of entangled tension." (ibid.) Consequently, both, similarities and differences between the three groups, nation, indigenous peoples, and diasporas would come to the fore simultaneously. Even though both, indigenous groups and diasporas, would resist the nation and refuse assimilation, their refusal would be on the content level, and not a structural one, as their collective identity would be constructed in a similar fashion. Neither is per se antinational, but, as Clifford stresses, their allegiance is equally strong outside the nation. Diasporas, as Clifford states, "are deployed in transnational networks built from multiple attachments, and they encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms" (ibid.).

By focusing on the relation between nation and diaspora (as well as indigenous groups) *within* a territory, Clifford foregrounds the factor of shared location. He is keenly aware of the necessity of spatial (and also temporal) distance from the (imagined) homeland for the diaspora consciousness, and he puts that in a slightly, though significantly, different way from many other studies on the subject of diasporic homeland nostalgia. He emphasizes that what he calls

[d]e-centered lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return. And a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin. (ibid. 306)

Clifford thus cautions against a predominantly origin/return conception of diasporas and re-interprets these commonly emphasized and interlinked concepts of the diaspora discourse. "Diasporas usually presuppose longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future. Diasporas also connect multiple communities of a dispersed population" (ibid. 304). That is to say, while most conventional approaches stress 'return' as a desire and ultimate (if unfulfilled) goal of the diasporic community, Clifford changes the narrative by positioning this 'return' as taboo.

The notion of return constitutes an ambivalent paradox, as the nostalgia, longing or myth construction result in an unreal or utopian vision of the homeland. Even if a place or territory for such a return existed (as is not always the case), a return in terms of a previous status quo is always

impossible – and even more so if the exodus is generations removed. By calling it a ‘taboo’ rather than impossible, Clifford highlights the pure structural impossibility of return. In order to constitute a diaspora, dispersal is imperative, if the diasporic community were to return, the diaspora would simply cease to exist. While this may be obvious and logical, Clifford draws attention to the ambivalence of diasporas’ self-perception with regard to return by stressing the factor of ‘taboo’. In doing so, he lessens the importance given to origin and return in most diaspora discourses and emphasizes other factors, especially lateral connections or axes. That does not mean that Clifford negates the relevance of the *there*; quite on the contrary, he stresses that it is constitutive of the diasporic imaginary, because “[w]hatever their eschatological longings, diaspora communities are ‘not-here’ to stay. Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (ibid. 311). Their “empowering paradox . . . is that dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*” (ibid. 321).<sup>60</sup> The emphasis on transnationality and hybridity shows that diasporic cultures cannot simply be linked to any nation or ethnic tradition, but rather constitute their own cultural identities, with invented traditions and perpetuated nostalgia as much as future oriented hybridity.

Though an early contribution to the discussion of diaspora definitions, James Clifford’s approach continues to be relevant, as it looks beyond the origin/return paradigm and focuses on “specific local interactions” (ibid. 322) as well as the “decentered, partially overlapping networks of communication, travel, trade, and kinship [that] connect the several communities of a transnational ‘people’” (ibid. 321f.). Clifford’s relational definition and his approach allow for a certain fluidity of the concept. Analyzing transnational communities, borderland communities and other collective identities that may be similarly situated in some ways, he emphasizes that on the conceptual level, adjectives like ‘diasporic’ could be applicable for many discourses, as “diasporic forms of longing, memory, and (dis)identification are shared by a broad spectrum of minority and migrant populations” (ibid. 304). Yet diasporas are distinct within this spectrum. Furthermore, using the adjective ‘diasporic’, according to Clifford, allows to account for shared practices, while upholding structural distinctions.

Clifford here already touches on what Brubaker in his 2005 essay labeled a *conceptual* proliferation of diasporas, a diversification of the term itself. This points to more recent

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<sup>60</sup> This solidarity to there then also contains a “condition to futurity”, as Brent Hayes Edwards, professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, emphasizes in an essay on “Langston Hughes and the Futures of Diaspora” (2007, 691). Edward’s point echoes Clifford’s argument that what may look like a nostalgia for a homeland, suggesting a focus into the past, is in fact a persistence on distance as a constituent relation sustaining the diaspora.

developments in the field: the increasing mobility, interconnectivity and individualization in the age of globalization result in a growing number of social formations that may rather be termed diasporic than diasporas. Recognizing the diasporic without at the same time necessarily claiming the diaspora increasingly takes place in both, etic and emic discourses. This trend is not simply a new form of the increase of diasporas, but also testimony to a growing awareness of the complexities of social group formations, as well as identitarian overlappings and contradictions that eventually challenge collective *identity* assumptions. Such complexities, implied in Clifford's essay, are amplified in more recent diaspora studies that focus on aspects like gender or class, and thus heterogeneity within diasporic groups. The heterogeneity within the collective identity reveals that members of the group may share more qualities and political or social practices with subjects outside the group than within the diaspora. Inequalities based on gender or class afflicting wider population segments may override cultural difference in the subject's perception of her or his marginalization and re-locate group membership away from the diaspora or ethnic group. In his focus on lived social relations rather than a systematic definition, Clifford's essay already emphasizes the diffusion into more hybrid fluid social constellations of only some diasporic character.

Clifford is only one among many scholars in the field of cultural studies who engaged in the discussion of diasporas, ethnicity, and cultural identity early on.<sup>61</sup> I reference his seminal essay on approaches to a definition of diasporas here not only in juxtaposition to the more taxonomy focused features lists. Cohen, while trying to define what constitutes a diaspora, reached the conclusion that no group could possibly possess all characteristics, leaving the field wide open for interpretations and social groupisms of more or less fitting characteristics to claim a diaspora identity. Clifford's dialectical approach, while profoundly different, suggests a similar point. By defining diasporas against what they are not, he too creates a fluid space of possible affiliations, especially if one considers the conceptual diversification of the term into terminology like diasporic or diasporization. This is not to say that they failed at defining the concept. The various approaches to a definition from social and cultural studies rather illustrate a trajectory from a fairly narrowly used concept that applies only to a few select groups of similar pasts, to an almost all-encompassing term that itself dispersed into new conceptual terminology.

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<sup>61</sup> Other key figures from the early phase of proliferation of the term and scholarship invested in the topic would be Paul Gilroy, or Stuart Hall and who already in 1989 argued that while cultural identities are often portrayed as "a sort of collective 'one true self' . . . with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (234), they are in fact "defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (244), cf. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" frequently republished, e.g. in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, and again in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader. KeyWorks in Cultural Studies*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Manur; Malden, et al.: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 233-46.

The struggles and strategies in finding a definition highlight not only the diversification of the term (and thus a perceived need for a definition), but more importantly that at the particular point in time, diaspora became recognized as a politically useful terminology for marginalized groups. Through the wider application to all kinds of (ethnic) groups it eventually turned into an empty signifier<sup>62</sup> with connotations of dispersal and victimhood/oppression that made it an appealing umbrella term under which to assemble. It is thus not surprising that due to the increase of diaspora claims, diaspora terminology and diaspora studies, many scholars have come to regard diasporas as a productive approach through which to view the globalized social of hypermobility with affiliations to many locales. Yet, based on its very conception, diaspora is structurally similar to the nation-state and insofar may have already outlived its productivity as a collective identity option for the contemporary social. Like nationalism or religious fundamentalisms, diasporas too may hold a greater potential to be harmful than helpful for the new global social. In the following I will look at the political potential diasporas hold before investigating that potential against the changing social realities of globalization.

### 3.2.1 The Possibilities of Diasporas

In his 1996 essay on “Rethinking Diaspora(s)” Tölölyan asks about the reason for the proliferation of diasporas and why “a term once saturated with the meaning of exile, loss, dislocation, powerlessness and plain pain became a useful even desirable way to describe a range of dispersions” (Tölölyan 1996, 9). In much the same line of thought, Cohen in the new introduction to the second edition of *Global Diasporas* (2008), linking the increased risk awareness in our global age to the increased appeal social group associations hold, emphasizes that “[w]e must thus consider not only whether the concept of diaspora has been appropriately used or improperly abused, *but also* what function it is serving to the many groups that have adopted it” (Cohen 2008, 17f., emphasis in the original).

Both scholars emphasize how it is less the increase of migration as such, than the term’s having a political potential that fostered the rise of diaspora formations among “more recent communities of dispersion” (Tölölyan 1996, 3). Such an act of renaming involves more than mere re-labeling. While ethnic groups are often *also* created by interpellation, for a collectivity to sustain itself over time and become a diaspora, it needs institutions and social cohesion, which can only be created through identification, through becoming a ‘collective identity’.

As Stuart Hall put it in his investigation of cultural identity:

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. my discussion below on Laclau’s concept of the empty signifier for populist movements.

I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. . . . The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject invest in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an *articulation*, rather than a one-sided process. (Hall 1996, 5f).

The question Tölölyan put can then be rephrased as: why do dispersed people find it useful and productive to group together under the heading of diaspora, to *articulate* themselves as a diaspora? What political, economic or social advantage does this grouping bring, and by extension, in how far has the political, economic or social context of the past decades changed to make being a diaspora an appealing group membership for agency?

These questions cannot be answered in depth within the brief glimpse at diaspora studies that can be offered here. I will, however, provide some hypotheses on the subject as it relates to globalization. Clifford had pointed out, "the term *diaspora* is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement" (Clifford 1994, 308). That is to say, a diaspora always exists with a political agenda, and within and responding to concrete contexts, both spatial and historical. Furthermore, as Clifford continues in his argument, the diaspora is always simultaneously constituted negatively, in its maintenance of difference and thus being other and othered, and positively in its identification with a homeland. The political potential of a diaspora, in terms of claiming membership and gaining support, is drawn from its positive identity construction, from its self-identification with "world historical cultural/political forces, such as 'Africa' or 'China.'" (ibid. 311). The political force in contrast stems from negative identifications, like shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion. The awareness that diasporas are formed for political reasons and that their transnational character adds momentum to local claims, however, does not yet answer Tölölyan's question as to *why* the diaspora as a social group proliferated the way it did in the late twentieth century.

One major effect of globalization is the increased proximity of the cultural other that gradually intensified through growing migrations since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With mass media of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century entering basically every household, this awareness gained a new quality and urgency. In the same way as the imagination of the nation needed the invention of the printing press, increased literacy and new forms of distribution,<sup>63</sup> imagining a globally interconnected society relies on easily accessible visual media. However, the increased awareness and proximity of the 'other,' which initially gave rise to political, economic and social forms of exclusion and

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Anderson 1991.

exploitation, eventually and through many struggles redirected the discussion towards questions of recognition and the right to celebrate and retain a cultural difference.

In traditional, pre-modern social structures, profession and family status had largely predefined the individual's role and rights. The increasing social mobility and individualization of modernity, however, gave rise to a growing more fluid identity concept and with that a need for recognition.<sup>64</sup> Over the last decades, the role of recognition in the public sphere and the diversification of claims for recognition has been growing intensely and not without conflict. We are essentially faced with two opposing notions of recognition, as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor points out. On the one hand, recognition in the public sphere can mean "politics of universalism, emphasizing the equal dignity of all citizens, and . . . the equalization of rights and entitlements" (ibid. 37), at least as an ideal. On the other hand, there is the "politics of difference . . . *Everyone* should be recognized for his or her unique identity" (ibid. 38). The merging of these two positions is the basis of struggles for recognition by a variety of minority groups, especially since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That is to say, a struggle for equality of citizen rights while retaining cultural difference. In a nutshell, this characterizes the appeal and political potential for grouping together under the diaspora label. The awareness of the other in close proximity has heightened the awareness towards cultural heritage forming an integral part of our identity. Recognition, then, came to mean recognition as having that cultural identity and a right, under the morality of human dignity, to live and perform that cultural identity. The struggle for this form of recognition with difference constitutes the political driving force in the collective identity formation under a diaspora label.

Ernesto Laclau's study *On Populist Reason* (2005) provides illuminating insights into such mechanism of group identity appeal and the articulation of demands, as he argues that the unity of a group, and by extension the binding force of collective identities, results from the articulation of demands.<sup>65</sup> Laclau's position is compelling, as it stresses the factor of 'motive' for the contemporary understanding of *collective* identity. To further establish Laclau's argument and the role of recognition in politics and the composition of the social of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a brief additional note on collective identity seems relevant.

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<sup>64</sup> Claims for recognition are based on the notion of human dignity and the individual's right for being treated with dignity. Cf. Charles Taylor's *The Politics of Recognition* (1992). Taylor argues that the collapse of the fixed social hierarchies and the inherent notion of 'honor' of pre-modern societies gave rise to recognition as the driving force of society. This is evident in the conception of nation states and the citizen, as well as the central idea of human dignity, based on the idea of morality and the premise that everybody shares in it. (25ff.) On the development of morality in early modernity see also Zygmunt Baumann's introduction to his study on *Postmodern Ethics*, 1993, 1-15.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Laclau, ix.



In his “Introduction: Who needs Identity?”, Stuart Hall discusses various positions or developments in the construction of identity from Althusser’s idea of ‘interpellation,’ to Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucault’s and Butler’s focus on discursively constructed identity. However, Hall in this essay neglects to sharply distinguish between individual and collective identities in his delineation of identity construction. As discussed above, such a differentiation is essential, as individual and collective identities are almost diametrically opposed in their structural logic. Individual identity is based on fluidity and hybridity, and always becoming, which means it is and is perceived to be constantly in flux and too complex and unfixed to be defined or described. Collective identity, in contrast, needs a degree of stability, it has to be describable, to have some definable characteristics that can be shared and on which to base claims of belonging, and it needs at least a certain level of institutionalization to form the basis for any group membership. Diasporas and their struggle for recognition clearly constitute collective identities.

Hall’s focus is on discursive processes of identity construction in between interpellation and identification, and thus how the notion of identity is articulated and by whom. Hall starts by stressing the importance “of the signifier ‘identity’” for contemporary political movements and he emphasizes the issue of ‘agency,’ understood as a rearticulation of “the relationship between subjects and discursive practices.” (Hall 1996, 2). Consequently, instead of an essentialist concept of cultural identity based on origin or shared characteristics, Hall suggests a “discursive approach [that] sees identification as a construction, a process never completed” (ibid.). It follows that

[i]dentities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. . . . Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. (Hall 1996, 4)

Therefore, the very question of representation, that is intrinsic to the project of recognition, is a question of identity construction. What becomes apparent, then, is that the construction of collective identities, like for example diasporas, does not occur by or for itself, but is already always an expression of the political agenda. Hall further emphasizes this position in his later article „Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities“ (1998) as he argues that the political question was not so much how to mobilize existing social groups, but rather,

[h]ow can we organize this huge, randomly varied, and diverse things we call human subjects into positions where they can recognize one another for long enough to act together, and thus to take up a position that one of these days they might live out and act through as an identity. Identity is at the end, not the beginning, of the paradigm. (Hall 1998, 291)

This question of ‘how’ to construct subjects into collective groups<sup>66</sup> to be mobilized for a cause brings us back to the post-Marxist political philosopher Ernesto Laclau and his study *On Populist Reason* (2005). Laclau points out that populism is not an ideology in itself, but rather a “*dimension of political culture*” (Laclau 2003 14, emphasis in the original)<sup>67</sup> that can be employed by any ideology. Consequently, he regards populism as “a performative act endowed with a rationality of its own” (ibid. 18) with a certain vagueness as a precondition to constructing political meaning, or rather rhetoric. To have social impact, rhetoric is necessary as affirmation, repetition, and contagion, with repetition likely being the most important in this case, as it removes the message from the original speaker, eventually turning it into a commonly acknowledged statement, which may in its effect or suggestibility result in contagion. Taking a look at group psychology Laclau concludes that the degree of distance between ego and ego ideal is the starting point for explaining group action, and populism would be located in this distance; the space in which rhetoric can effectively mobilize around the idea of demands. The main body of the study thus concentrates on how this mobilization of individuals into groups could be orchestrated. Laclau’s focus, as stated already in the title, is populism, and thus an extreme form of group mobilization, usually around a leader figure. I do not mean to equate diasporas, social movements or collective identities in general with populist movements or agendas. They all differ significantly in content, boundaries, focus, mode of mobilization and addressees. Highlighting structural similarities, however, highlights the crucial and central characteristic of diasporas and other collective identities with regard to their underlying political agendas, emphasizing the necessity of rhetoric, repetition and the inherent vagueness that makes the group idea open and yet compelling enough for the subjects’ identification with it.

Laclau explains the formation and dynamics of social groups around three categories: discourse; the notion of the ‘empty signifier’; and rhetoric. Discourse is the realm of the social, constituted by relations and difference.<sup>68</sup> As discourse is relational, constituting the subject in difference, the formation of any collective identity would require differentiation from something other than itself. Yet to constitute a group identity, this cannot merely be any other difference. To constitute itself, the group needs to exclude or expel a difference, which consequently would make all other differences equivalent in their shared exclusion of the one. “But equivalence is precisely what subverts difference, so that all identity is constructed within this tension between the

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<sup>66</sup> I use group membership, rather than ‘identity’ as Hall does, in order to avoid the connotations identity carries because political collective action is a response to demands and rhetorics and thus structurally different from individual identity.

<sup>67</sup> Laclau here references Peter Worsley’s essay “The Concept of Populism” in: Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969, pp. 212-50.

<sup>68</sup> Laclau here references Saussure’s theory, following the linguistic concept of discourse.

differential and the equivalential logics” (Laclau 2007, 70). The totality of identity is thus both impossible and necessary, impossible because differences continue to exist, they are simply overruled by the common excluded difference, and necessary, as otherwise there would be no basis for collectivity. Furthermore, this group, existing only in discourse, has no other means to affirm itself than through representation. This very act of representation, however, again is only possibly within discourse and thus in differentiation and relation. Consequently, “the hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an *empty* signifier” (ibid. 71) and “requires a radical investment . . . and engagement in signifying games” (ibid.), where the affective dimension plays a great role. This, automatically, leads to the third category, rhetoric, as the empty signifier essentially functions as a rhetorical figure, that of synecdoche. Rhetoric is the force to iterate subjects into collectives and thus to mobilize them around an ‘empty signifier’. As Laclau comprehensively outlines, groups do not form by chance or strong leadership alone, but around the category of ‘social demand’ – which implies both meanings of the English word, request and claim. Laclau even stresses that populism – or in my analogy here group membership in general – is formed in the transition from request to claim. That is to say, demands emerge as requests, isolated and in a particular set of circumstances. If they get satisfied, they dissolve. However, unsatisfied particular demands accumulate, creating a general discontent with the surrounding social (and its institutions, as these would be the instruments to deal with demands). Eventually, the “*requests* are turning into *claims*” (ibid. 74). This in turn develops into “[a] plurality of demands which, through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity we will call *popular demands*” (ibid.). Laclau’s examples and focus are ‘the people’ in opposition to power. In analogy, one can easily see how the mechanism just described also apply to social movements in general, and especially to diasporas, as their individual subjects would often be the excluded element of society and they would often find their demands not being met by the institution of power. Furthermore, in the discursive constitution of a diaspora, differences within the group are similarly subverted. The ‘diaspora’ becomes the empty signifier that serves as the articulation and representation of the thus constituted group. This ‘empty’ signifier serves as a vessel for individual discontents and channels these towards political agendas and mobilization.

The individual’s identification with a larger group is affected through rhetoric. In this context, Laclau emphasizes the importance of naming and of affect. While the subjects within the group are singularities and will always be aware of that, the moment of formation of the group that unifies their singular and non-identical demands is that of naming. A demand will always, for the individual subject, be particular, but at the same time, “its own particularity comes to signify

something quite different from itself: the total chain of equivalent demands” (ibid. 95). The collective chain of demands then crystallizes around certain signifiers,

which refer to the equivalential chain as a totality. The more extended the chain, the less these signifiers will be attached to their original particularistic demands. . . . [I]t has to dispossess itself of particularistic contents in order to embrace social demands which are quite heterogeneous. That is: a popular identity functions as a tendentially empty signifier. (ibid. 96)

Laclau continues to stress that the “empty” is not to be confused with ‘abstract’ in terms of a general quality still shared by each particular demand. Quite on the contrary, the very center of an empty signifier, like ‘justice’ or ‘freedom’, is its vagueness of no conceptual content. The emptiness is constitutive as it allows for each particular demand to imagine itself represented in the signifier and thus for the subject to be mobilized into the group. The very concept of ‘signifier’ already implies the act of signification and thus naming. A successful rhetorical act of mobilization means the subjects’ investment through affect. As Laclau put it, “if an entity becomes the object of investment . . . the investment belongs necessarily to the order of *affect*” (ibid. 110).

Laclau concludes his considerations on the emergence of populism on the basis of empty signifiers with a set of questions that, in fact, highlight the analogy of his theory to the larger realm of social movements, including diasporas. He raises the issue that the frontiers within society that give rise to demands to be subsumed under an empty signifier may change, shift or even dissolve, and asks what about demands that cannot be incorporated or what about new demands possibly even clashing with older ones under the same signifier. This points to the constant changes of the social world as well as the heterogeneity within any group.

Rogers Brubaker in his study on *Ethnicity without Groups* emphasizes that in the analysis of the social we have to scrutinize naturalized ‘groups’ or what he calls ‘groupism’, meaning “the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis” (Brubaker 2004, 8). Brubaker, of course, acknowledges constructivist approaches in sociology and cultural studies, but emphasizes that in the vernacular discourses ‘groupisms’ prevail, as participants (on all sides of such discourses) continue to present and cast categories like ethnicity, race or nation as actors. Brubaker stresses the need to think of

ethnicization, racialization, and nationalization as political, social, cultural, and psychological processes. And this means taking as a basic analytical category not the ‘group’ as an entity, but groupness as a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable. (ibid. 11)

This contextual approach consequently regards groupness as an event, which emphasizes temporality as well as the fact that, being non-natural, “groupness may *not* happen . . . despite group-making efforts” (ibid. 12). Furthermore, if group-making happens, it needs to be treated just as that, a project of *making* or constructing something for a specific social, cultural or political

purpose and following certain social dynamics. Although groups are often based on categories of differentiations of the social, the two are not synonymous. Moreover, “[e]thnicity, race, and nationhood are fundamentally ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world. They are not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world” (ibid. 17).<sup>69</sup> If the larger social context changes in ways that significantly impacts the ‘empty signifier,’ the cohesion of the group would alter too, or even dissolve altogether. A development that may not be improbable in the case of diasporas in a global age.

### 3.2.2 The Futures of Diasporas and the Paradox of Collective Identities

The dispersal of any group does not necessarily reconstitute it as a diaspora. To form a diaspora, members must be ‘activated’ into the group, which happens by both, interpellation and, more importantly, self-identification. Such self-identification will always be based on the perception of shared demands. That is to say, if the individual does not experience anything lacking, there is no need to seek a particular group membership. A demand, e.g. a demand for recognition, can be articulated more powerfully through the group. To be recognizable as a diaspora, to be recognized into the diaspora and to have one’s demands heard requires articulation. Insofar, diaspora exists in and as discursive social practice in the relationality between homeland, diaspora and new country/ies of residence.<sup>70</sup> The understanding of diaspora as *imagined community*,<sup>71</sup> similar to Anderson’s conception of the nation raises the question under what conditions do such discourses arise and by extension, whether the diaspora model of political mobilization promises to be a sustainable and productive tool for the changing global social.

With the increased global mobility and migrations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent cultural differences in close proximity, the proliferation of diasporas in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, both as collective identities and in academic discourse, alongside the emergence and growth of a multitude of other social movements and claims for recognition, is hardly surprising. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of identity discourses, starting with new insights from psychoanalysis in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, through the feminist and civil rights movements, but also due

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<sup>69</sup> Brubaker elaborates these arguments further, especially in the first three chapters of the volume.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Martin Sökefeld’s essay “Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora.” *Global Networks* 6:3 (2006) 265–284, where he elaborates on this comparison between the mechanisms of diasporas and social movements and their structural similarities around the question of a demand.

<sup>71</sup> As Sökefeld points out, “*imagined communities* . . . are real because they are imagined as real, because they are taken as real and because they therefore have very real effects on social life” (ibid. 266, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, they are not so much “representations of social reality” but rather, “such imaginations *project* a community” (ibid. 268, emphasis in the original).

to the horrors of two world wars. The emerging identity discourses gave impetus to struggles for equal rights and recognition.

The concurrent proliferation of diasporas with the emergence of globalization over the past decades could signify that this form of group membership might be particularly well suited for the emerging global self-perception of the social - a position advocated by Robin Cohen, among others. He claims that although “[g]lobalization and diasporization are separate phenomena with no necessary causal connection, . . . they ‘go together’ extraordinarily well” (Cohen 2008, 154). Similar trains of thought can be found in Tölölyan’s early essays, or in a more recent paper by Brent Hayes Edwards on “Langston Hughes and the Futures of Diaspora.”

However, any evaluation of the potential or possible future significance of a critical concept depends on the context from which it is approached. That is to say, it depends on the narrative in which it is embedded and what social reality such a narrative aims to describe, as a closer look at Edward’s essay illustrates clearly. The determination of whether or not diasporas and globalization go together exceedingly well, depends on the narrative or understanding of globalization that is applied. For instance, Brent Hayes Edwards in his essay describes globalization primarily as “the imposition of a single mode of exchange everywhere” (Edwards 2007, 689) and consequently celebrates diaspora, for “diaspora foregrounds divergence” (Edwards 2007, 689). That is not to claim that Edwards approaches globalization as a homogenizing force, but he foregrounds economic processes and a long historical development. Given this assessment of globalization, he is quite right to regard ‘diaspora’ as a productive tool or “framework of inquiry” (Edwards 2007, 689) challenging hegemonic narratives of both, the nation state and of the global market. In so doing, Edwards stresses the positive possibilities of the concept ‘diaspora’ over its common alignment with deprivation and dispossession, and emphasizing the complexity and fluidity of diasporic communities. Diasporas, then, represent social formations that operate on a different mode than capitalist markets that drive globalization, and therefore, they hold the potential of being sites of resistance.

However, what happens to this potential, if a different narrative or understanding of globalization is applied? If globalization is understood as a new social awareness of interconnectivity, dominated by increased individualization, fluid identities with a simultaneous local, regional, and global sense of belonging, yet at the same time an acute comprehension of risk and the precariousness of life, diasporas hold much less appeal as a future oriented model for social structuring. Based solely on a diagnosis of the current status quo there seems to be sufficient evidence supporting a claim like Cohen’s that diasporas are a productive future oriented tool for social groups. However, in the long run, diasporas and globalization are more likely to become

antagonistic to each other, if we take into account the way the global social has developed over the past decades – in terms of individualization, mobility, and hybridity – and assume that these processes are not only irreversible, but also likely to continue.

In her essay “Together-in-Difference: Beyond Diaspora, Into Hybridity” (2003), Ian Ang, professor of cultural studies, for example stated that “the discourse of diaspora owes much of its contemporary currency to the economic, political and cultural erosion of the modern nation-state as a result of postmodern capitalist globalization” (Ang, 143). She acknowledges that claiming a diasporic identity, claiming one’s cultural difference and “turning it into symbolic capital has become a powerful and attractive strategy” (ibid. 141) as it allowed the profitable participation in the identity politics of the past decades. However, she emphatically cautions against such a strategy for our globalized world and emphasizes that as

we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between us and them . . . [h]ybridity is a necessary concept to hold onto . . . because unlike other key concepts in the contemporary politics of difference – such as diaspora and multiculturalism – it foregrounds complicated entanglement rather than identity. (ibid.)

Historically, diasporas have been seen in relation, if not as resistance to the nation. But the question coming into view now is whether an evaluation of diasporas from the traditional relation to the nation, as provided by Tölölyan, Cohen or Edwards, can result in productive insights in the age of globalization. Provocatively, one could argue that just because the diaspora is the *more* adaptable of these two unfit collective identity constructs, it is not necessarily suitable for dealing with a globalized social future.

While the transnationalism of diasporas is often taken as an implicit point of critique of the territorial boundedness and internally homogenizing perspective of the nation-state, the limits of diaspora lie precisely in its own assumed boundedness, it’s inevitable tendency to stress its internal coherence and unity, logically set apart from ‘others’. Diasporic formations transgress the boundaries of the nation-state on behalf of a globally dispersed ‘people’ . . . but paradoxically this transgression can only be achieved by drawing a boundary around the diaspora. (ibid., 142)

Ang even describes the diasporic imaginary as proto-nationalistic feeding into a transnational nationalism.<sup>72</sup>

To propose the impending decline of diasporas does not imply that these will quietly or quickly peter out. Quite on the contrary, over the next years or even decades it is more likely that there will be an upsurge and intensification of many of the old and stability suggesting modes of social structuring, like the idea of the nation or that of ethnicity-based communities like diasporas. It is not going to be a smooth transition from any essentializing form of collective identity to a complex particularistic social web. Yet, in the long run, the changing global self-image is likely

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Ang 145.

to increasingly challenge collective identities based on notions of territorially bound societies of either the present or the past.

To elaborate on this claim of the prospective decline of diasporas, let me take a closer look at Robin Cohen's argument of the 'elective affinity' between diasporas and globalization and critically reexamine his claims. As mentioned above, Cohen's chapter on diasporas and globalization saw a significant revision between the two editions. The changes and edits show a development in Cohen's understanding of contemporary diasporas from a rather essentialist perception towards an approach that regards diasporas as social agents and as in constant flux. However, he adheres to his argument that diasporas and globalization are mutually beneficial, by looking predominately on aspects of globalization that "have a particular bearing on the mobilization of diasporas" (Cohen 2008, 141). He consequently concludes that aspects of globalization "disproportionately advantage diasporas, and leaders of diasporic communities are able to exploit them to mobilize the group concerned" (Cohen 2008, 154f).

In the later edition these aspects are 1) the globalized economy, 2) new forms of migration, 3) the development of cosmopolitan sensibilities, and 4) the revival of religion as a focus for social cohesion.<sup>73</sup> Links or affinities between globalization and diasporas are obvious in these areas. That does, however, not signify, as Cohen claims, that "[e]ach of these . . . aspects of globalization have, in different ways, opened up new opportunities for diasporas to emerge, re-emerge, survive and thrive" (Cohen 2008, 141). 1) Existing transnational networks like those of diasporas, or ethnic groups in general, may initially have had an advantage in a newly global marketplace. However, the market is firmly in the grip of multinational corporations and banks, following mostly exploitative objectives. While ethnic groups may now benefit from easier access to goods from the region of origin due to established and cheaper global trade routes, their contribution to the global economy in this regard is likely neglectable. At the same time, the mass markets interest in the 'exotic' and the ethnic groups' vantage position of 'marketing the ethnic' will diminish and lose its monolithic position.

With regards to 2) the increase in global mobility, Cohen attests that a "more diverse geographical spread creates a more truly global basis for the evolution of diasporic networks" (Cohen 2008, 144). What he disregards, however, is the fact that the increase in mobility also means an increase in multiple relocations, which weakens any group cohesion. The increased mobility is more likely to increase the variety of social constellations of people with migration background and these may ultimately even challenge the community form diaspora. Furthermore, as Tölölyan indicates in his essay on "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies,"

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Cohen, 2008, 141.



diasporas foster mobility only within established networks as they rely on “settled diasporic nodes in which a public sphere and civil society peculiar to them develop” (Tölölyan 2007, 254). Consequently, diasporas function as a force to increase mobility within established routes of resettling, but significantly less so where new routes of global mobility are concerned.

3) The third aspect that illuminates an ‘elective affinity’ between diasporas and globalization according to Cohen is the emergence of new cosmopolitan sensibilities. Cohen argues that the internationalism of diasporas is advantageous as they are better equipped to deal with the changed and changing social realities. Once again, as an observation of social reactions to current developments, he is likely right, as a population of a transnational state of mind and a difference-focused perception, is more likely to welcome and adapt to an increased awareness and proximity of difference. However, an ever-increasing plurality will eventually be read as a threat not only to the hegemony of a supposed ‘national culture’ but any community committed to the preservation of its culture. Insofar, it is more likely that increased individualization as well as an awareness of interdependencies outside of group memberships will dismantle the cocoon of safety, belonging and stability collective identities suggest. Identities will be both global and local at the same time, without that being a contradiction, as Cohen suggests.<sup>74</sup>

Looking at 4) the current upsurge of fundamentalist movements around the globe and the increasingly uncontrollable violence committed in the name of religious political alliances, Cohen’s fourth claim, of a “*revival of religion as a focus for social cohesion*” may at first glance seem spot on. Not only is a shared religious belief a node that aids in connecting to people upon moving to a different location, but any religion has a certain level of institutionalization and thus a framework that can be accessed by all members. Furthermore, from a socio-emotional perspective, religions (as other collectivity signifiers like nations, diasporas, or cultures) too seemingly offer stability, assurance and guidance or direction in a chaotic, uncontrollable global world. The awareness of powerlessness and precariousness in the face of global forces at work (from ecological factors like global warming to political alliances and conflicts, to economic inequality) draws individuals into groups that suggest stability and by extensions shielding from chaos. Moreover, in order to promote group membership and draw people in, the upsurge of religions in the last decade or two saw a rise of “ecumenism, orthodoxy or fundamentalism” (ibid. 152). This goes as much for terror networks in the name of a religion, most notably ISIL (or ISIS), as for the rise of fundamentalist Christian churches in the USA.

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<sup>74</sup> This has already been comprehensively argued by Stuart Hall as early as 1991 in his essay “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” in *Culture, Globalization and the World System. Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Anthony D. King, ed. Basingstoke, Hampshire (u.a.): Macmillan, 1991, 19-39.

Again, this development allows for two interpretations. According to Cohen it is a sign of the symbiosis between globalization and collective identities, in particular diasporas. As he argues, “[i]n a complex world, full of uncertainty and even fear, it is comforting to express a known and familiar identity – with the warmth of an extended family and the intimacy of a shared religion, language and way of life” (ibid. 155). Cohen does not see the turn towards traditional social structures as a past-oriented yearning for stability, but as a future oriented approach to a solution. Yet, a closer look that not only takes the status quo in consideration but considers the deeper structures of both movements, the upsurge in a) religious movements, and b) collective identities in general, is more likely to regard these as a *reaction* to globalization tendencies than an associated development or an ‘elective affinity’ as Cohen diagnosed. In the long run, these strategies of associations with groups based on ‘naturalized ties’ are likely to weaken or dissolve (though not peacefully or quietly), as better adapted strategies of coping with or living in a globalized world emerge. Cohen acknowledges and emphasizes that diasporas and transnational communities will have to change and adapt to the new world order. However, he suggests a diasporic core identity and from that to branch out in a more cosmopolitan way. This imposes a hierarchy of allegiances that again runs counter a globalized ethics and reinforces social structures that are likely to be devalued in the course of future developments.

His assumption regarding an ‘elective affinity’ between globalization and diasporas is also structurally incoherent as most of his arguments cannot be restricted to diasporas but would hold true for migrants and transnational societies or subjects in general. He repeatedly collapses varieties of migration patterns and forms of translocation into the term diaspora (which the rest of his study so carefully tries to distinguish), most crucially in including the category of ‘sojourners’ into the diaspora-fold.<sup>75</sup> This is particularly problematic in the light of the argument he is trying to make. Short-term labor migration to urban centers and between urban centers may increase the cosmopolitan character of these, however the migration is temporary, and characterized by high mobility for purely economic reasons, while social ties remain rooted in the place of origin. This increased mobility fosters individualization and a cosmopolitan perspective more than identification as culture, religion or ethnicity based collective identities. While, as Cohen too argues, migrants and more mobile and culturally hybrid people will be able to adapt more easily to changing contexts, this does not necessarily imply that they would organize in diasporic group memberships or even ethnicity-based collectives. With the global increase of mobility, non-diasporian migrants are more likely to profit, because they possess greater flexibility, both in their state of mind and concerning actual mobility. Diasporas (by Cohen’s own definition) require a

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Cohen 1997, 164f. and 2008, 145f.

certain amount of stability and thus institutionalization. By these very characteristics, such group formations are less likely and less capable of swiftly adapting to changes in the social make-up. While diasporas to date seem to profit from globalization and foster its developments, the rigidity of diasporic social constellations, and their focus on membership based on traditional cultural values or heritage and territorial origin, will eventually dispossess the diaspora in relation to other forms of transnational migration. The very stability diasporas preserve and suggest, be it institutionalized or just within the community, will find the diaspora more often in opposition to change than as its driving force.

This critical re-evaluation of diasporas as a social model for the future does, however, not mean to disregard or discredit their having served as a productive vehicle for many groups over the past decades, during which processes of globalization were also on the rise. However, this productive role of diasporas was not due to these concurrent processes of globalization but was rather because of the diasporas' relation to the nation.<sup>76</sup> With the end of modernity and the decline of the power of the nation-state, both collective identity concepts, the nation and the diaspora are being re-articulated and re-examined,<sup>77</sup> especially within discourses on cultural plurality and multiculturalism. If compared to the idea of nationhood, diasporas with their cultural hybridity, seem indeed better adept at dealing with the social changes brought about by globalization, though likely only for the moment and within limitations.<sup>78</sup>

This argument has also been made by Sociologist Yasemin Soysal in her essay "Citizenship and Identity". She argues that the frame of reference within which or against which claims are made is no longer (only) the nation and that identity constructs and demands based on these are developing and being articulated on many more levels.

First, we see an increasing tendency to advance particularistic identities and demands, which at the same time are located in and legitimated by the universalistic discourses of human or personhood rights. Second we see that the mobilization of claims takes place independent of nationally delimited collectivities and at different levels (local, national and translocal). In other words, the social and political stages for claims-making proliferate. (ibid. 7)

The individual's growing awareness of their singularity over the past century currently culminates in the awareness that any group association can only be partial, but never fully representative of the individual's identity and demands, despite the current but likely only temporary increase of stability-suggesting group affiliations. Moreover, if claims are being made on the basis of common human and personhood rights, individuals would not, at the same time,

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<sup>76</sup> Khachig Tölölyan had already positioned the diaspora as the 'other' of the nation in his introductory essay to the first issue of *Diaspora*.

<sup>77</sup> An argument Tölölyan already made in 1996 in "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment." *Diaspora* 5:1 (1996), 3-37.

<sup>78</sup> Published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (January 2000).

need a limited identitarian group like the nation or a diaspora that defines itself in opposition to others, to articulate these claims. In fact, the notion of the diaspora as the frame of reference for its members has always been a myth, as the “public spaces within which immigrants act, mobilize, advance claims and produce cultures are broader than the ethnic dominion of diaspora” (ibid. 11).

Evaluating projects of collective identity, it may also prove beneficial to re-evaluate our focus on difference, but rather look at the underlying discourses and ask the question that the British sociologist Avtar Brah so pointedly put in her book about *Cartographies of Diaspora*: “Difference; what difference?” (Brah 115). Brah here plays with ambiguity, calling the whole idea of (collective) differentiation into question, as well as, asking about the choice of one difference to be given dominance over possible other differences. In doing so, she implicitly draws attention to this selection process and to the agency and power distributions of such acts.<sup>79</sup> The selection is neither an arbitrary process, nor, necessarily an immediately conscious one. Rather, the differences that are singled out are those that are historically constructed as (insurmountably) different and that become thus essentialized as values.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the rise of fundamentalist movements, the proximity of the ‘other’ through media and social contact has over the past decades managed to erode much of these essentialist values and we have come to realize the arbitrariness of many of these differences once taken to be absolute. No value is necessarily or naturally intrinsic to any difference. Collective identity as identity *politics* came to the fore as social movements began to destabilize social structures of inequalities founded on assumptions of difference, be it gender, race/ethnicity, or belief or value systems. For a lack of better models, however, group memberships were built on the same principles as the dominant discourse they challenged. As a result, diasporas did not so much dismantle the underlying assumptions, but rather claimed equality in difference. The specific values attached to certain differences may have been altered, but not the assumptions of ‘ethnic differences carrying values’ as such. Today that leaves us with societies, especially in the U.S., where recognition discourses and resulting affirmative action policies are emphasized above all others. The result is a society deeply divided along arbitrary lines of ethnic or cultural origin and thus seemingly unable to unite along more realistic lines of class or income inequality. We seem

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<sup>79</sup> Brah, in her essay looks at four different possible ways to conceptualize difference: as experience (“as a practice of making sense, both symbolically and narratively” [116]), as social relation (“the ways in which difference is constituted and organised into *systemic* relations” [117, emphasis in the original]), as subjectivity (“the site of processes of making sense of our relation to the world” [123]), and as identity (as “inscribed through experiences culturally constructed in social relations” and “marked by the multiplicity of subject positions that constitute the subject” [123]).

<sup>80</sup> Brah’s argument here is reminiscent of Ernesto Laclau’s mechanism of populism, of mobilizing people into a group around one difference that eradicates all others within the group (see my brief summary of Laclau’s argument above).

to be battling a constructed (though not fictitious) battle that keeps us from seeing the actual war that is destroying us.

### 3.3 The Impossibility of the Recognition Project: Vulnerable Conviviality

The contemporary upsurge of collective identity constructions, especially of a fundamental character, leaning increasingly towards extremist positions, is at the same time also countered by a general weariness with identitarian group memberships. The gradual dismantling and questioning of collective *identities* is not targeting social bonding and association in groups, but collective identities' underlying value assumptions, essentialism and exclusionary strategies. While contemporary scholars in philosophy, as well as, cultural and social studies from Stanley Fish<sup>81</sup> to Arjun Appadurai<sup>82</sup> or the philosopher and cultural-theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah<sup>83</sup> emphasize dialogue as a method for investigation, collective identities necessarily foreclose this kind of dialogue, as they are based on value assumptions or preconceived notions of others' value systems, and by extension already also impose hierarchies of values.

Values are a psychological necessity as well as a necessity of co-existence. Our behavior is determined by our value systems. However, the problem inherent in the very idea of 'value' is that of something being better than and to be preferred over other things. Values and living by values automatically impose hierarchical structures. As Stanley Fish comprehensively pointed out, we cannot fully recognize the other('s value system) because in order to do that we would have to reset or adjust our own values. He calls this juxtaposition 'boutique multiculturalism' based on the observation that multiculturalism either stops short at only recognizing superficial differences like cultural expressions, and thus cannot offer true *recognition*; or it strives for a universal "politics of equal dignity" (Fish 381) as humans, with a notion of strong multiculturalism and unique distinctiveness of cultures and politics of difference, which however is an impossibility. If we truly recognize another culture's or community's values that would be contradictory to ours (for example women's rights), we would have to negate our own value. We cannot simultaneously hold or accept two contradictory sets of values. He eventually dismisses both approaches. "If the politics of equal dignity subordinates local cultural values to the universal

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Fish's essay on "Boutique Multiculturalism" where he also investigates the mechanisms and logics behind hate speech and why we need to engage with it.

<sup>82</sup> Appadurai's discussion of the dangers of dialogues will be discussed in detail in the context of my analysis of Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in chapter 8.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*: "there are some values that are, or should be, universal, just as there are lots of values that are, and must be, local. We can't hope to reach a final consensus on how to rank and order such values. That's why the model I'll be returning to is that of conversation" (p. xix).

value of free rational choice, the politics of difference names as its preferred value the active fostering of the unique distinctiveness of particular cultures” (ibid. 381f.). Such subordination does not take difference serious enough, but rather regards them as “matters of lifestyle” (ibid. 384). The strong multiculturalist, on the other hand, faces a dilemma of values. “The trouble with stipulating tolerance as your first principle is that you cannot possibly be faithful to it because sooner or later the culture whose core values you are tolerating will reveal itself to be intolerant” (ibid. 382). Fish, in a nutshell, presents the two sides of the inevitable failure of recognition projects and identity politics. Either the recognition only stays on the surface of cultural practices and identity markers of minor relevance, or while striving for deep recognition will eventually arrive at an insurmountable clash of values.

The increased contact with the ‘other’ through migration and media made us acutely aware of the co-existence of a multiplicity of different value systems. The real problem inherent in values, however, is not only their establishing of hierarchies, but moreover their inertia – once established, it takes a lot of time and overcoming opposition to dismantle or debase a value. Value systems adjust very slowly to changed circumstances and they cannot – given their inherent logics – easily accept the co-existence of other and especially contradictory logics. This then, is the impasse of morality – in terms of a knowledge of right and wrong – as a social guiding principle.

Morality, according to Zygmunt Bauman and his study *Postmodern Ethics* is a product of modernity. In pre-modern traditional societies moral issues, matters of life and questions of proper conduct were largely considered outside the individual’s domain, allocated to a higher, divine power. However, with the increasing autonomy of the subject and the subsequent increase of life choices, decisions about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ suddenly also fell within the individual’s agency and criteria of evaluation became a necessity.

[M]odern legislators and modern thinkers alike felt that morality, rather than being a ‘natural trait’ of human life, is something that needs to be designed and injected into human conduct; and this is why they tried to compose and impose . . . a cohesive code of moral rules (Baumann 1993, 6)

This, at the same time, was also directed at controlling the individual’s freedom and creating (easily) governable societies. Modern morality in essence is a form of social order upheld by rules and regulations and based on a division between ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ all of which are enforced through their institutionalization.

Social life, however, does not follow patterns, nor is it subject to teleology, or exclusively governed by reason. The fragmentation of society, our multiple and overlapping roles, and a plurality of authorities, claims, and choices have eventually rendered modernity’s idea of a universalist morality impossible. By the end of the modern era, we can only acknowledge that

to make individuals universally moral through shifting their moral responsibilities to the legislators failed, as did the promise to make everyone free in the process. We know now that we will face forever moral dilemmas without unambiguously good (that is universally agreed upon, uncontested) solutions, and that we will be never sure where such solutions are to be found; not even whether it would be good to find them. . . . Human reality is messy and ambiguous – and so moral decision, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent” (ibid. 31 f.).

In response, the postmodern era, according to Bauman, has rediscovered emotions, irrationality and personal perspective, granting that what may be good from one point of view, need not be good in general. This results in an awareness for the complexities of human value systems and decision-making processes and for the fact that both lie largely in the emotive rather than rational capacities of the individual. Furthermore, in the changed perception of the social, contextualization and different circumstances have gained prominence and approaches with universalist claims consequently came under suspicion. The notion of responsibility became prevalent. Responsible action towards the other and the self is at its core characterized by individualization, contextualization and ambiguity and insofar, according to Bauman, embodies postmodern notions of ethics.

Ethics in a globalized world is about the *how* of human interaction. Unsurprisingly, the past decades saw a big revival in philosophical engagements with the project of ethics. This ‘return of ethics’ in the late 1980s can be gleaned from publications like Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s essay on “Ethics” in the collection *Critical Terms of Literary Study*<sup>84</sup> (1995) or the collection *The Turn to Ethics*<sup>85</sup> (2000) – a turn for which especially Michel Foucault’s work served as a trigger, particularly his *History of Sexuality* in three volumes. It is not coincidental that such a turn occurs as modernity and its capitalist world-system<sup>86</sup> experience severe destabilization and a new world-order is likely to emerge.

With the growing proximity and spatial intermingling of different value systems, questions of tolerance or recognition are increasingly apprehended as violent due to their inherent hierarchical assumptions. While to ‘tolerate’ someone else’s point of view is obviously presuming a superiority of one’s own position, recognition, too, is not without hierarchical value structures, as outlined above. The growing awareness of this situation has fostered to turn to ethics in discussions of cosmopolitanisms over the past decades.

Cosmopolitanism, like ethics, has a long history in academic discourses. Of particular interest for the present study, however, is not the history of these discourses so much as the recent

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<sup>84</sup> In *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 387-405.

<sup>85</sup> Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds. *The Turn to Ethics*. Culture Work. New York: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Immanuel Wallerstein’s notion of world-systems-theory that diagnoses the end of modernity and claims that societies are currently tethering on the brink of a new, emerging world-system that is yet undetermined, which adds to the flux and instability of our times.

strong resurgence of both terms in combination in the context of globalization studies. Scholars like Paul Gilroy, Arjun Appadurai or Judith Butler take up the topic of cosmopolitan ethics investigating the fragility of the individual's existence in a globalized society. More optimistic viewpoints, like Seyla Benhabib's work focuses on the gradual spread and incorporation of cosmopolitan norms based on human rights into territorial law and order frameworks.<sup>87</sup> At the forefront of all these positions is the call for modes of (peaceful) global coexistence.

Like the term 'diaspora,' 'cosmopolitanism' is not a product of globalization, but in contrast to diasporas, there does exist an 'elective affinity' between globalization and the increased momentum of cosmopolitanisms. It actually exists on two opposing levels. In one application, cosmopolitanism is used to celebrate the global mobility of educated elites, while on the opposite end of the spectrum discourses of disfranchisement employ the term as a site of resistance as 'cosmopolitanism from below'. That is to say cosmopolitanism exists among the profiteers and the 'victims' of globalization at the same time, because the latter, too, have become mobile and multilingual out of necessity.<sup>88</sup> Migrants, refugees and exiles too are part of and form cosmopolitan communities.

As a philosophical concept, cosmopolitanism is based on an idea of the community of human beings, though not necessarily defined by collective identities. The focus lies on the coexistence of individuals, which is to say on questions of justice and human rights, as well as broader considerations about human nature, mutual respect, and an obligation toward others. Cosmopolitanism is an ideal, yet one that is central to many contemporary thinkers as the time-space compression of globalization reveals the limitations and inadequacies of most traditional institutionalized modes of (segregated) co-existence when it comes to a productive shaping of the contemporary and future global social.

Paul Gilroy emphasizes – for example in his 2004 volume *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* – that multiculturalism, though often debated as a political approach, in fact is and needs to be regarded simply as social reality. He criticizes academic and political discourses focused on diversity management for reiterating and thus (re-)producing and enforcing differences. As long as our public discourses continue to focus on *how* to live with difference they reinforce and thus construct these differences by attributing essentialist values to them. This is not only or consciously a political move, but according to Gilroy produced by a longing, or rather

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<sup>87</sup> For an overview of variants of cosmopolitanisms see Carol A. Breckenridge et. al. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Arjun Appadurai's recent work, not only in his scholarly engagements but also in actual humanitarian work as the founder and president of PUKAR (Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research), a non-profit organization based in and oriented to the city of Mumbai (India).



melancholia or – as the title of his recent publication emphasizes – *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Melancholia – which is per se a pathological condition – signifies a state of mourning without loss, or without the consciousness of a distinct loss.<sup>89</sup> In the larger context of multiculturalism as discourse and politics, postcolonial melancholia then implies this mourning for not only a former empire but in a more general sense, ideas of cultural cohesion which reverberate in insisting on (collective) identity and thus difference, rather than emphasizing a social reality (though one fraught with conflicts – many of which again originate in or because of such discourses). Gilroy's examples largely focus on Great Britain but also black nationalist movements and discourses in larger contexts, dismissing these on the same grounds as white supremacist attitudes. He points out their exclusionary core characteristic, and calls instead for modes of planetary understandings of the social.

It is out of such a consciousness, then, that Gilroy advocates for conviviality,<sup>90</sup> by which he means

the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life . . . It does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance. Instead, it suggests a different setting for their empty, interpersonal rituals, which, I suggest, have started to mean different things in the absence of any strong belief in the absolute or integral races. Conviviality . . . introduces a measure of distance from the pivotal term 'identity,' which has proved to be such an ambiguous resource in the analysis of race, ethnicity, and politics. The radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification. (Gilroy 2005, xv)

Gilroy emphasizes that solidarities – an inevitability in human coexistence and a necessity in struggles against inequalities – can only be effective if not based on essentialist ideas like race or culture, but on individual experiences, shared features, and a common goal. Conviviality acknowledges diversity, yet without implied essentialist value systems. It advocates an everydayness and in doing so takes actually lived experiences as the basis of identifications, eventually hoping for a humanist universal mode of living together in an awareness of our vulnerability.

Vulnerability also stands at the center of Judith Butler's more recent work, which even more than Gilroy's specifically engages in the question of possible modes of co-existence in a globalized world. Butler's *Precarious Life*, subtitled *The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, stresses the individual's dependence on other anonymous human beings. We need to avoid tactics and measures of dehumanization, particularly on the levels of political and social public

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud's 1917 paper on "Mourning and Melancholia" (English translation in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, London: The Hogarth Press 1973, 239-260).

<sup>90</sup> A concept also taken up by Arjun Appadurai, for example in his keynote lecture on "Beyond Multiculturalism" in Berlin in June 2009, where he elaborated on the dangers inherent in our understanding of dialogue, as discussed in chapter 8.

discourses, because, as Butler elaborates in greater length in *Frames of War*, a life can only be grieved if apprehended as a life, and it will only be valued if its loss is perceived as grievable. The problem that arises in global social interaction is, however, how to also value the ‘anonymous other’s’ life. Both current models, those of tolerance and models of recognition, prove themselves unfit in the current social realities: ‘Tolerance’ presupposes the other’s inferiority, while ‘recognition’ for Butler holds the deeper question ‘what is it that would be recognized?’ Implying that in minority discourses, whether defined along the lines of sexual preferences or religious or cultural differences, it was not simply the individual person who was recognized, but the categories themselves and thus difference manifest.<sup>91</sup>

Butler wrote the five essays comprised in *Precarious Life* in response to 9/11 and its aftermath, especially the effect of the terror attack on politics and media representations. Her driving question is

what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war. One insight that injury affords is that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know. This fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away. No security measure will foreclose this dependency; no violent act of sovereignty will rid the world of this fact. (Butler 2004, xii)

Butler elaborates on and investigates this aspect in depth in the last essay, entitled “Precarious Life.” She turns to Emmanuel Levinas’s influential work in the field of ethics and his studies on responsibilities towards the ‘Other’ as the face that puts us under an obligation. Butler, in this essay, looks at the intimacy of address to highlight the precarity of the individual and the importance of recognizing a life as a life, before, in the later volume, investigating the question of grievability and, by extension, global interdependencies.

Levinas’s ethics regarding the other primarily states that “the other’s right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other” (Levinas quoted in Butler 2004, 132). What is more, the very fact of address, of being addressed constitutes an ethical obligation. “To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life, or rather, the precariousness of life itself” (Butler, 134). However, as Levinas’s work points out, while the face of the other exudes an obligation, our very awareness of its vulnerability, at the same time, stimulates and tempts me to violate it. A temptation simultaneously heightened and reined in by the fact that the vulnerability of the other also highlights my own precariousness. This notion feeds “from a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence” (ibid. 137).

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. *Frames of War* chapter 4.

Such encounters and the awareness of their implications are intricately tied to discourse, as already before we speak the mere presence of the face means that we are spoken to. As Butler points out, “it is only on the condition that we are addressed that we are able to make use of language . . . the Other is the condition of discourse. If the Other is obliterated, so too is language, since language cannot survive outside of the conditions of address” (ibid. 138f.). To approach ethics through Levinas’s philosophical theories highlights the complicity of “representation and humanization” (ibid. 139) and consequently also dehumanization.

In a next step, looking at representation, the question of media and the media’s representation of conflict come into focus. Butler’s *Precarious Lives* only briefly touches on these questions and the media’s normative schemes in presenting certain lives as more or as less grievable and thus more or less precarious and worthy. She develops this aspect as her central theme in her following volume, *Frames of War*. In that study, she moves from “[t]he more or less existential conception of ‘precariousness’” to “a more specifically political notion of ‘precarity’” (Butler 2009, 3), charged with the norms of social organization, including legal matters of the definition of life. The perception of a life is “dependent on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life, or indeed, as part of life” (ibid. 4). Here, Butler makes the important distinction between apprehension and recognition. The second – for which she draws on Hegel’s philosophy – is the stronger term, and ultimately an impossibility, as the current failures of various recognition projects in social reality demonstrate. Apprehension, then, is more ambiguous as it does not necessitate full cognition, it is “a mode of knowing that is not yet recognition, or may remain irreducible to recognition” (ibid. 6). Of course, the two concepts are somewhat inseparable, but a conceptual differentiation for a proposition of ethical coexistence is imperative here. Although recognition presumes cognition, not all acts of knowing are acts of recognition. To apprehend life as a life also means to apprehend it within certain frames, or, to reverse the approach, to be able and apprehend lives that may not be recognized as such, requires a challenging of certain frames.<sup>92</sup>

Turning towards the larger implications of her question of both the apprehension rather than recognition of life, and social norms and framing that would allow for this apprehension by qualifying a life as grievable, “[t]he question is not whether a given being is living or not, nor whether the being in question has the status of a ‘person’; it is, rather, whether the social conditions

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<sup>92</sup> The title of her small volume already emphasizes the notion of framing, which Butler subsequently takes up in a more literal sense as she discusses war photography and how the pictorial framing defined whose lives were grievable and whose deaths were relegated into obliteration by not being documented. The topic of war photography will be taken up again in the analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story cycle “Hema and Kaushik” in chapter 6.1.

of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible” (ibid. 20). The act of living requires certain conditions and a supportive system, therefore, those in power of the distribution of these ultimately determine the value of a life. This, then, brings the philosophical discussion down to social practice, as actual political power structures determine by whom and how subjects are produced, which results in the dialogical problem that those who are subjects (recognized as subjects) are simultaneously the ones to influence the subject formation processes, as in the case of citizenship and democratic participation.

The ultimate issue of social networks is exclusion, as Butler points out in an argument that shows similarities with Ernesto Laclau’s thesis on populism.

When such networks form the basis of political coalitions, they are bound together less by matters of ‘identity’ or commonly accepted terms of recognition than by forms of political opposition to certain state and other regulatory policies that effect exclusions, abjections, partially or fully suspended citizenship, subordination, debasement and the like. (ibid. 147)

In order to avoid this effect of exclusionary networks, we need to dispose of many of our established models of approaching life, others, and social structures. Instead of recognition discourses we have to acknowledge the impossibility of cognition while simultaneously apprehending life and apprehending life as precarious. That also implies that to achieve conviviality, we need to dismiss binary oppositions and exclusionary identitarian conceptions of the social.

The fact that questions of cosmopolitanism, ethics and coexistence dominate contemporary discourses is further evidence for the current state of emergency and change of the global social. As modernity’s traditional modes of coexistence that suggest stability are increasingly destabilized and newer models of similar logics like recognition and identity politics are failing, the question of how to live with each other and amongst others, comes to the fore. In the time-space compression that marks globalization and the rapidly increasing interconnectivity and interdependencies in ungraspably complex ways, Butler’s approach of apprehension seems a plausible ideal model. It is not only informed by an awareness of the violence inherent in collective identity assumptions but also by the need for particularistic approaches to contexts and people in these. To apprehend life is not necessarily to recognize it while at the same time acknowledging that we cannot fully know it.

## 4 South Asian Heritage in North America: Diaspora and Beyond

Fiction by North American writers of South Asian heritage presents an ideal case study for the analysis of literary negotiations of or reflections on the social reshaping processes of globalization for several reasons. First of all, because throughout South Asia's history, forms of transnationalism have been vital elements in identity constructions of people and groups frequently blanketed under the term South-Asians. The subcontinent (and especially India in its construction as a multilingual, multiethnic and multi-religions democracy) in itself provides a fruitful field for investigations of diversity management and cosmopolitanism. The selection of South-Asian North American writers for my case study was further motivated by the fact that questions of ethnicity or cultural differences have a strong tradition in North American writing and scholarship. Moreover, North America, especially the USA, are a dominating force in globalization processes and discourses. At the same time, South Asia as a region has a centuries-old involvement in global developments through both, colonialization and migration that has not only resulted in large numbers of South Asians in the economic centers of the West, but their presence globally.

In both Canada and the USA, this group has largely been regarded as a model immigrant group, due to wide economic success and an incorporation of their cultural specificities into the North American lifestyles they largely adopted. There are, however, several crucial factors that facilitate such a perception and/or this group's relationship with the new countries of residence. The most important ones are the absence of a collective trauma, the heterogeneity of the group, the diversity of moment and motive for migrating, and the economic and educational status of the migrants.

The U.S. Census Bureau lists Asian Indian's and other South Asians at about 1.1 % of the total population in the 2010 census.<sup>93</sup> Statistics Canada claims a total of 1,924,635 South Asians in the 2016 census under visible minority population, accounting for about 5.5% of the country's population.<sup>94</sup> Statistical data necessarily has its limitations, depending on the categories and what determines inclusion or exclusion in the count, but either number confirms a sizeable population segment of South Asian Heritage in the respective country.<sup>95</sup> The majority of people from the

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. U.S. Census Bureau, "2010 Demographic Profile Data," [http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC\\_10\\_DP\\_DPDP1&prodType=table](http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1&prodType=table).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Statistics Canada < <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Geo2=&Code2=&Data=Count&SearchText=Canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=01>>.

<sup>95</sup> The problem of racial categories in the census, and the special case South Asians represent for these categories has been discussed by Amardeep Singh in his critical blog in an entry published on August 09, 2011, investigating the

region came since the immigration laws changed in the USA and Canada, in 1965 and 1967 respectively, from preference systems (focused on national / ethnic origin) to skill oriented systems. Statistics further show that this heterogeneous group belongs largely to the middle and upper-middle class. While such data is highly generalizing, it still helps to show that along other factors, the motivations for and situations of settlement in North America have contributed to a lower group-coherence in the collective diasporic identity constructions of this ethnicity.

I am fully aware of the necessarily ambiguous terminology designating the subject of my case study. South Asian refers to a region that comprises many nations.<sup>96</sup> The regional term seems more applicable for two reasons. First, it is preferable to the names of nations for historical reasons. As Vijay Mishra has pointed out in his essay “The diasporic imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora”, the diaspora from the subcontinent “began as part of British imperial movement of labour to the colonies” (Mishra 1996, 421), and thus long before the respective nations came into existence by the end of the colonial period. Consequently, especially what he had defined as the ‘old’ diaspora would not necessarily identify with nations created after their departure, but with the India of the British Raj.

Second, the cultural ‘othering’ processes by the majority culture largely don’t differentiate between various subgroups, be it national, regional, cultural or religious. Most migrants from the region are still perceived as South Asians in the respective destinations in the West. That is to say they are interpellated as South Asians because of visible features like skin tone as well as cultural similarities in dress styles and food. The blurring of national boundaries in the perception of the diaspora – often with the acquiescence of the community itself – is visible in both the institutions of the countries of destination (e.g. the Canadian census offers the category ‘South Asian’ for ethnic origin in addition to the individual nations) and in social practice (it is, for example, said that vast majority of ‘Indian’ restaurants in New York, or also Berlin, are operated by Bangladeshis).

Throughout this study, the term South Asian will thus be used as a generic marker, whereas I will differentiate according to national origin or more specific regional heritage in the discussions of the individual literary texts wherever relevant. At the same time, several of the recent fictions, especially when only alluding to cultural heritage, do so with a conscious ambiguity, employing

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controversy around South Carolina governor Nikki Haley who had listed ‘white’ on her driver’s license, despite her South Asian heritage < <http://www.electroalani.com/2011/08/nikki-haley-race-and-us-census.html>>.

<sup>96</sup> In the most common uses of the term these are: Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

the category of ethnic visibility as a strategy rather than national specificity of locating the text or character's origins regionally, nationally or culturally.<sup>97</sup>

With regard to the migration from the subcontinent, one has to distinguish between at least two significantly different types of diasporas: a) The waves of laborers migrating to the sugar plantations in Fiji or the Caribbean, as well as the migration of laborers and merchants to Africa around the turn of the last century, and b) the diaspora of late twentieth century capitalism to the economic centers of the West. These two differ not only with regard to the historical period of their occurrence, but with regard to class and education of the migrants, their motives, social status, and most importantly the perpetuation of ties to the place of origin, and as a result, their diasporic imaginary.

Indentured labor migration existed from about 1830 to 1917.<sup>98</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indians also migrated to East Africa as merchants and (mainly Sikh from the Punjab) relocated to other places like Canada<sup>99</sup> or California, but not in large numbers.<sup>100</sup> This 'old' diaspora, as Mishra explains in detail, is bound together by the experience of the harsh ship journey and grueling plantation life. It more closely resembles a traditional diaspora in its traumatic origin, a recreation of homeland traditions and the strong notion of a return, even though the few who did return after the end of their indenture period often faced a reality harshly different from the nostalgic image and imaginary in the diaspora.<sup>101</sup> Gurharpal Singh summarizes the key features of the 'old' diaspora in the introduction to *Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora*, emphasizing that in their life as laborers on plantations,

the emigrants remained separate, disenfranchised and frequently racialized. In these conditions successive generations tried to reproduce as accurately as they could the cultural ways of their forebears, while the restrictions on travel as well as the lowly economic status of most overseas Indians limited regular contacts with the 'motherland' (Singh 5).

Consequently, it was as much their being separated, as their self-exclusion that created the community. The distance, remembering, reiteration, and a few artifacts formed the diasporic

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<sup>97</sup> Cf. for example, Shauna Singh Baldwin's short story "Naina" in the collection *We Are Not In Pakistan*, which gives no specific heritage indicators at all. But also, stories that locate a character's origin, for example in a religion, as in Saleema Nawaz's story "Bloodlines" or geographically as for example Abha Dawesar's *Family Values*, do so in a generic way and with hardly any implication or relevance in terms of identity constructions.

<sup>98</sup> Mishra dates the first ship from India to Fiji with February 1829 and claims that during the period of indentured labor migration a total of about one million people were transported from India, mostly for plantation work (cf. Mishra 1996, 427).

<sup>99</sup> In the brief period between 1906-07 about 4.700 Indians reached British Columbia, however, many of them returned home, as by 1914 there were fewer than 2.000 Indians in the province (cf. Mishra 2007, 140).

<sup>100</sup> In addition there was a significant number of migrants going to the 'mother-country' especially to get a British education. Following the English Education Act of 1835 – influenced by Thomas Babington Macaulay's now (in)famous "Minutes on Indian Education" – the British education system became the model and Indian-based education came to be regarded as second rate in comparison.

<sup>101</sup> See Mishra 2007, chapters 1 and 2.

imaginary as much as the dire living conditions fueled a nostalgic longing that helped maintain it. Insofar, the 'old' Indian diaspora fairly closely matches the classic notion of diasporas.<sup>102</sup>

The 'new' Indian diaspora of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is markedly distinct from the 'old' diaspora. It differs in motivation, mode of formation, means, education, continued links to the homeland, the large absence of an actual nostalgic longing for a return, and a traumatic unity forming experience.<sup>103</sup> By claiming the absence of a collective trauma, I do not mean to suggest that South Asian history is devoid of collective trauma. The partition, the wars between India and Pakistan, and religious riots are just some of the most obvious traumatic experiences of the region's 20<sup>th</sup> century history. However, there is no unifying exodus event<sup>104</sup> for the migrants coming to North America. Neither moment, nor motivation, nor the actual journey is shared by large numbers, nor is it a basis for the formation of a (traumatic) collective memory. Individual stories of migration may hold such identity shattering or forming qualities,<sup>105</sup> but these were not constitutive for a group identity. The majority of migrants did also not experience a trauma of arrival in the new countries of residence,<sup>106</sup> nor does the ethnic group as such have historical experiences that would necessarily result in a complicated or even hostile relationship with the new countries of residence.<sup>107</sup> As a result, group cohesion does not stem from a joint experience of an originary moment. Group cohesion is built in the struggle of arrival, and thus largely through othering processes and through being interpellated into the group, *recognized* as hyphenated South Asians.

At the same time, another key feature of diasporic communities in general, including the 'old' South Asian diaspora, is largely absent within the groups of South Asian migrants of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely the longing for (or myth of) a return to the homeland. The arrival in the economic centers of the West and subsequently financial success are the objectives of migration. A permanent return would signify defeat and is not considered desirable. However, the culture of

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<sup>102</sup> Cf. chapter 2 above and Cohen's distinction of various types of diasporas in his study *Global Diasporas*.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Singh 4.

<sup>104</sup> Jewish collective identity is the prime example for traumatic exodus group cohesion, but also the old South Asian diaspora of indentured labor shared the conjunctive migration experience that formed their identity based on the ship-brotherhood.

<sup>105</sup> The fictional text most often named as an example for such an experience might be Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, first published in 1981, in which the protagonist throughout the novel changes her identity as she is time and again interpellated into a new role, called by a new name, negotiating new differences. Jasmine is an individual, her story is unique, but her struggle and search for identity as she navigates through various environments in the new land can be / is commonly read as representative for the experience of the group.

<sup>106</sup> That is to say, the arrival in the new country of residence was not marked by traumatic living conditions as experienced by the old diaspora on the plantation. There is, however, a 'trauma of arrival' in terms of recognition discourses and identity politics that largely differentiate(d) visible minorities from the mainstream culture through 'othering', as discussed below.

<sup>107</sup> Both the white settlement of the continent, and slavery would be such histories that resulted in trauma-based collective identity formations of the Native Americans or First Nations, and African Americans in relation to the white cultural majorities in the USA and Canada.



the country of heritage is usually still deemed superior to that of Western nations, and thus reconstructed within the families and communities, resulting in a different kind of nostalgia. This is not a nostalgia for return but for cultural values left behind. James Clifford, too, recognized that the South Asian diaspora – by which he means this new diaspora – falls outside strict diaspora definitions because rootedness and return were not dominant in their identity construction. As he argues with reference to Amitav Gosh’s essay “The Diaspora in Indian Culture”: “the South Asian diaspora . . . is not so much oriented to roots in a specific place and a desire for return as around an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations” (Clifford 1994, 306).

While that does not necessarily signify less group cohesion as such, I would argue that this lack of relevance of certain homeland discourses preconditions this ethnic group to more easily adapt to, be aware of, (or actively shape) social changes, because their memory narratives and nostalgia from the very beginning were less trauma-based and more oriented towards the individual situation in the place of settlement. Furthermore, the majority of migrants from South Asia to North America entered these countries after certain changes in immigration regulations. As a consequence, these were immigrants who largely came from economically secure backgrounds, most of them also being fairly educated. Moreover, the ethnic group experiences itself is highly heterogeneous with regard to culture, religion, language, and history, due to the extreme diversity on the subcontinent as well as the long-standing global presence of South Asians as a result of the old diaspora.<sup>108</sup>

With regard to their legal status, economic success, education, and acceptance by the majority culture, these immigrants thus also differ from continuously arriving labor migrants, most prominently from Mexico and South America, and other migrant groups shunned by the system, forced into states of illegality or other systemic forms of powerlessness that can result in a troubled relationship with the new country of residence and consequently constitute a collective trauma. That is not to say that South Asian immigrants did not face hardship or exclusion from the majority cultures, but these experiences were on an individual more than on a systemic level. Consequently, the new South Asian diaspora is first and foremost marked by continued heterogeneity – a heterogeneity, which, as Johanna Lessinger in her summarizing essay of 2003 on “Indian Immigrants in the United States” emphasizes, grew throughout the last half century also in terms of social stratification.<sup>109</sup> Even though the majority culture may – not only in the

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<sup>108</sup> The old diaspora was also marked by an extreme heterogeneity, however, the ship-brotherhood and barrack life on the plantation, and the resulting forced intimacy molded the migrants into a newly ‘homogenous’ hybridity. In contrast, no ghettoization was imposed on the economic migrants of the late 20th century nor were they exclusively existing in ethnic enclaves, even if they may have created these for mutual support, cultural familiarity and the celebration of traditions.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Lessinger 167f.

census – perceive South Asians as a largely homogenous group in an ‘exotic’ similarity of their differences, the diaspora itself retains a high level of internal diversity, mostly along the lines of region of origin and religion.<sup>110</sup>

This heterogeneity and internal diversity stand in sharp contrast to the idea of South Asians as a group, often perceived as “a model minority in the US, exceptionally successful and well-adjusted” (ibid., 173) as Lessinger points out. Yet, simply being regarded as model-migrants has done little for the minority members’ inclusion into the majority societies.

Although the economic integration of Indian immigrants had been generally successful, cultural integration has perhaps been less smooth than the immigrant leadership implies. American nativism and racism have an impact on Indian immigrants [...] This unease may encourage a transnational outlook by constantly reminding people that ‘home’ is elsewhere and should not be abandoned. (Lessinger 178)

The exclusion as well as self-distancing from the majority culture of the new countries of residence then resulted in a continued role of India/South Asia for the migrant. Even though the myth of return is not a dominant aspect in the diasporic imaginary of these later migrant communities, the homeland is no less significant as a source of cultural belonging, resulting in the conception of the NRI (Non-Resident Indian) as a new category of transnational cultural citizenship.<sup>111</sup>

A non-resident-Indian (NRI) identity was not only of importance for the self-imagination of the diasporic community, but also gained relevance for the Indian economy since the 1970s in the form of direct foreign investment.<sup>112</sup> The increasing number of Indians living abroad and an increasing return influx of capital into the Indian economy from these Indians living abroad not only resulted in strengthened ties between the diaspora and the homeland, but also in a changing perception of Indians living abroad as evident in developments in Indian mass culture, particularly

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<sup>110</sup> In so far they replicate the pattern of migrant groups everywhere, as initially settlement as a community would include the whole region, but with the arrival of more migrants from similar backgrounds and the overall growth of the community, the group would increasingly diversify internally. Shauna Singh Baldwin’s novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* depicts this development in her portrait of a South Asian community in Vancouver over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also how homeland (identity) politics or political and religious unrest is replicated in the diaspora, increasing the splitting of the group as briefly discussed below in chapter 5.1.2.

<sup>111</sup> This continued relationship especially for Indian migrants is, moreover, a twofold one, as India itself retains a claim on its subject living outside the national borders. Even though the country does not offer full dual citizenship, it introduced the status of ‘Overseas Citizen of India’ with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2003. In addition to this lifelong option, a ‘Person of Indian Origin’ card of 15 years validity had already been introduced in 1999 to facilitate traveling. (For more information on the OCI and PIO schemes, cf. the webpages of the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, for example <<https://www.mea.gov.in/overseas-citizenship-of-india-scheme.htm>>) Early in 2011 the government announced the merging of both cards into a new ‘Overseas Indian Card’ combining the benefits of both.

<sup>112</sup> Since partition the Indian economy had been governed by socialism and protectionism, not dissimilar from the five-year-plan model of the Soviet Union. However, after a first crisis in the 1970’s, the Indian economy started the large-scale introduction of liberalization policies that, by 1991, had resulted in deregulation and privatization and allowed for direct foreign investment, which especially appealed to and was targeted at Indians living abroad. Cf. Parekh, Singh, Vertovec, *Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora*.

the Hindi movie industry commonly referred to as Bollywood. The early nineties still portrayed the NRI as financially successful, yet devoid of moral standards; or, if presented as a likeable character, any positive features were exclusively located in traditional beliefs and a bond with the mother country. In recent years the diasporic Indian is portrayed as a positive character, combining the best of two cultures, successful, loveable, and in every way equal to his/her Western peers, yet conscious of the values of tradition, family and religion of the motherland.<sup>113</sup> Migrating and settling abroad permanently are increasingly less vilified in the country of origin, as almost every middle and upper class urban family today has members living abroad.<sup>114</sup> This development, then has today resulted in mobility being the norm of the educated global élite, and no longer the exception of a few groups forced to relocate by traumatic experience.

Another frequent key feature of diasporas is a rootedness in or origin from trauma.<sup>115</sup> Looking for such a genesis of a diasporic consciousness with regard to the new South Asian diaspora, we recognize that this relocated population is not traumatized by departure and journey. A trauma that can be argued to have established itself in the diasporic consciousness is one of arrival. This is not a trauma created by the living conditions met by the immigrant upon arrival (as in the case of the old diaspora of the sugar plantations); rather, the trauma stems from the experience of exclusion based on ethnic heritage (which, in the course of diversity management politics, turns the ‘ethnic subject’ into the subject of ‘recognition’ discourses) - resulting in an exclusion or distancing discourse marked by an emphasis on otherness, made visible through hyphenation. As critics and writers – especially of South Asian heritage – frequently emphasized, identity politics and the practice of hyphenation rather serve to mark a distance and create a collective difference than signify inclusion into the majority society. Mishra summarizes this well-established argument among ethnic critics and writers as follows:<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Subhash Ghai’s 1997 movie *Pardes*, for example, paints an exclusively black and white picture of characters closely relating to or still living in the homeland and characters morally corrupted by Western culture. Later movies, like Siddharth Anand’s 2005 film *Salaam Namaste*, which depicts a westernized young couple who chooses to cohabit without marriage and consequently does not embody the traditional Indian morality code, do not demonize Western traits or characters any longer, but present them as lovable. Traditionally unacceptable topics from divorce to gay themes are no longer used in the more recent films to reproach the diaspora, but merely as plot twists, while fifteen years earlier only sharp binaries of good vs. evil dominated the narrative. Cf. also Bernhard Fuchs, “Der Mythos der Rückkehr in den patriotischen Romanzen des Hindi-Films,” and Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema*, esp. chapter 8 “Bombay Cinema and Diasporic Desire.”

<sup>114</sup> While I focus only on the diaspora to North America, there are equally large movements to other urban (western) centers, notably Australia and New Zealand, as well as a continued migration to Great Britain (where, based on the long historical trajectory, the situation of the diaspora is somewhat different). In addition, however, contemporary migratory flows also include other destinations – both temporary and permanent – most notably a modern form of labor migration to the Middle East.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. the characteristics-based definitions of diaspora by e.g. Safran or Cohen discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>116</sup> Examples of this critique abound among writers and scholars in the USA and especially Canada commonly referred to as ethnic writers/scholars. Among the group of the case study concerned here, Neil Bissoondath’s *Selling Illusions* may be the most frequently quoted. But also Bharati Mukherjee’s passionate dismissal of the ‘Canadian

the politics of the hyphen itself is hyphenated because, in the name of empowering people, the classification indeed disempowered them; it makes them, to use a hyphenated term, 'empoweringly-disempowered'. Although the hyphen makes rebirthing and coalitional politics (seemingly) possible, the words around the hyphen claim otherwise. (Mishra 2007, 184)

As a logical consequence, this form of collective trauma *cannot* be eliminated by diasporic group formation and collective identity constructions. On the contrary, these manifest the differentiation from within the group while aiming to object to that very practice the individuals are subjected to.

Living in difference by retaining and recreating a culture distinct from the majority culture in the new country of residence, also raises a whole set of additional questions, as Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan summarizes in his study on "Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora", all of which circulate around questions of authenticity. Does 'Indian' signify the same in 'Indian' and in 'Indian-American' (or 'Indian-Canadian' for that matter). "Which of the two is authentic, and which merely strategic or reactive?" (Radhakrishnan "Ethnicity" 2003, 123), and whose claims to cultural authenticity are valid or more valid? Aside from a duality of cultural identity in the diaspora, which may already render cultural authenticity impossible, 'authenticity' in its essence requires a level of emotional commitment. This then raises the question of whether second generation migrants' emotional commitment to a homeland can even be authentic. While the general public as well as fractions within the diaspora could be quick to assume that authenticity could only be found in the homeland or first generation immigrants, that is to say within people who have first-hand exposure to that culture and are socialized into it, Radhakrishnan points out that it would be foolish to assume that the investedness of the first generation, or within the homeland for that matter, was more 'authentic' than that of future generations. Both are inventions and projections.<sup>117</sup> "[W]e cannot legislate or hand down authenticity from a position of untested moral or political high ground" (ibid. 125). Information *about* a nation can be shared, emotional investment *in* a 'homeland' only experienced. Consequently, the impact of a diasporic identity can only be individual, because experience (as opposed to knowledge) cannot be shared cognitively.<sup>118</sup> Nor, of course, does a 'true' India exist in the geographical region. Everyone's ideas about what constituted India also differ based on their individual experience, even if they

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Mosaic' is well known (cf. her short story collection *Darkness* and especially her introduction to the same), as is her critique of ethnic self-fashioning in the diaspora as expressed in her essay "Two Ways to Belong in America."

<sup>117</sup> While, following Hobsbawm's influential analysis, all tradition and consequently ideas of the nation and nationalisms are inventions and projections, the diaspora's commitment to a homeland is a double invention, as it creates ideas of that homeland, whose very existence and traditions itself are invented from specific historical needs. These re-inventions of the diaspora may differ as they fulfill different needs and voids in different groups and generations, yet none is less authentic or more real than the other.

<sup>118</sup> This ultimate argument against the conceptualization of 'collective identity' is also the dominant theme of Abha Dawesar's third novel, *That Summer in Paris*, which, oscillating between the four spheres art, nourishment, sexuality and death, constantly calls the idea of shared experiences into question, see chapter 6.2.

live in close proximity within that region. Distance or proximity are no guarantees for authenticity or alienation.

With regard to the specific relationship of authenticity and ethnicity, Radhakrishnan further cautions against claiming authenticity in nostalgic positions on the homeland, as these are usually triggered by dissatisfaction in the present and often reduced to essentialist readings of the cultural heritage. An exclusion from or a position different from a majority culture not only gives rise to such reinventions of 'authenticity', but at the same time also signify a positioning of the established culture towards the difference. In the case of the South Asian diaspora, this response from the majority culture is one of exoticization and consumption, which in reverse will impact the groups perception and shaping of that culture.<sup>119</sup>

A final key feature of the new Indian diaspora to be mentioned in this brief overview of characteristics is its high degree of mobility. However, as outlined in the diaspora discussion above, the globalized hypermobility of the individual eventually and inevitably disrupts and loosens social cohesions of groups. Of course, the factor mobility, not surprisingly, has always played a dominant role in diasporic realities and cultural productions, but, in recent texts, the individual and their high degree of mobility are emphasized over the factor of traveling cultures, as migrations no longer follow binary departure-arrival models but often involve multiple relocations.

While the traditional motivators for group cohesion in the diaspora may be fading among the second or third generation, as the experience of displacement cannot be cognitively shared, new developments globally and socially, result in changing emotional investments. These can either lead to the dissolution of group identity or, as we can currently also observe with the new rise of populisms and fundamentalisms globally, they can result in stronger group cohesions and radicalization. Looking at South Asians living abroad, the past decade or two has seen a loosening of ethnicity or geographical origin-based group association. However, the global increase and strengthening of collective identities based on religious affiliations can also clearly be seen among South Asians, especially with regard to Muslims and Sikh, as both have been faced with growing animosity from the white majority cultures since the 9/11 attacks and subsequent wars and growing fear and hate discourses globally.

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. the discussion on exoticization below.

#### 4.1 The New Diaspora and its Literature<sup>120</sup>

With the rise of ethnic literatures in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various aspects of migration, diasporism, ethnicity and the growing cultural intermingling around the globe also became increasingly dominant themes of the North American literary landscape. The emphasis on cultural differences and ethnic identity constructions in various realms of the social has, not surprisingly, found reflection especially in texts by authors of minority heritage. Like postcolonial literature, in a more general and overt way, this body of literature, too, had been urged forward by a political agenda. The texts were actively engaged in, and largely composed in relation to the larger social struggle for recognition: to have one's own (collective) voice heard; to put one's stories and thus also histories and identities on the map – a development that is clearly visible in the field of South Asian North American fiction if one takes a look at publications like *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (1993), or *Contours Of The Heart: South Asians Map North America* (1996), to mention just two anthologies among many.

Such projects of mapping not only entail negotiations of acculturation and difference within the new territory, but also to a large extent the introduction or description of the territory of 'back home' to the intended audience, adding one's cultural heritage to the archives of the new country of residence. One example for such a form of mapping of the diasporic imaginary would be the recurring focus on the city of Bombay in the writing of South Asians in North America. What makes Bombay a particularly suitable example is that, on the one hand, it functions as a key embodiment of India, being home to the most prominent Indian film industry, but also emblematic of the clash between rich and poor, mansions and slums, as well as all religious groups and many regional sub-divisions. On the other hand, it is of particular significance for the diaspora, as it has, over the past 2 decades, gained a sort of mystical status: 'Bombay' had been taken off the geographical map when the name of the city had been changed to Mumbai in the mid-1990s after the Hindu-nationalist Shiv Sena party had come to power there. This, however, only increased the newly de-territorialized cosmopolitan metropolis' significance in the realm of the imaginary. As Rashmi Varma in his essay "Provincializing the Global City" emphasizes, Bombay's change to Mumbai cannot be seen as one among the many examples of postcolonial re-naming. Rather, it is closely linked with right wing politics and communalism, in the course of which much of the city's cosmopolitan character was dismantled in favor of increasing provincialism and, as Varma

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<sup>120</sup> For a comprehensive study on the literature of the old South Asian Diaspora see Vijay Mishra's study *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (2007). The literature of traditional, trauma-based diasporas frequently acts as a historical as well as a cultural translation, as collectivity forming traumas resonate in the cultural memory and are continuously revisited by later generations. The dominant example for the Indian context, Mishra claims, is the fiction of V. S. Naipaul, which he analyses at length.

calls it, ethnic chauvinism.<sup>121</sup> Ironically, it was only in this phase of Bombay's decline, meaning since the 1980's, as Nilufer Bharucha, Professor of English at the University of Mumbai (formerly University of Bombay) states, that the city developed a strong literary presence playing a pivotal role beyond mere setting. Bombay has been taking its place next to Dicken's London, Joyce's Dublin or Auster's New York.<sup>122</sup>

What makes it an even more emblematic setting for diasporic literature is the fact that many of the texts of these diaspora writers were written before the city's name was changed, like much of Rohinton Mistry's writing, several of Salman Rushdie's novels that use Bombay as a setting or Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*. History's de-territorializing of the geographical marker added additional symbolism to the diasporic character of these novels, emphasizing the very impossibility of return and the transposition of 'home' into the imagined space. At the same time, looking at more recent fiction written after the name change, Bombay's loss of geographical reality and its being relegated exclusively to the imaginary became its own driving force. This is evident, for example, in the personification of the city in the prologue of Thrity Umrigar's novel *Bombay Times* or in the magic realism of Anosh Irani's dark novels and plays.

Bombay as a recurring setting and (re-)imagined city in diasporic literature is just an example of literally putting the minority group on the majority culture's map. Other, more figurative ways of redrawing the cultural map would be in the depiction of traditions, inscriptions of folklore and history, and challenging established world views with alternate approaches. Such a redrawing of the map has a twofold effect: a) it serves as a reaffirmation for the community and a platform to negotiate the diasporic experience, the trauma of arrival and inter- and transcultural processes; and b) this act of cultural cartography, at the same time, necessarily condenses and generalizes customs, stories and identity markers. It serves as an outlet for nostalgia and invites the majority culture not only to engage, but unfortunately also to stereotype and exoticize that which is different.

Diasporic literature fulfills the first of these, the affirmative function that serves as a platform to negotiate the diasporic experience through representation, predominantly in identity narratives and the reiteration of the shared experience. The New Diaspora's trauma of arrival may - compared to the ship brotherhood of the old diaspora - be a more individual experience in its specificities that differ for every migrant striving to find his/her place in the new country of

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<sup>121</sup> Cf. Rashmi Varma, "Provincializing the Global City: From Bombay to Mumbai," *Social Text* 81, 22:4 (Winter 2004) 65-89. Cf. also Arjun Appadurai's analysis of the history and contemporary condition of the city in his essay "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai" in *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000) 627-651.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Nilufer E. Bharucha, "The City as Hero," *Literary Criterion* 28.3 (1993) 46-49, or "Fictional and Cinematic Representations of the Journey of Bombay to Mumbai", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and the City*, ed. Jeremy Tambling, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016: 623-638.

residence and its society, however, Vijay Mishra throughout his study still holds that diasporas are as a prerequisite “traumatized and unhappy” (Mishra 2007, 183). It is this unhappiness that binds the individuals into the group membership.<sup>123</sup> To write diaspora means to write mourning. Diasporic bodies in such fiction (and Mishra here explicitly mentions Naipaul, Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee as representative authors) are “always traumatized, always wrecked by self-doubt” (Mishra 2007, 187).<sup>124</sup> The dominant themes are the struggle for recognition, especially regarding rights within the nation-state, and in this struggle also the negotiations of individual and group identities. This political focus of much literature of the new South Asian diaspora is not always only one on the struggle *for* recognition (identity construction narratives), but frequently also *about* recognition (identity negotiation narratives), that is to say reflections on underlying terms of the concept, agency or lack thereof, and assumptions inherent in the categories that form the basis for the recognition *as* something or someone.<sup>125</sup>

The cultural basis on which ethnic identity is created has in many cases – particularly for second-generation migrants or migrants with multiple ethnic backgrounds – become, what Arjun Appadurai calls a “nostalgia without memory” (Appadurai 1996, 30). Memory, an essential factor in identity constructions, has been replaced by an artificially constructed and displaced cultural heritage. The basis of this collective identity is no longer actual cultural memory so much as a “*social imaginaire* [...] a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios” (Appadurai 1996, 30f.).<sup>126</sup> This ‘social imaginaire’ is one of the reasons for often static forms of diasporic culture reenactments and preservation attempts, but also plays a significant, if often unacknowledged, role in authenticity discourses.

Migration and othering, as well as negotiations of identities and of space, result in more deliberate reflections on culture. To actively reflect on culture and cultural (re-)iterations,

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<sup>123</sup> Laclau’s argument of the unmet demand once again seems to resonate in this observation on diasporic group cohesion.

<sup>124</sup> The question that begs to be asked with this analysis of Mishra is, whether the texts in fact are about or suffused with trauma, or whether self-doubt and identity negotiations are not read as trauma narratives (by the critic) in order to make the diaspora label a more applicable one. The term ‘trauma’ seems to have become fairly porous when applied to the new diaspora and lost much of its paralyzing quality to make way for a more active mode of engagement.

<sup>125</sup> To be recognized *as* a group member is also linked to the debates regarding the makeup and management of multicultural societies, especially in the U.S. and Canada. Writers of color have repeatedly emphasized how the hyphenated identity that seems to create inclusion has turned the hyphen more into a dividing line than a uniting symbol.

<sup>126</sup> This idea of ‘nostalgia without memory’ – which is inspired by Fredric Jameson’s ‘nostalgia for the present’ – can also be read as cultural memory without a ‘practical past,’ a concept Hayden White develops from Michael Oakeshott’s distinction between a historical and a practical past. ‘Practical Past’ means a past of actual experience, a “past of memory, dream, and desire as much as it is of problem-solving, strategy and tactics of living, both personal and communal” (White, MS 9f.).



especially from a marginalized and possibly de-localized position, then, almost naturally evokes the question of and need for authenticity. Cultural identities based on a ‘social imaginaire’ rather than a cultural memory, may emphasize authenticity as a strategy of self-justification.<sup>127</sup>

The issue of cultural authenticity, however, is two-sided. On the one hand it may serve as a tool for cultural unity building, but also marketability, on the other hand it is the instrument that puts and keeps the artist in the ethnicity corner. In their introduction to a collection on ‘beyond autoethnography’ Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn highlight developments in Asian Canadian writing, emphasizing that this body of literature has been moving decidedly beyond political agendas to a greater level of aesthetic awareness and experimentation. Yet, the aspect of authenticity claims remains with the ethnic subject. As Asian American writers, the authors cannot escape – even if they might not explicitly address it – a racialized context.<sup>128</sup> That is to say, while autoethnography primarily aimed at ‘representations’ of the ethnic subject, even fiction that goes beyond this agenda, or deliberately sidesteps it, cannot fully exist beyond or outside its frame. Especially markets so highly influenced by identity politics like those in North America have created highly racialized contexts for literature. From cover designs and book marketing to the subsequent reader expectations, any author of visibly ethnic heritage is always already racialized and conscious of this context. Being racialized, then, means that readers (and critics) approach the text with expectations of authenticity even though “[m]any authors attempt to question or problematize the link between ethnic identity and literary production” (Ty and Verduyn 3).

In this essay collection the phrase ‘beyond autoethnography’ is used “to characterize and highlight texts that refuse to be contained simply by their ethnic markers” (ibid. 4). The authors do not intend to signal the end to the trend of ‘literary representation’, but want to emphasize that creative expression is “not necessarily predicated on the exposition of one’s ethnic identity. Going ‘beyond’ autoethnography or critical ethnography means moving away from questions of ‘authenticity,’” (ibid.) and it “raises questions about the way literary critics approach ethnographic texts” (ibid. 5). Because – as the essay by Paul Lai in the collection emphasizes – this context we create not only already creates boundaries and thus delimits possibilities, but we do so on the basis of criteria devised prior to approaching the text, which implies that regardless of the (possible) politics of the text, readers always already approach it with political expectations – most likely those of representation of a group and thus ethnic authenticity.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Cf. Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan’s essay “Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora” discussed above.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Ty and Verduyn 3.

<sup>129</sup> Lai in his essay suggest how to read autoethnography differently from such established practices by outlining links between anthropology and literary studies and why critics seem to be so invested in claiming texts as ethnic ‘representations’ (cf. Paul Lai, “Autoethnography Otherwise,” *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography*, 55-70).

In addition, this idea of the ‘authentic (visible) other’ fosters an interest in the exotic, a craving for ‘newness’ that gives impetus to consumerism. Even more so, as the increase in global migration over the second half of the twentieth century brought the ‘margins’ to the ‘center’. Global migration relocates the ‘other’ in the center. Large-scale migration fosters the need for a global commodity market to make articles like food or clothing available for the migratory community. Yet, at the same time, such and other cultural products are also marketed to the majority cultures, with the media as the driving force in market generation.<sup>130</sup> This led, as Mridula Nath Chakraborty diagnoses, to “a new kind of orientalisng gaze that operates on the will-to-know-the Other: through the market economy of first world consumption” (Chakraborty 2003, 127). Contrary to past centuries, when the growth of conquering European empires brought ‘strange goods and stories’ of other cultures to European centers of power, exoticism is no longer characterized by distance. This is also a focus of Graham Huggan in his study *The Postcolonial Exotic*:

Late twentieth-century exoticisms are the products, less of the expansion of the nation than of a worldwide *market* – exoticism has shifted, that is, from a more or less privileged mode of aesthetic perception to an increasingly global mode of mass-market consumption. . . . These ‘new’ exotic products . . . are characterised, not by remoteness but by *proximity*. (Huggan 2001, 15).

The apprehension of this nearby ‘other’ on grounds of ethnic heritage has led to reductive, essentialist and deterministic readings of cultures and the literature produced. It renders the ‘visible other’ susceptible to exoticization, turning it into a “consumable Other” (Bahri and Vasudeva 2). Seen in this light, Stanley Fish’s term of ‘boutique multiculturalism’<sup>131</sup> is shifting its emphasis, as the everyday transcultural interaction becomes less a question of (superficial) respect than increasingly one concerned with the literal market value of the ‘multicultural.’

This effect is further fostered by some works of diasporic literature, in particular texts like the above-mentioned anthologies, as they focus largely on issues stereotypically associated with the label ‘South Asian,’ especially in the portrayal of female victimization. Anthologies like these and a frequent political, cultural and diasporic focus from critics and readers have repeatedly led to these texts’ being almost exclusively regarded as source texts for cultural and transcultural information, frequently at the expense of the text’s (sometimes self-conscious) aesthetics. As a social and as a creative project, the struggle for collective recognition based on ethnicities has thus ultimately resulted in mis-recognition.

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<sup>130</sup> Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* regards migration and the media as the two major factors of the cultural dimensions of globalization.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Stanley Fish’s essay of that title in which he differentiates between ‘boutique multiculturalism’ that stays on the surface of ‘recognition’ and an (impossible) deep multiculturalism that ‘recognizes’ difference.

If the political project of recognition is losing its relevance (if it has not even failed altogether), what then happened to *littérature engagée*? At a first glance, the established visibility of ‘other cultures’ in the markets of the hegemonic West might be interpreted as a success story; for example, the share of texts by authors of South Asian background in the Anglophone literary market has been growing significantly over the last decades. However, the market segment “South Asian English language literature” is a) largely promoted on the appeal of the “exotic”<sup>132</sup> and b) clearly dominated by authors living in the economic centers of the West, especially the UK and in the last 20 years increasingly Canada and the USA<sup>133</sup> thus marginalizing, for example, English language writing by authors in South Asia. Critics like Graham Huggan, Professor of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Leeds, have repeatedly pointed out, how this visibility of ethnic subjects in the West further contorts cultural ‘recognition.’ Adding to that is the fact that a large part of this body of literature also focuses on aspects related to recognition projects, cultural hybridity, the negotiation of cultural differences or the history and conditions of South Asian diasporas, which further perpetuates the western-centrism of the market.

Literature produced in the west is, overall, keenly aware of the literary market and its mechanisms and demands. Writers – especially in North America where both of the predominately English speaking countries, Canada and the USA, pride themselves in cultural diversity (management) – respond to these market mechanisms in a variety of ways.<sup>134</sup> The bulk of texts of the new diaspora is “self-consciously hybrid and determinedly postmodern.”<sup>135</sup> It emphasizes a state of in-betweenness that caters to western readers by negotiating anxieties of belonging.

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<sup>132</sup> Mary Anne Mohanraj gave an insightful paper on the topic at the 2008 Annual Conference of the South Asian Literary Association, where she took a look at the design of book covers of works esp. by female South Asian writers in the west and found a disconcerting amount of recurring tropes like only partial female bodies, more or less scantily draped in Saris, rarely a face, usually some ‘oriental’ ornamentation, or the dominance of the color red; cf. “Marketing the Queer Desi Woman.”

<sup>133</sup> On this debate see, for example, Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 2001, especially pp. 12, 15, and 78.

<sup>134</sup> Not infrequently, these authors turn to narrative strategies like magic realism to enchant their readers (for example the texts by Salman Rushdie, but also Vikram Chandra, Anosh Irani or occasionally Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni). Magic realism as a literary form has since its emergence particularly lent itself to literatures on the margins, be it postcolonial or minority writing, as it crosses many borders, not least that between reality and magic, not as a break with reality in the sense of fantasy, but rather a continuation, an inclusion of the magic, the threshold not clearly marked; a fluid back and forth or merging of the realms. The inclusion of the surreal fosters exoticization while at the same time relegating the ‘other’ culture somewhat into an otherworldly realm that frequently makes it appear less threatening. Cf. for example studies like Kim A. Sasser’s *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism: Strategizing Belonging* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), Seretha Denise Williams’ *Mythic Spaces: Magical Realism in African Diaspora Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1998), or Maria Alonso Alonso’s *Diasporic Marvellous Realism: History, Identity, and Memory in Caribbean Fiction* (Cross/Cultures 183, Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015).

<sup>135</sup> For discussions of themes see, for example, the collection *Asian-American Writing: The Diasporic Imagination* in three volumes, edited by Somdatta Mandal. Cf. esp. Latha Rengachari’s essay “Debating Expatriate Women’s writing from the Indian Subcontinent,” 31-48, here 32.

Moreover, the writers largely belong to a cosmopolitan élite themselves, many of them with an academic background in creative writing and cultural and literary studies.<sup>136</sup>

Yet, literature is always more ambivalent than its position in the market may suggest. Even though it may be marketed for its otherness, many literary texts would at the same time aim to subvert the exoticization they are subjected to, through employing the very same tactics strategically. This strategic interplay with market mechanism then challenges such exoticization of otherness or ethnicity. Huggan in his *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* takes a closer look at the postcolonial writer/thinker in this global cultural field and distinguishes in this context between two regimes of value: postcolonialism and postcoloniality. While postcolonialism “becomes an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of literary and cultural texts,” postcoloniality “is a value regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange. Value is constructed through the global system of commodity exchange of cultural commodities and, particularly, culturally ‘othered’ goods.” (Huggan 2001, 6) Yet, the two are far from independent from each other, because postcoloniality reveals and enforces, the global market is craving for ‘othered’ goods and thus

postcolonialism comes into conflict once again with postcoloniality; for while postcolonial works and their authors gain currency from their perceived capacity for anti-imperialist resistance, ‘resistance’ itself emerges as a commodified vehicle of symbolic power. (ibid. 29)

Graham Huggan draws attention to the powers at work in the production and the marketing of ethnically labeled texts – their being caught between postcolonialism and postcoloniality – but at the same time he emphasizes the potential agency of the marginalized in this process.

Postcolonial cultural production is profoundly affected, but not totally governed, by commodification; it is frequently, but not invariably, subject to the fetishisation of cultural difference; it is increasingly, but by no means irredeemably, institutionalised in Western commercial and educational systems; its value is certainly shaped, but not rigidly determined, by its contact with the global market. It is something of a solecism perhaps to say that postcolonialism exists in the margins, when the best-known writers and thinkers are obviously operating in the mainstream. Still, it would be fair to say that it is validated . . . by its insertion in discourses of marginality that are immediately local, but also potentially global, in their effect. And this means that exoticism, itself a discourse of the margin, must be confronted, incorporated into works that challenge—often looking to subvert—metropolitan mainstream cultural codes. (ibid. 27).

Huggan stresses that exoticization is not only a tool of Western hegemony, but that the ‘othered’ themselves have made use of it in the form of strategic exoticization as, as he calls it, ‘the postcolonial exotic’. “Writers . . . have proven adept at playing on readerly expectation, rehearsing but also transforming those literary formulae of an imagined India which capitalise on the illicit

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<sup>136</sup> A perfect (though not well known) example of such a determinedly postmodern, self-consciously hybrid, academic writing would be Yasmin Ladha’s small collection of short stories *Lion’s Granddaughter*.

adventures and extravagant clichés of exotic romance” (ibid. 80). So-called or -interpreted cultural ‘authenticity’ is thus, at the same time, a marketing tool, a promise towards the reader as well as both a (possibly) strategically [the writer] and a (likely) orientalizing [the reader] act of exoticization.

Whether they are employing strategic exoticization or just playing the market, the success of South Asian North American writers over the past decades is undeniable. Their visibility in the literary field and market is most prominent with regards to literary awards. Let me list only an excerpt of the most prestigious prizes for fiction given to authors of the new South Asian diaspora to exemplify this element of the ‘success story’: In 1997 Arundhati Roy received the Man Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things* as did Kiran Desai in 2006 for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Jhumpa Lahiri, among many awards, won the Pulitzer Prize for her first collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000. The Governor General’s Award for fiction – Canada’s most prestigious prize for the arts – was awarded to Rohinton Mistry in 1991 for his novel *Such a Long Journey*, to Michael Ondaatje in 1992 for *The English Patient* (which also won the Man Booker Prize that year) and again in 2000 for *Anil’s Ghost*.

As Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma point out in their essay on South Asian authors in a global milieu, these writers are also promoted in the market, as their fiction “appeals to a diverse reading public . . . because of their veneer of ordinariness” (Rajan and Sharma, 151f.). These writers “tackle everyday realities of cooking, eating, living and loving to carve out a plot . . . rather than large-scale theatricalized histories, as Forster or Rushdie had done” (ibid. 152). The differences in ordinary life-styles and -stories further foster the craving for the exotic, as differences are most prominently located in identity markers in everyday lives, like food, clothing and customs. At the same time, the everyday existence of others around us is the realm from which the desire for knowing stems from. What Rajan and Sharma here call a new cosmopolitanism is “enmeshed in global capitalism through routes taken in the publishing processes and subsequent, sophisticated forms of packaged communications” (ibid.). It is thus hardly surprising that the success of transcultural and ethnic literature carving itself into the literary market has resulted in increased commercialization of these topics in literature and film.

#### 4.1.1 After Politics – Cliché

Irrespective of whether cultural recognition or mis-recognition was achieved in the various projects of identity politics, the by now established visibility of the ‘other’ in cultural products on the consumer market indicates that the *engagée* focus is no longer a requisite of their production. Yet, even though contemporary texts may no longer be predominantly informed by a diasporic

struggle of ethnic group identity negotiations, quite a significant number of texts seems to linger in this realm of overt cultural translations. That is to say, even though the urgency of a political agenda may have changed or diminished, many texts continue to employ previously successful strategies with regard to content, form and style. Such stories often rely on stock-items like the role of the female as the preserver of traditions (often battling various forms of victimization from arranged marriages to [initial] feelings of dislocation in the new culture), identity markers like exotic food and spices, or colorful clothing that pepper the narratives of frequently romanticized family- or love-plots spanning various continents and/or generations.

These texts are, in general, far from Huggan's notion of 'strategic exoticism.' Their revisiting of the 'exotic' does not challenge exoticizing discourses in the market. On the contrary, many recent texts seem to exploit the exotic *for* easy consumption, to sell in large quantities what the literary market seems to crave. The majority of the authors – many of whom university educated and quite a number of from creative writing programs – show a familiarity with theoretical discussions in the fields of postcolonialism and ethnic studies, and much fiction reads like creative adaptations of such discourses on transnationalism, transculturalism, hybridity and states of in-betweenness. This literature is not necessarily without merits - much of it is very well crafted - nor is it devoid of political engagements. Yet these texts seem to merely reiterate established discourses on recognition and diaspora, resulting in a lack of urgency.

This is an almost inevitable effect of the development of societies globally. The everyday contact with the 'culturally other' in close proximity invites and asks us to engage with foreign cultures. Literary texts (as well as other media) commend themselves as 'cultural informants' in such endeavors. Diaspora literature fits into that project even better than foreign fiction, as it is often more accessible (both in terms of availability and in terms of approachability) to a Western reader, as it already focuses on this task of culture-mediation. But, as discourses become established and widely accepted or at least commonplace, their political urgency recedes. Consequently, reiterations of this type of struggle in literary texts eventually become formulaic, leaning towards cliché and stereotypes. Especially recent diasporic literature by women writers and/or addressed predominately at a female audience fall into that category. To put it a bit polemically, in order to be considered South Asian diasporic literature, it seems, topics like arranged marriage, poverty, corruption, gender inequality, cultural identity in appearance and behavior, negotiations of and struggles with hybridity and belonging, and strained relationships between generations ought to be worked into the tale. A prime example of this kind of diasporic literature published more recently would be Gurjinder Basran's award winning debut novel

*Everything Was Good-Bye* (2010)<sup>137</sup> from the ethnic-literature focused Mother-Tongue Publishing, or Shilpi Somaya Gowda's debut novel *Secret Daughter* (2010), published by a branch of the Harper Collins conglomerate.

Gowda's novel reiterates the common traits of the genre already in terms of focalization and structure. It starts off with a prologue that should leave the reader puzzled and that would come to full circle in the epilogue. The main plot then is narrated chronologically in short chapters from the three main female protagonists' perspectives. The male characters only occasionally get a voice and are far less developed. Each of the short chapters is headed by a poetic to cryptic title that provides the major focus for the following pages, like "An Uneasy Peace" or "Only One Regret". These titles are followed by an indication of location and year, followed by the name of the focalizer character of the chapter. The underlying trauma that connects the three main characters is the practice of female infanticide in rural India.

The novel juxtaposes the lives of a poor couple in rural India, who after finally having had a son, relocate to the slums of Mumbai, working their way up, but losing their son to corruption and crime in the big city. Before giving birth to this male heir, Kavita had given birth to several girls, most of which were taken from her and killed right away. She eventually saved one baby girl by bringing her to an orphanage. This part of the plot is juxtaposed with the story of Somer and Krishnan, a couple of doctors in California, who, unable to have children themselves, adopt said girl, the 'Secret Daughter' of the book's title. The storylines converge when Asha, the girl goes to visit India and her adoptive father's family there. Her visit also serves to research social problems in Mumbai, specifically in the slums in Dharavi,<sup>138</sup> the very slums her biological parents had lived in after moving to the city. The story employs a few "almost meetings" between Asha and her birth mother. They, for example, visit the same locations at different times, which, while purely coincidental, suggest a deeper bond and more importantly keep the reader in suspense whether or not they would meet.

Asha eventually resigns to not finding her biological family and in doing so is finally able to fully embrace her hybridity. After having struggled all her life with being a visible outsider, both in America due to her skin color and in India due to her demeanor, Asha decides that she simply belongs everywhere. However, if read closely, the shallowness of this hybridity is exposed

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<sup>137</sup> Winner of the Search for the Great B.C. Novel Contest and of the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize 2011. Basran's novel, like many before her, narrates a young woman's renegotiation of her identity in relation to the ethnic community she grew up in and her own desires that long for a hybrid existence beyond the traditional life such an ethnic identity would entail.

<sup>138</sup> Dharavi in Mumbai is one of India's most famous slum areas, it is also the settlement that recently reached international fame through the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, another highly emotional story of beating the odds of one's social heritage.

at the narrative's fringes. Despite her visits to India, Asha remains exactly that, a visitor with an interest in the culture, yet unable to really grasp it. While Asha serves as the primary informant on all things Indian for the reader, her grandmother and her editor during her internship at The Times of India educate her on the real India.

The final celebration of Asha's hybrid identity, which at that point is transgressing not only cultures but also gender roles, too is limited to this surface hybridity. At the end of the novel, she is asked to light the funeral pyre for her grandfather, a right usually reserved for male heirs only. But her grandmother chooses her as a substitute for her absent father. Her grandmother's breach with tradition is accepted by the community only because the chosen one did not really belong. This last scene bears additional irony, as symbolically the female infant who was not meant to live (in India), has – in India – become equivalent to the male.

The novel explicitly addresses quite a number of political and social issues, from the lack of woman's rights, social inequality and the high levels of illiteracy esp. among the rural population in India, as well as crime and corruption in Indian politics and the upper class. American culture, in contrast, is portrayed as suffering from individualism and isolation, as exemplified through the character of Asha's adoptive mother, who feels like an outsider in her own family, because she is Caucasian, while both her husband and daughter are South Asian. Her alienation serves as the canvas for questions on U.S.-culture's emphasis on ethnicity and collective identities.<sup>139</sup> Gowda has in the meantime published her second novel, *Golden Son* (2015), which follows the same formula of a bicultural narrative, partly set in the US, partly in India, of negotiating past and present, and "here" and "there".

Recent South Asian North American diaspora literature like Gowda's well-crafted and at times emotionally poetic, yet overly symbolic and overall formulaic texts in their predictability always already signify the commercialization of this body of literature.

The transition from *littérature engagée* to literature that simply conforms to and fulfills market demands of the center, comes full circle once themes can be seen entering the pulp fiction markets of airport literature and 'chick-lit.' Stereotypes and clichés, as well as formulaic plot developments form the basic ingredients of these genres, as, for example, Anne Cherian's 2008 novel *A Good Indian Wife* exemplifies. This novel, too, caters almost exclusively to a female

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<sup>139</sup> In addition, a look at the novels publishing and distribution history in Canada further highlights how the political agenda of postcolonialism has by now (been) turned into an exotic cliché for easy consumption. This debut novel initially did not receive much publicity. However, the novel suddenly received attention when it was republished as a trade paperback, after Harper Collins Canada discovered that the author had also once lived in Canada. Furthermore, the book was then picked up for distribution through Costco retail warehouses and suddenly Gowda's novel was the number 2 bestseller in Canada for several weeks. This shows not only the exotic appeal for mass consumption but is also one of many examples of how the publishing and distribution market determines the reception of fiction. (Barber, "What is the secret of Secret Daughter?").



readership.<sup>140</sup> The victimized protagonist Leela is a young woman from India who enters into the valued arranged marriage to an NRI-doctor, who, however, continues his affair with his stereotypical blonde blue-eyed white American secretary. Leela adjusts to the American way, eager to please her husband, but also retains her cultural values and standards, which are presented as superior or more pure than those of the Western culture around her. Further emphasizing Leela's in-between position is the fact that she even becomes a subject of research for a thesis by a university student of South-Asian heritage. Inevitably and predictably, Neel, her husband, through the virtuousness and patience of Leela, eventually recognizes her value over that of his American lover. The mass of clichés – from arranged marriage, to the racism and greed of the American girlfriend to brief allusions to dowry practices, an over-valuation of other people's opinions and last but not least, that being connected to 'one's own culture' is essential for leading a happy life – woven throughout *A Good Indian Wife* reads like a checklist that the author may have deemed necessary in order to comply with the exotic expectations of western audiences. Cherian's portrayal of both cultures never even scratches the surface or attempts to critically revisit the clichés it employs.

What this brief sketch of developments in South Asian North American diasporic fiction of the last decades tries to illustrate is that the literary voices have lost their urgency and impact with regard to the political agenda of diasporic writing in terms of representation and giving voice. The immense internal heterogeneity of this 'ethnicity' and its social mobility due to high levels of education, as well as geographical mobility have increasingly eroded essentialist collective identity configurations. In addition, the exotic, once it is firmly established in the commodity market and widely available, automatically loses some of its appeal. The entry of South Asian North American diaspora fiction in the mass and pulp fiction market may mark an "arrival at the center", but it at the same time results in reiterations that lack inventiveness and a decline in both political relevance and literary quality.

#### 4.1.2 Double Diasporas and Multi-Hyphenation

While the literary market fosters the appeal of the exotic and continues to use homogenizing techniques to create individual 'ethnic niches' for publicity, the texts so readily subsumed under such a label frequently try to break that mold. A particular case can be made for

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<sup>140</sup> Targeted at the female adult of a certain age and situation in life, the book already includes a 'reading group guide' with an author's introduction, and a set of twenty questions like "It is clear to us that Leila is proud of her heritage and Indian identity. Do you believe that Neel is equally proud? Why or why not?" or the final one "While Neel often frets about Leila's lack of Americanness, Leila is busy making comparisons between life back home and in America, with each one making her grow stronger. Can you chart those epiphanies?" (Cherian 392).

texts by a special sub-group among the South-Asians in North America: the South Asian double diaspora – members, or rather, mostly descendants of the old diaspora who in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century migrated into the centers of the West. Their migration in terms of routes and reasons may often resemble that of the new diaspora (although certain groups among them have been forced to re-migrate under traumatic circumstances after African colonies gained independence – most notably those with family-roots in Uganda<sup>141</sup>). These migrants find themselves subsumed under the diaspora-label by the majority culture, yet often excluded from within the diaspora by cultural difference. This can create an even greater awareness of hybridity and difference in their multi-hyphenation, as they elude easy ethnic labeling altogether.

Neil Bissoondath and others have repeatedly emphasized that the hyphen serves as an invitation to exoticize the identity ascribed. The second part, that is ‘Canadian’ or ‘American’, is the common ground, while the first half stresses the difference. This often goes hand in hand with the classification as ‘visible minorities,’ where this ‘visibility’ enforces the stress on difference rather than similarity. Multi-hyphenation, in contrast, challenges and deconstructs the inherent hierarchies of such social processes as it already makes easy stereotyping impossible on the surface level, and it exposes the process of exoticizing people on ethnic grounds on the deeper level. It reveals and dismisses the ‘human need’ for categorization and definition to the point of absurdity as Kip Fulbeck has exhibited in his art project *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*: What do we possibly learn about a Hapa child by labeling it “Ghanaian, Chinese, Croatian, Scottish, Irish, German, Indian, British, Native American”?<sup>142</sup> Many writers have also revisited this aspect in their critical and more interestingly their literary texts, using the imaginative sphere and aesthetic strategies to counter hetero-stereotypization.

The complex history of migration to and on the subcontinent already resulted in forms of diasporas within the region. Consequently, the Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry could be regarded as a writer of the double diaspora based on his Parsi heritage.<sup>143</sup> I will in the following, however, focus on texts by writers who, through family roots, belong to the old as well as the new diaspora outside of the former British Raj. One of the best known, and according to Mishra “arguably the most important Canadian writer of this twice-displaced diaspora” (Mishra 2007, 164) is M.G. Vassanji. His importance is not only due to his own fiction, but even more so to his co-founding the literary magazine *The Toronto South Asian Review*, which turned into *The*

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<sup>141</sup> In the course of Uganda’s turbulent post-colonial history, Idi Amin, after seizing power from Milton Obote in 1971, forced the South Asian minority out of the country.

<sup>142</sup> Kip Fulbeck, *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006, 126f.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Sharmani Patricia Gabriel’s essay “Interrogating Multiculturalism: Double Diaspora, Nation, and Re-Narration in Rohinton Mistry’s Canadian Tales.”

*Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*, and which also gave impetus to the founding of the TSAR publishing house, which later turned into Mawenzi House.<sup>144</sup> M.G. Vassanji, like many postcolonial writers, shares a fascination for historiography and in his writing revisits the recent pasts of the multiple countries he has inhabited, depicting identity struggles in his constantly in-between characters. His novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* even stresses this status in the title. The novel merges the two waves of the Indian diaspora through the family history provided through the plot and in the text's narrative perspective. The grandfather came to Kenya as an indentured laborer and decided to stay, while the narrator and protagonist of the title relates his part of the story as a member of the double diaspora, living (as a fugitive) in Canada. Personal love stories are entwined with Kenya's troubled history: the family of Indian descent has two kids, the boy Vikram is in love with a white English girl, the daughter Deepa is courted by a black African. In this story of personal and political unrest, Vassanji does not paint clear-cut pictures of colonial or post-colonial struggles, but rather emphasizes the complexity of power relations, corruption and greed.

Vassanji differs from later writers of multiple hyphenations in so far as his texts are deeply rooted in identity negotiations and haunted by a diasporic imaginary. Similarly, Cyril and David Dabydeen, Neil Bissoondath or Farida Karodia, remain caught up in the juxtaposition of identity narratives, though they too explore these in critically and creatively engaging ways. However, the double-diaspora has also produced voices that playfully transgress the boundaries of such an imaginary to strategically employ identity and cultural difference discourses in order to challenge if not ridicule their underlying assumptions. Literary voices of this double-diaspora would, for example, be Yasmine Ladha, or Shani Mootoo.

Ladha was born in Tanzania and relocated to Canada in 1978 at the age of twenty. She studied creative writing with Aritha van Herk at the University of Calgary and has published poetry, two collections of short stories and in 2010 the novel *Blue Sunflower Startle*, which bears significant autobiographical traits. In her earlier collection *Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories* (1992) Ladha, a writer of postmodern metafictional texts, confronts the reader and his/her exoticizing gaze explicitly, especially in the two stories framing her collection. These are structured as imagined conversations of the narrator addressing a *Readerji*. Through these stories Ladha artfully ridicules simplistic attempts at understanding cultures, regardless whether it is done from a consciously exoticizing position or from a well-meaning critical one, and how such

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<sup>144</sup> According to their website, Mawenzi House is dedicated to fresh new writing from Canada and across the world that reflects the diversity of our rapidly globalizing world, particularly in Canada and the United States (cf. < <http://www.mawenzihouse.com/> >).

attempts might be doomed from the beginning, as the basis of information and the frames of inquiry always already originate from the western majority culture and hegemony.

Ladha's texts further refuse the reduction to any one, and especially an 'othered' cultural context through intertextual references, ranging from western classics like Greek mythology, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, or Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to South Asian classics and the canon of established postcolonial writers like Rushdie and Kureishi, thus rooting her fiction in 'world culture' rather than a 'cultural heritage.' Ladha not only explicitly refuses to be othered as such, but more importantly claims the agency of the discourse for herself and the writer. As Mishra put it "it is for the writer to decide, strategically, where and when and how to define her work as 'ethnic' or 'other' or even 'mainstream' (Mishra 2007, 160).

*Readerji*, is this binary inevitable? One is the colonizer, the other, the colonized. Then whoa, whoa *Readerji*. Now, please pick up speed and move! *Chapa chapa, tout-suite* (clap clap), *fatafat*, out of my text because I shy/sly from any confinement/circle/missionary position. Friction/fiction between mates facilitates ousting of hierarchical positions. I don't want to be the sturdy alphabet to set a novice at ease in Other literature (Ladha 1992, 97).

Ladha's self-reflective metatextuality here is a prime example of what Graham Huggan termed strategic exoticism.

Another example would be Shani Mootoo, a writer and multimedia visual artist. She has a truly globalized biography. Born in Ireland, she was raised in Trinidad and relocated to Canada at the age of nineteen. Her fiction has been collected in both, ethnic and queer anthologies. She has published one short story collection, a collection of poetry and four novels to date. Her fiction, categorized as both, queer and ethnic, subverts the craving for the exotic by constantly catering to it while deconstructing it at the same time. Being a lesbian of the South Asian double diaspora puts her on multiple fringes in (both national and diasporic) heteronormative patriarchal societies, which she frequently addresses and ironically deconstructs in her art. Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), for example, has elements of magic realism and is set on an imagined island in the Caribbean. However, the many levels of cruelty in the story, like attempts of cultural re-education in the form of 'colonial brainwash,' psychological violence in marriage, alcoholism and child abuse render any attempt of nostalgic exoticization and beautification absurd.

'Strategic exoticism' in Huggan's sense is even more prominent in her short stories collected in the earlier volume *Out on Main Street* (1993). The last story of the collection "The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds," for example, is the rather comic, self-reflective and ironic story of the lesbian homodiegetic narrator who grew up in a South Asian middle-class household in Trinidad and now lives in Vancouver. Already the title of the story sensitizes the audience for absurdities to be encountered as the narrator "unfolds" her world, absurdities largely due to ethnic and gender exoticization. The story begins with an analepsis, triggered by an

awareness of her linguistic conditioning in childhood when her parents had forced an “ancient retired British tutor” (Mootoo 1993, 106) onto her and her sister. The reader only learns more than four pages later that the word which had caused this flashback, the word with which the story should have been started, had it not triggered literally painful memories, was OKAY, “[a] simple, overused word. Not one, however, that is overused in my back-home, but overused here, in this country of englishes” (ibid.). The ensuing discussion of language use clearly depicts the colonial state of mind of her teacher as well as her parents, and the child’s improper use of “the Queen’s English”, i.e. a colonizers’ tool of superiority and power. This ‘disrespect’ leads to “the attack of a slender 18” x 1 1/2” length of wood sprung “thwaaaack! against a thinly-covered row of bones” (ibid.). The story thus opens with a depiction of colonial power structures on a small scale. The child commits a crime, though only if judged by the colonizer’s standards, and is left puzzled over the reasons for her punishment that is carried out by an instrumentalized anonymous agent while those in power remain outside the scene.

Mootoo’s text achieves a critical examination of issues like colonialization of the mind, exoticism and ethnicity through the subjacent irony, in general a powerful tool for textual subversion. Her story is suffused with irony on several levels: metafictional irony in the narrative’s self-reflective remarks; the irony of narrative distance between the adult voice of the frame narrative and the child’s experiences in the memory narrative; and finally, irony as omnipresent on the discourse level in the story of the narrated present, adding humor to the described events while at the same time subjecting readers to closer examination concerning assumption of cultural identities and attitudes towards others.

The second part of the text deals with different approaches to the appropriation of other cultures. It begins with the narrator’s realization that in multicultural Canada “White friends, unlike my White childhood tutor, no longer want to whiten me but rather they want to be brown and sugary like me” (ibid. 112). This recognition of changing expectations is again using language as central theme. While the first part presented the reader with the post-colonial child’s struggle with the “Queen’s English”, the protagonist of the second part is aware of multiple “englishes” which effectively dethrone the superiority of the colonizer embodied in her earlier experience. Yet, she finds herself insufficiently equipped for multiculturalism, as the dominant culture approaches her with the denomination ‘Indian’ or ‘South Asian’, yet she cannot offer the expected cultural or linguistic knowledge of what is assumed to be her heritage. This supposed ignorance turns into shame because it mixes with a memory of guilt for having declined her grandmother’s attempts to infuse her with ‘Indian culture’ including the Hindi language. Again, a case of what Appadurai called ‘nostalgia without memory.’ This is, furthermore, mixed with the desire for

social acceptance. The narrator claims that from the moment she stepped on Canadian soil, she had been exoticized as it was constantly assumed that she was proficient in cultural expressions of South Asia, especially Indian cuisine.<sup>145</sup> Initially, both her perception of guilt and her need for belonging make her comply with expectations even though she is aware of the stereotypization and misrecognition.

To add further ambiguity to the issue, the narrator-protagonist herself can be seen to employ the same mechanisms of cultural assumptions she feels exposed to. When her lover Zaire left her, she went and bought Sudanese music to soothe her broken heart. Yet at the same time she ponders, whether she had a ‘right’ to that music and by extension that culture.

The ultimate hypocrisy of cultural appropriation in this boutique multiculturalism is exposed in the final scene set in a Hindu temple. Observing her friends in “their desire to be Indian” (ibid. 115), the earlier frustration at her own ignorance at what ‘ought to be’ her cultural heritage turns into anger over the hypocrisy of the white crowd at the temple, who in their admiration for the exotic seem to have lost the ability for critical judgments of injustices.

The men sat closest to [the] front, and the women sat at the back. The Brown women fell into their places at the very back, against the wall. Midway through the sermon a young man came to fetch women, who were needed in the kitchen to serve the food. He crossed over and meandered among the congregation of White women who were nearest to him, heading for the Brown ones. They dutifully rose and followed him into the kitchen, missing the ending of the sermon.

. . . Meghan followed my eyes as I watched the Brown women walking single-file to the kitchen. In her favourite accent, full of empathy, she said, “Pretty sexist, eh! That’s a problem for us too” (ibid. 120f).

Even though Meghan and Virginia are self-portrayed feminists, such political agendas stop short when their admiration for the exotic steps in. Exoticism, as depicted in this text, is not only a form of cultural misrepresentation but inherent in it are additional dangers like the willing suspension of resistance against unjust power distributions. The postcolonial exotic here, as Huggan puts it, is “a self-critical unveiling of the imperialist [and one might add patriarchal] power-politics that lurks behind aesthetic diversion” (Huggan 2001, 32).

Vassanji’s or Bissoondath’s fiction, even though they deal with a double displacement, are still largely rooted in a diasporic imaginary. In contrast, Ladha’s or Mootoo’s writing is rarely informed by characters negotiating cultural differences in their identitarian struggles, rather, they flip the coin and critically revisit the underlying assumptions of such collective identity formations. Ladha in her metatextual approach and direct address makes the reader complicit in such processes, while Mootoo through the character’s discomfort with her own and other’s actions exposes the hypocrisy of cultural appropriation and assumptions of cultural identities. The particular engagement with cultural identity of these authors seems triggered by an experience of

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. “The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds” 117.

double-hyphenation, which might have made these writers more keenly aware of the shortcomings of collective ethnic identity formations, even while engaged in the production of ethnic literature.

Based on such an experience of difference due to multi-hyphenation, a reexamination of collective identities seems almost inevitable for these writers of the double diaspora. However, this development in ethnic literature can be found increasingly widespread throughout the spectrum of ethnic writers as the following discussion of more recent South Asian North American writing will exemplify.

## 5 Widening the Politics of Diasporic Literature

As Vijay Mishra moves towards more contemporary fiction in his study on the *Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, he acknowledges that recent writing “is differently accented.” The diaspora “no longer confines the aesthetic to a poetics constrained by the politics of identity and recognition” (Mishra 2007, 191). Mishra acknowledges that the literary archive of the more recent South Asian diaspora recognizes and embraces changes of transculturation, even though he, at the same time, continues to exclusively read the authors of South Asian heritage in the West that he included in his research as diasporic writers.

This development of diaspora literature from predominately negotiating cultural differences and group cohesion, by portraying character’s stories and evolutions as representative, to increasingly opening up towards topics of more individualized complexities, is most obvious in several later works of well-established writers of ethnic heritage. Much of their early work from the 1990s is at the center of the genre of South Asian diaspora writing, focusing on negotiations of cultural difference, generational conflict, and identity constructions, as for example in Jhumpa Lahiri’s first story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* and most prominently in her first novel *The Namesake*, or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Mistress of Spices*. More recent fiction by the same authors seems less focused on representative identity narratives and more engaged in the specificities of individuals navigating their specific complex social field. These characters are still largely of South Asian heritage and cultural belonging continues to play a role, but their stories are set in more particular environments and less symbolically representative of a group experience or identity.

This development of an opening up or a disbandment of traditional diaspora foci can in particular be observed in the two genres that have proven to be productive in diaspora and ethnic writing: historiographic fiction and the *Bildungsroman*. The general popularity of these genres for representative fictions is self-evident. By being set in a former time and a distant land and culture, the historical novel can function as a literary tour guide to educate the (foreign) reader about another culture and its historical roots and significant historical events. The *Bildungsroman* or novel of formation, in contrast, provides a ready-made template for a character’s development during their struggles of negotiating cultural belonging and identity formations.



## 5.1 Historiographic Fiction between Diaspora, Ethnicity, Postcolonialization and Globalization

*My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.*<sup>146</sup>

The English-language historical novel has enjoyed continued popularity since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however it has undergone significant changes especially since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the traditional historical novel was a romanticized narrative of a past, Modernism and Postmodernism brought about a rethinking of history and history writing, which is mirrored by the new wave of historiographic fiction in particular since the 1970s.

Joseph W. Turner in his differentiation of “The Kinds of Historical Fiction” points out that the term seems to be self-explanatory, yet it is difficult to define, mostly because it is less a formally determined genre than a question of plot, content, and focus. Struggling with the same issue of definition, Richard Maxwell settles on a common denominator in so far as “[h]istorical fiction is by definition referential, gesturing toward a world commonly understood to have existed” (Maxwell 545). This implies not only a historical, but also geographical probability, and indeed Maxwell emphasizes the intimate connection between history and geography.

National discourses have always tended to link history, culture and a notion of collectivity to the geo-political space of the nation-state, a process for which the invocation of myths of origin – as (imaginary) long-lasting links between the space of the nation and time or rather history – seem imperative. This alleged link between history and space further explains why historiographic fiction experienced an upsurge in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century as a means, alongside other critical discourses, to challenge such established implications of history. By the same token, it also proved to be an especially productive genre for postcolonial, ethnic and diaspora literatures, as it can serve as a vehicle for minorities to inscribe their version of history into a space and into mainstream culture and challenge hegemonial discourses.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>146</sup> This line from Agha Shahid Ali’s poem “Farewell” is also the first of three epigraphs of Anita Rau Badami’s novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* It epitomizes the driving force behind the popularity of the genre of historiographic fiction in postcolonial, ethnic, and diasporic literature.

<sup>147</sup> Canadian literature saw an especially marked productivity in the genre, as Canada a) always already had at least two competing founding myths (English and French Canada), b) is characterized by high ethnic diversity and c) fostered an intense public discourse on these issues since the 1970s. Canada also produced much compelling research on the matter. Herb Wyile’s study *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (Montreal: McGill - Queens University Press, 2002) investigates not only why historiographic fiction is such a prolific genre in Canadian literature, but also how the more recent fictions are less radical and more ambivalent in their challenging of historiography and representation and in doing so reflect the difficulties of negotiating social complexities. Cynthia Sugars also looks at the link between history and geography and takes up the issue of the missing unifying foundation myth in her essay “(Dis)inheriting the Nation”: “not only is there no ‘moment’ that one can fix upon to achieve this end, but there is also no single people that one can identify as the ancestors of the contemporary Canadian populace” (Sugars 178f). It is furthermore no coincidence that the

As the Canadian critic Herb Wyile in his study *Speculative Fictions* diagnoses, the presentation of history in the historiographic fiction of the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is very much aligned with postmodernity in general, as it “is fragmented, self-conscious, and discursively and generically heterogeneous, reflecting a wariness about the terms of – even the possibility of – historical representation. This disruption is part of a much broader reconfiguration of history and literature (Wyile, 4). He continues to emphasize that in these critical investigations of processes of historical representation a focus was first and foremost on voices left out of the discourse, on (hi)stories omitted or obscured, as postcolonial studies and literatures document.

Another testament to the continued – or resurging – relevance and popularity of the genre is Jerome de Groot’s more recently presented comprehensive study on *The Historical Novel* in the Routledge New Critical Idiom series. In it, de Groot devotes a long chapter to historiographic fiction of the later twentieth century that follows a clear political agenda rather than a post-modern one, though that writing too is, of course, deeply informed by postmodernism’s scrutiny of received perceptions and established structures. It is noteworthy that historiographic fiction of a political agenda – as *littérature engagée* in general – largely follows realist models of narration. Characteristics of postmodern writing like multi-perspectivity and fragmentation may frequently be found – stylistically informing the objective to challenge received world-views – but in general these texts tend to aim at authentic fallacy in terms of creating believable alternative histories.

The genre of historical fiction always intended to (re-)create plausible (fictive) past worlds and, as de Groot stresses, “[f]rom its beginnings as a form the historical novel has queried, interrogated and complicated fixed ideas of selfhood, historical progression, and objectivity” (de Groot 139) – attitudes that are then further amplified through postmodernism’s techniques of storytelling. As a genre it “provides a space for political intervention and reclamation; for innovation and destabilization” (ibid. 140). This potential, then, came to the fore with the social movements and changes of the twentieth century being carried and negotiated also in the arts. Consequently, de Groot, after looking at ‘conflicted national histories’ as such, focuses on ‘history from the margins,’ in particular, fictions about race, gay and lesbian writing, women writing, and the field of “anti-colonial fiction and identity” (ibid. 159). This is, of course not a new argument, on the contrary, it can already be found in the now canonical text in post-colonial studies, *The Empire Writes Back*. In their study, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin already stressed that, because

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influential concept ‘historiographic metafiction’ was coined by a Canadian scholar: Linda Hutcheon. She first used the term in her essays “Canadian Historiographic Metafiction,” *Essays in Canadian Writing* 30 (Winter 1984-85) 228 – 238 and “‘The Pastime of Past Time’: Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction,” *GENRE XX* (Fall-Winter 1987) 285-305. She uses the term to describe the postmodernist self-reflexive type of historiographic writing that forms the beginning of the current new wave of historiographic fiction, while it, at the same time, problematizes the entire question of historical knowledge as such.

the colonized subject was never an active part of or an agent of representation in imperial history, post-colonial writing naturally engaged in a re-writing of these histories from marginalized positions.

The revisionist character that propels the popularity of the genre of historiographic fiction<sup>148</sup> is further amplified by the fact that history is implicitly collective, the social and not the individual are the subject of history. This, too, then makes the genre particularly productive for ‘representative’ writing. It is a way for ethnic writers to include ‘other’ pasts into established histories as a part of their diasporic collective identity negotiation.

However, among authors of ethnic heritage, this genre cannot be relegated to diasporic literature alone. While, as outline above, the diasporic agenda and the emphasis on collective identities is gradually being displaced by a focus on individuals negotiating the complexities of the social without serving as an archetype, historiographic fiction continues to be a prominent genre in contemporary (ethnic) writing. To exemplify, I will briefly discuss two South Asian Canadian historiographic novels that, in different ways or with a different focus, depict a transition from diasporic literature towards a more complex transcultural engagement. Both texts, Shauna Singh Baldwin’s first novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) and Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) fall under the classification of ethnic (Canadian) literature and could also be read as representative Sikh-Canadian diaspora narratives. Yet, they not so much revisit and rewrite received histories to give voice to omitted collectivities, as they use the stories of the past to elucidate global co-dependencies and ethical issues of the present. To read either Baldwin’s story of the India-Pakistan partition from a Sikh perspective, or Badami’s portrayal of South Asian minorities in Vancouver and their involvement in Indian politics as representative fiction runs the risk of missing Baldwin’s text’s invitation to rethink the significance commonly placed in “cultural identity”, or Badami’s focus on global complicity in local histories, and thus accountability for events outside our immediate realm.

### 5.1.1 Alternative Divisions

Shauna Singh Baldwin’s gripping postcolonial novel *What the Body Remembers* is framed by a prologue dated 1895 and an epilogue dated 1965, both of which tell of the (re-) birth of a female who enters the world with her eyes wide open, who remembers her past lives (and the continued oppression of women). Her name is Satya, meaning truth. However, the novel’s plot does not glorify remembering but emphasizes that to remember too much, or rather to be too

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<sup>148</sup> Cf. for example Elisabeth Wesseling’s study *Writing History as a Prophet*, especially chapter vii “Alternative Histories” 155-191.

unforgiving, holding on to one's past too firmly, results in bitterness and more violence, foreclosing peaceful co-existence. At the same time, Satya in 1965, about to be born a girl child again, also emphasizes that although India may have changed radically from a colony to a postcolonial nation born from violence, the status or role of women and attitudes towards them were largely unchanged, so there was still a reason for bitterness and another fight to be fought.

The actual plot of the novel spans from 1928 to 1947 and tells the story of Sikhs in rural India up to the time of Partition. The story is predominately Roop's, who as a young girl becomes the second wife to Sardarji, a well-off, British-educated landowner her father's age, because his first wife, Satya, was unable to bear children. The novel centers on the relationship between these three characters and their families, as well as the complex power positions in these relationships – all of which echo the novel's title *What the Body Remembers*, as memory being coterminous to pain.

Through these relationships the text depicts borders and their being a means for both, joining and separating, along arbitrary lines, through communities, but also within households and families. In Sardarji's haweli, or mansion, each wife inhabits a clearly demarcated wing, as well as role and realm of power and responsibilities. At the same time, as India moves towards Partition, the borders through its society get increasingly drawn along religious group affiliations, creating sharp distinctions based on features that had little significance at the outset of the novel. With the partition of the nation itself, finally, an actual border between newly minted nations is being established based on arbitrary lines drawn on a map – lines, we learn, Sardarji tried to have drawn differently to ensure proper irrigation and thus continued means of existence for all of rural Punjab.

The initial chapters of the nine-part novel depict Roop's childhood in the Punjab where Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus coexist, largely without deeper conflicts. Roop's best friend is a Muslim girl, and while her father and thus her family are Sikh, his parents and siblings had been Hindus. This focus on Sikhs adds ambivalence to the emerging borderlines, as the Sikh, in contrast to the Muslim and Hindu communities did not have independent territory allocated to them in the partition of the British colony. They were, however, often instrumentalized to influence other groups, only to be eventually cast aside by all, the British, Muslims and Hindus.<sup>149</sup>

On the surface, the historical period the novel is set in, and in particular the character constellation between the three focalizer characters may invite a symptomatic reading that would position this novel within the realm of representative fictions. Each of the three voices can be

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<sup>149</sup> CF. Susan Stanford Friedman's essay "The 'New Migration': Clashes, Connections, and Diasporic Women's Writing," in *Contemporary Women's Writing* 3:1 (2009), Special Issue Diaspora, 6-27, which also highlights this novel as a female writers' example of the new developments in diasporic writing towards more transculturation.

interpreted to embody a side of an idealized 'Indian character': Satya is the voice of resistance and strength, subverting male power and ruling the household from below, Sardarji embraces the progress of modernity brought by colonialization while at his core retaining his cultural identity and regarding traditional values as superior to those of the West, and Roop in her disadvantaged position as a woman and her additional burden of being deaf on one ear, is the idealized transcultural character who works towards the ideal of coexistence. Yet, the underlying conclusion the text reaches is a fundamental criticism of notions of collectivity and collective memory. The text does not celebrate notions of community based on shared heritage but on the contrary, emphatically oppose such notions and highlights the arbitrariness of such borderlines, whether drawn on a map or existing in people's minds. One instance to exemplify this opposition to collective identity would be Roop's tattoo. She had her name tattooed onto her wrist when she was still a little girl in the village, where at the time Muslims, Hindus, and Sikh coexisted with little to no friction. To her surprise and shock, the person creating the tattoo did not, as she had expected, use the Gurmukhi script in which the holy book of the Sikh is written, but wrote it in Urdu, that is to say with the Arabic lettering used by the Muslim communities. Decades later, during the bloody massacres at the time of Partition, Roop flees from newly founded Pakistan into India with her servants. Unfortunately, they are stopped by a group of violence-crazed Muslims, wanting to kill them in retribution for killings of Muslims by Hindus. The tattoo saves their lives, as Roop claims she too is a Muslim and so are her servants. She shows the tattoo as proof of her claim and is immediately treated with the respect granted to a sister of family member. The episodes in both moments of time highlight the arbitrariness of divisions between communities along religious or cultural lines that the communities may hold to be absolute. Neither the appearance of the girl/woman, nor her name, or anything else about her made her distinguishable *as* a member of either group. The sound of her name could be expressed equally accurately in either sign system. The person creating the tattoo simply assumed she was Muslim or possibly only knew how to write in Urdu, but either way did not consider it relevant enough. The rage-crazed band of Muslim men out to rape and kill the women cannot by appearance, language, or dress determine which religion she belongs to either, but believe her based on the culture the signs on her wrist allegedly represent.

India's historical progression from a colony to its partition into individual post-colonial nation states is most dominantly epitomized in the character of Sardarji. While he appears in some previous episodes, he is only introduced in depth in the third part of the novel, after Roop had been betrothed to him as a second wife. Sardarji, we learn, had received his engineering education

in England and works in the water irrigation department, while Satya, his first wife, runs the feudal estate. Sardarji embodies the concept of a mimic man in a literal, as well as Homi Bhabha's sense of the colonial subversive. During his years in England, he had acquired "Mr. Cunningham, his English-gentleman-inside" (*WTBR* 131) as a permanent counterpart to his Punjabi-Sikh Indian self-image. Both sides of him continuously engage in discussions on issues of colonialization, of modernity vs. tradition, the ideal paths for India's progress, and most of all modes of proper conduct and thus differences in habitus and social structures.

Cunningham still saddles Sardarji's mind, hoary phantom remnant of his years in England. And now Sardarji cannot remember how he thought before he learned to think with Cunningham. Cunningham . . . argues less and less as long as Sardarji asks only the questions Cunningham approves of, walks and talks the way Cunningham has taught. Cunningham can edit paragraphs in Sardarji's mind before releasing them for utterance, and now that he has trained Sardarji on what is Done and Simply Not Done, generally stays within the bounds of reasonable discourse. If Cunningham becomes overpowering, Sardarji can silence him with land revenue and octroi estimates, gurus Cunningham reveres more than Christ. . . .

Even so, he still kept from Cunningham what he calls his "ten per cent," his turban, his faith, the untranslated, untranslatable residue of his being.

Sardarji has become that strange rare being, the contradiction and exception to the rule of Indian inferiority, a convenient oddity providing hope of advancement to Indians, convincing his British masters . . . of their magnanimity. (*WTBR* 132f.)<sup>150</sup>

Sardarji's British consciousness is part of him, yet *not quite* him. The two different sides – the Indian and the English – are kept distinct from each other. While "Mr. Cunningham" is literally a mimic man, Sardarji is not only aware of the *not-quite*, but consciously retains the slippage as his space of resistance, and insofar exemplifies Bhabha's notion of mimicry.

Colonial mimicry, in Homi Bhabha's analysis, comes close to the problem of the hyphen of diversity management discourses, as he points out – referring to Macaulay's infamous "Minute on Indian Education" where Macaulay expressed the desire for "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay) – that mimicry was "the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English" (Bhabha 87, emphasis in the original). Initially mimicry is an objective of the oppressor: "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference*

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<sup>150</sup> The choice of the name Cunningham, one could argue, also symbolize this mimicry in itself. In terms of an imitation of an ideal of the colonizer it may refer to the three Cunningham brothers Alexander, Joseph and Francis, who all lived in British India and left a legacy that the character of Sardarji is likely aware of. Alexander Cunningham, a British army engineer and archeologist had founded the Archeological Survey of India, Joseph Cunningham was the author of the book *History of the Sikh* (mentioned in the novel in a discussion with the alter-ego Cunningham cf. *WTBR* 201), and Francis was a military man and a writer. More importantly, Francis Cunningham had argued in a historical incident *for* a case where a childless Maharaja lost his kingdom, supporting the idea that he should be allowed to adopt an heir and have his empire restored to him. This very argument comes to Sardarji's mind – though he does not utter it out loud so not to insult the colonial voice in him – when he explains why he had to marry Roop to have children of his own (cf. *WTBR* 134). In addition, in terms of the colonial subversive, the alter ego's chosen name phonetically contains potential slippage: in all its respectability, it contains the word for trickery and calculated deceit, and insofar exposes the arbitrariness of the colonizer's alleged superiority.

*that is almost the same, but not quite.*” However, inherent in this limitation is a potential space for resistance, because what follows is “that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (ibid. 86). This ambivalence is not only a sign of incompleteness, but *because* it also highlights the limitations of normalizing and disciplining powers, “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (ibid.). “[T]he visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction” (ibid. 89); the menace is not an a priori resistance but rather – in the *not quite* – it threatens colonial authority in its constant slippage. The slippage then, as inherent element of mimicry is the site from where mockery emerges. The above quoted passage may point to an initial colonial inferiority complex, yet the ironic presentation of Sardarji’s mimicry predominately serves to critique the colonizer.

Furthermore, as Bhabha pointed out, mimicry also creates awareness in the colonial subject about the ambivalence of being kept at a distance, yet educated to become almost equal. Individuals like Sardarji thus suffer even more from colonial subjection, because by all measures *but* origin they were the colonizer’s equals.<sup>151</sup> Resistance, as Bhabha noted, emerges as a menace resulting from constant interdiction. When Sardarji asks for Mr. Farquharson’s support in a promotion that “should be his by merit, by right, by seniority – by caste” (*WTBR* 178)<sup>152</sup> his boss not only refuses but outspokenly tells him “You must face the fact that Indian engineers are simply incapable of anything but assembly. Little boys playing with Meccano sets” (ibid.). This demeaning attitude then leaves Sardarji to conclude: “It is from such humiliations that larger resistance comes” (ibid.).

Bhabha further emphasizes in his essay that mimicry by definition cannot be representation, but will always only be repetition. This becomes obvious in Singh Baldwin’s novel on the eve of Partition. The British are abandoning the colony, Sardarji has just finished drawing his suggestion for what he takes to be the least destructive division of the Punjab. A general awareness of the utter uncertainty of what the future holds is in the air.

*What do you have to say, Cunningham?*

But Cunningham is, for once, watching Sardarji in silence. This situation is one that has no frequency of occurrence; it hasn’t occurred in anyone’s life before.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. for example the detailed debate between Sardarji and his ignorant British superior about the impossibility of being promoted in the irrigation department, and a concurrent discussion on the issue between the two alter-egos of Sardarji (*WTBR* 175ff.).

<sup>152</sup> While this statement highlights the limitations of mimicry set by the colonizer and the frustration of the colonial subject, it at the same time also emphasizes a self-defined ‘not quite’ of the colonized. While three out of the four arguments may support his qualification, the reference to caste others Sardarji, and in addition discredits him in the colonizer’s eyes, as the caste system is a social order looked down upon by the colonizer. Moreover, Sardarji here ironically evokes a logic not dissimilar to that of the colonizer. While his superior deems him unfit on the grounds of him not being of the right origin or social group (i.e. British), Sardarji argues his qualification in part on his belonging to a certain caste. Neither social heritage would in itself be a qualifier for the position in question.

Cunningham has no theory that can help Sardarji formulate a policy that can establish a strategy for action.

Sardarji is alone.

Only his ten per cent – the untranslated, untranslatable residue of his being – can guide him now. (WTBR 387f.)

Sardarji's alter ego did not so much depart with the rest of the British as it was rendered impotent by the impossibility for repetition. Mimicry was dismantled by history. Herein too, lies the menace of mimicry Bhabha emphasizes. The fact that "[m]imicry *repeats*, rather than *re-presents*" (Bhabha 88, emphasis in the original), in turn exposes the hollowness of that which it repeats. "Mimicry conceals no presence or identity" (ibid.) and consequently puts the authenticity and relevance of colonial discourses into question.

As Sardarji's alter-ego falls silent, all that remains is the slippage, the difference. Throughout the remaining part of the text, "Cunningham, that hoary phantom remnant of his Oxford days who had saddled his mind so long, was either gone or silent" (WTBR 395). Sardarji now puts his opinions in opposition to what he imagines his late first wife Satya would have said. Sardarji's adoption of his departed wife as his new inner voice, and thus her taking over the role of Cunningham is almost a natural progression as her character was also an embodiment of Bhabha's notion of mockery as the flip-side of mimicry. That is to say, while at least a potential for subversive mockery is inherent to mimicry itself in its lack of authenticity and depth, cultural mimicry is frequently also met by outspoken mockery for trying to copy the oppressor. In Singh Baldwin's novel *Satya* embodied this trait, as she openly and explicitly mocked her husband for his catering to the colonizer, his alter-ego and his selective ignorance regarding historical developments and emerging violence.

Moreover, one could argue that mockery is in general a common feature of the genre of historiographic fiction, if seen from the perspective of reading experience, as the reader's knowledge of historical events adds a level of dramatic irony, juxtaposing characters' actions and options with the readers' knowledge. By choosing a well-known historical event as the setting for her narrative, Singh Baldwin establishes dramatic irony insofar as the reader knows of the historical outcome of the developments in motion in the narrative. From this knowledge the reader cannot but at times mockingly smile at the naïveté or futility of characters' actions or opinions. Simultaneously, the genre can offer a platform for challenging established assumptions through the contrast of readers' historical knowledge and text's presentation of fictive alternatives.

Mimicry, as Bhabha noted, despite the slippage, is not a site for resistance. While Sardarji's mimicry, in the difference, the 10% as he calls it, may have an opposition effect, his mimicry as such forecloses real resistance. Overall, Sardarji is a consensus-oriented character. He constantly finds himself in in-between situations, be it in his home environment between the two



women he married, or in his professional and political roles. He always tries to reconcile, to find peaceful solutions and compromises, while around him Jinnah's All India Muslim League or Gandhi's Satyagraha Movement are explicitly resisting colonial rule. As mimicry is for the most part an earnest attempt at imitating those in power, it cannot at the same time be an act of resistance, yet, it may be perceived as subversive.<sup>153</sup> However, Sardarji's difference or subversiveness is not all unintentional. The 'slippage' is as much created by the distance enforced from the colonizers, as it is consciously retained by himself.

Although mimicry may not be a viable mode of resistance, Sardarji's split personality can still be read as a site of resistance if not purely interpreted as Bhabha's mimic man, but rather as a personification of the position that Partha Chatterjee, one of the co-founders of the 'subaltern studies group,' outlined in his seminal study *The Nation and its Fragments*. In his argument, Chatterjee develops and outlines a sketch from colonial to postcolonial India in terms of a historical trajectory of consciousness, rooting the seed for its various resistance and independence movements in the factor of a split-attitude towards the colonizer. Even though some of the progress, the institutions and the industrialization the British brought to the colonies were embraced, welcomed, or at least incorporated, the general mindset, Chatterjee argues, did not fully succumb to the inferiority complex the colonizers aimed at instilling. Quite on the contrary, while he acknowledges that the Indian (postcolonial) state was formed in a material way by colonialism, the British economy and institutions, the nation as a collective identity did not emerge (only) in relation to the colonizer in terms of a result of the struggle for independence. The collective identity of the various Indias were constructed much earlier (and actually in opposition to modernity) in the struggle to retain cultural identities, rituals, and in the underlying sense of a spiritual superiority. Chatterjee, emphasizes that the emergence of an independent sense of India, a collective myth construction, and the distancing from the colonized position was already undertaken actively in the mid-nineteenth-century and did not just start with the visibility of emerging movements for independence. This mindset of valuing the elements to be profited from, yet retaining a spiritual independence with a sense of cultural superiority and greater emotional and social depth, marks Singh Baldwin's Sardarji. His desire to advance in the irrigation department is motivated by his goal of the advancement of all of India rather than to impress or aid the British.

If Sardarji were Consulting Engineer to the Central Design Division, he might adjust British thinking, modify British models to fit the unique requirements of India, explain to his British superiors that

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<sup>153</sup> Cf. Amardeep Singh's analysis of Bhabha's essay, where he points out that mimicry had little relevance as resistance in practice, yet may serve the purpose through its being "unintentionally subversive". "Mimicry and Hybridity in Plain English." May 8, 2009. <<http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2009/05/mimicry-and-hybridity-in-plain-english.html>>.

designs that work in England do not always work in India; . . . explain that earth must be carried fistful by fistful here to give work to many. He would make them understand that digging in Punjab often excavates fossil cities like Moenjodaro and Harappa, lost rivers, five-thousand-year-old artifacts, the graves of pyres of djinns – superstitions, perhaps, but superstitions he can overcome for them. . . . But first he must be assigned to the Central Design Division where he can study the plans for Bhakra, correct them, use his special knowledge of old and new to bridge the distance between India and England faster. (*WTBR* 176f.)

Throughout the novel, Sardarji becomes increasingly outspoken about his discontent with the British because of their deliberate disrespect for and disinterest in other cultures, as emphasized in the example of Mr. Farquharson who despite having been born in India “lives for the preservation of his incomprehension” (*WTBR* 175). The growing discontent with the colonizer is paralleled in the historical temporality and developments depicted in the text. In the years leading up to Partition, political and economic events are frequently discussed among upper-class men of all backgrounds, English, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu over lunch in a gentlemen’s club in Lahore, and between Sardarji and his Muslim friend Rai Alam Khan in more private settings. However, in the course of the novel, all of them – and most obviously Rai Alam Khan – begin to see a need for supporting their *quom* over the needs of India as a whole, even to the extent of the idea of a separate state of Pakistan. Sardarji, in contrast, votes for evolution from colonial rule rather than revolution. He devises strategies and plans for the independence of all of India and is consequently appalled by the dramatic increase in religious separatism throughout the country. Eventually, he has to accept that a partition of the country has become inevitable. “*Everyone’s ears are tuned to take offence; they are deafened by their own concerns*” (*WTBR* 383). Ironically, Sardarji’s awareness of the violence of exclusivist collective identities – and the impending very real threat they carried – did not prevent him from also supporting the ‘Sikh cause’ in the political struggles, as the question of partition increasingly turned out to be one between Hindus and Muslims. When Sardarji eventually draws a recommendation line on a map, however, his objective is still the greater good, because he draws the line along the Chenab river so that 90% of Sikh land and most of their holy sites as well as Lahore would remain in India, even though it would mean that his own land and the sites of his personal history would in the course be relegated to Muslim Pakistan.

From Sardarji’s split personality and the voiced political opinions of this dual identities, as well as the above discussion of these in the context of Bhabha’s and Chatterjee’s arguments, the conclusion could be drawn that Singh Baldwin’s novel is a prime example of a postcolonial novel, lending itself to a representative interpretation in terms of ethnic literature. Yet, while examples and voices of ethnic identity representations abound, the reader is actually drawn away from such a symptomatic reading of symbolic significance and political message, as the reading

experience is one of heightening peril that has its root in ethnic essentialism. The violence Partition will result in is played out in the novel through family relationships and close friendships. The outset of the novel depicts these relationships as stretching across religious and ethnic boundaries that cause only little or almost no friction. During the historical period depicted in the narrative, the reader sees these boundaries turn increasingly more divisive and dominating these relationships. A perceived or fashioned need for safety and stability increases the impact of group memberships over even longstanding personal bonds. In the course of the text – and it is suggested in the course of India's history – these collective identities eventually overrule other relations like economic ties and friendships. The interpellation into a religious group is being internalized and finds self-justification in the violence it created. The added reading distance to the depicted historical developments heightens the reading experience created by this increase of groupisms.

The text uses this historical basis to develop, sketch and suggest alternative routes throughout all stages of the historical trajectory. Singh Baldwin does not – as other historical novels have done – write alternative history or unheard voices into the dominant narrative. She takes the most prominent and well-known historical narrative in the case of South Asia (though admittedly significantly less known in the North American context of the book's publication and circulation) and follows its history. However, each of her three focalizer characters, Roop, Sardarji and Satya, continuously suggest or imagine alternatives to ongoing developments, both in the immediate personal realms and the larger socio-political one. They imagine roads history decides not to take. In the very suggestion of the alternative, Singh Baldwin not only destabilizes the dominant narrative, but consistently challenges normative collectivity assumptions. The violence erupting at the end of the novel is inevitable, given the previous developments, but embedded in the ensuing cruelty is a call to reevaluate the validity of essentialist group memberships and to imagine alternatives.

On the level of the three focalizer character's personal relationships, Satya, in the end, deliberately opts for death rather than giving in and having to share her husband or accepting Roop. Her refusal to co-exist, mirroring the violence of historical events, had resulted in the violent consumption of her body by death. In contrast Roop, who can only hear on one ear and who as a woman had from childhood on been told not to look straight at others, is more perceptive through her own bodily limitations, while Sardarji has a greater awareness of difference due to his experiences in England. These two and their three children are the survivors of the novel, even though they are momentarily defeated by partition, the novel ultimately ends on an up-beat note about their building a new future.

### 5.1.2 Diaspora Divided

While Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* addresses the historical formation of distinct exclusivist identitarian groups in the wake of colonial India's independence movement, Anita Rau Badami chooses a diasporic frame for her historiographic novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* She focuses on the history of Sikhs throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the implications of a South Asian diaspora in this history. Although diasporic in setting, Badami's text too goes beyond the frame of diasporic literature.

Badami's text, in her depiction of long-standing and ongoing transnational links between the South Asian community in Vancouver and the homeland, invites readers to question their perception of history from within national frames of reference. As emphasized in chapter three above, diasporic communities cannot be conceived without acknowledging multiple forms of belonging. Badami's novel, though largely devoid of interaction between the South Asian characters and Canadian majority culture and society, still emphasizes that transnational ties also and inescapably implicate the host-nation as a whole. South Asian history, the text suggests, is relevant for and to some extent belongs to Canadian history too. This is explicitly brought to the fore by her framing of the plot by two incidents that closely link Indian and Canadian national histories. The narrative starts with the immigrant ship *Komagata Maru* which was refused entry into Vancouver in 1914; thus, one part of the British Empire refused entry to citizens from another. The novel ends with the bombing of Air India flight 182, which killed all passengers, most of which were Canadians – though of South Asian origin. However, then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney sent his condolences to Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India and did not (also) officially express them towards the Canadian-Indian families actually affected. Insofar the text is framed by explicit criticism of Canada's often celebrated and equally often criticized self-image as a multicultural mosaic.<sup>154</sup>

Transnationalist ties and belonging are furthermore emphasized through the text's combination of narrative voices. Like Singh Baldwin's, Badami's text too alternates between three focalizer characters and their intertwined life stories. Through this technique the text engages the reader emotionally in the life choices and experiences of these characters. The first is Bibi-ji, who after "stealing" her sister's suitor relocates with him to Canada. Together, Bibi-ji and Pa-ji run a café, "The Delhi Junction" which becomes a central meeting and exchange point of the diaspora in Vancouver. The community depicted in the novel is a typical diasporic community, marked by

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<sup>154</sup> The notion links back to John Murray Gibbon's 1938 published book *Canadian Mosaic: The Making of a Northern Nation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart), and was prominently criticized by John Porter in his analysis of social and ethnic inequality in his study *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1965.

stories of departure and arrival, links to the homeland and a group evolution pattern common to diasporas. Initially the group emphasized the larger South-Asian region of origin. But a growing number of arrivals from various parts of South Asia, historical developments in the region, as well as sensationalized news on these events like the Partition, the wars with Pakistan, or Bangladesh's independence, affect the diaspora and result in alternating seating patterns and sub-clusters according to religion, region of heritage, or other notions of communality. Pa-ji, however, welcomes anyone, reprimands those excluding others, and dismisses a radical fundamentalist promoting the foundation of an independent Sikh nation, Khalistan, in Northern India.

Bibi-ji and Pa-ji, unable to have children of their own, take on the role of surrogate parents for many new arrivals. Due to this central role in the community, Bibi-ji, who had lost contact with her family back home during Partition, learns by chance from Leela, a newly arrived immigrant from Southern India to Vancouver, that one family member, her niece Nimmo had survived the sectarian violence that had torn through the Punjab in 1947.

The second focalizer character is Leela, a Hindu from southern India who, growing up, had always been excluded within her own her family because of her mixed, white and Indian heritage. When she got married to a well-educated fairly wealthy man, his family welcomed her with open arms. She was then reluctant to follow her husband to Canada and again life an in-between existence, giving up the community of her new family. Eventually, as her own two children grow up, she comes to terms with Vancouver as her home.

While Leela's continued ties to India are through letters only, Bibi-ji starts to visit the homeland regularly and even brings a grandnephew, Nimmo's oldest son, to Canada to live with her. Her niece Nimmo is the third focalizer character of the text. She lives in New Delhi, and although her economic situation is difficult, her family life is filled with love.

After reconnecting with this sole survivor of her family in India, Bibi-ji and Pa-ji take her oldest son Jasbeer with them to Canada. Nimmo is initially horrified by the idea of having family members taken from her again, but Bibi-ji eventually bribes Nimmo into consenting, by painting a picture of a good education and eventually successful life for Jasbeer that Nimmo and her husband could not possibly offer him if he stayed in India with them. However, once living in Canada, the boy grows up to be resentful and eventually joins the Khalistan movement.

In 1984, during their annual pilgrimage to the Golden Temple, Pa-ji gets shot and killed in the course of Operation Blue Star. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the military in a 5-day attack to storm the temple compound where radical Sikh groups were said to hide out among the pilgrims. Pa-ji's death is not so much a turning point as it marks the absence of a voice calling for moderation. After his death, Jasbeer stays back in India. In the diaspora, however, Pa-ji's most

trusted associate, Pappu becomes radicalized and even Bibi-ji begins to support the Khalistan movement, cutting ties with her Hindu friend Leela.

Meanwhile in India, the raid on the Golden Temple leads to the killing of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard, which results in a surge of violence against and killing of Sikh all throughout India, with Nimmo losing all of her family in communal riots for a second time. This traumatic experience, and in particular that her trying to keep her daughter safe by locking her into a metal cabinet had caused the child to die a horrible death due to their home being burnt down, drives her into madness. As a response to the violence and hatred against Sikh, the Khalistan movement carries out the final terrorist act that ends the novel. Air India Flight 182 is blown up mid-air, half way between Canada and India. Among those on board is also Leela Bhatt who was about to revisit her homeland for the first times since emigrating. Violence born out of radicalized collective identities thus inflicted a tragedy on the lives and families of each of the focalizer characters.

Diasporas, as outlined in chapter 3, are often characterized by trauma, or more specifically a notion of collective trauma. Badami employs that trope on the content level but in doing so alerts to the dangers inherent in subscribing to such a narrative. She depicts how the community in the diaspora is influenced by news of conflicts in the homeland and reacts as if directly affected. By focusing on the arbitrariness of sudden divisions within the community the text highlights the narrative constructedness of ‘collective trauma’ and its being based on an ideological agenda.<sup>155</sup>

Jeffrey Alexander, in his introduction to a collection on *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, differentiates individual and collective trauma, arguing that – like collective memory – collective trauma is actually an impossibility, and can merely be a construct.<sup>156</sup> He emphasizes that when it comes to collective trauma, “[e]vents are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (Alexander 2004, 8) and consequently, collective trauma as such is always to a degree imagined. He classifies his understanding of ‘imagined’, distinguishing it from, for example, Benedict Anderson’s, in so far as to him imagination is “intrinsic to the very

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<sup>155</sup> Much research has been done on trauma and narrative and especially the fact that the basic characteristic of trauma is its untranslatability into a cohesive structure or self-narration. It can neither be fully incorporated into memory nor into meaningful, linear identity constructions, as Cathy Caruth pointed out with reference to the psychologist Pierre Janet. “Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become [...] a ‘narrative memory’ that is integrated into a completed story of the past. [...] The trauma [...] requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But [...] the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall” (Caruth 1995, 153). Furthermore, as Kai Erikson stressed, a trauma is not really generated by an event, “it is how people react to them rather than what they are that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have” (Erikson 1995, 184).

<sup>156</sup> Cf. my discussion of the oxymoron of collective identity and collective memory in chapter three.

process of representation” (ibid., 9). The construction of trauma, which necessitates a narration to the community concerned, always involves structuring and selection processes, resulting in a message, which becomes part of shared narratives of cultures and often nations. However, in contrast to positive foundational myths,

[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (ibid., 1)

What becomes evident here is that not the events themselves constitute the crisis. The alleged trauma results from the representations of these events, turning the experience into a cultural trauma by attaching a certain meaning to it. This, however, also means that events cannot become a collective trauma without a persuasive narrative. To be traumatized is as a collective is an active process, which can be carried out or refused on the level of collective and cultural trauma. It depends on whether the group or individuals from the group allow such trauma narratives to affect them and make them identify with these.

In Badami’s text the initial refusal and later embrace of a collective trauma narrative lies at the basis of the South Asian diaspora’s divide and the Sikh group’s involvement in fundamentalist homeland politics. This is not uncommon among dispersed groups, as Clifford pointed out in his analysis of diasporas. He emphasized that there can be an added value in diaspora discourses and reclaiming diasporic origin, what he calls the ‘currency of diaspora’. “Association with another nation, region, continent, or world-historical force ... gives added weight to claims” (Clifford, “Diasporas” 310). While the early arrivals may have sought to blend in or be invisible within the majority culture, a growing group and group membership will increase not only visibility but also pride in one’s difference and heritage. To claim an identity as a diasporic community will convey and assert a stronger sense of cultural difference than just to reference an ethnic origin.

With regard to this dynamic, Badami’s story efficiently shows the dangers of secluded cultural communities, which can, as Mishra pointed out in his study on the diaspora, lead to “purist readings of homelands and the search for absolute ethnic states: Khalistan, Tamil Eelam, Kashmir and so on” (Mishra 2007, 10). Initially, the depicted South Asian community in Vancouver welcomes South Asians from all parts of the subcontinent, which mirrors the general dynamics of emerging diasporas in their initial tendency to blur internal diversity. However, the political developments in the home-country keep influencing the community in Badami’s novel. Due to the geographical and temporal distance, these influencing pieces of information arrive as sensationalized news and form a breeding ground for fundamentalism. All major events in 20<sup>th</sup> century South Asian history like the Partition, the wars with Pakistan or the Bangladesh war of

independence had an impact on the community in Vancouver in terms of changed seating arrangements among the regulars in Pa-ji's café 'The Delhi Junction,' which is the center of the community. The text insofar highlights the arbitrariness of borderlines between communities. The narrative constructedness of a collective identity is, furthermore ridiculed throughout the text by Pa-ji himself. On the one hand, as he explicitly points out the absurdity of breaking up established friendships over political developments on the other side of the globe. On the other hand, he – lacking a large family to call his own – had hung important-looking portraits of Sikh men and families in his office, claiming them to be his ancestors, narrating heroic stories about them. Yet in the privacy of his own marriage, he pokes fun at the whole thing with Bibi-ji, amusing her with his ever more outrageous invented stories.

Despite the recurring divisions originating in homeland events, the desire for community in Canada eventually overrules differences in India each time. However, things change with the arrival of fundamentalist voices campaigning for the independent Sikh nation of Khalistan. As Clifford put it in his analysis, “[d]iasporist discourses reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland, not as something simply left behind, but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntal modernity” (Clifford, “Diasporas” 311). Yet, a continued attachment to a homeland creates “a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (ibid.). This is even more strongly the case if a community's demands are not met. An experience of exclusion will sensitize a community towards other injustices, especially if they feel such an injustice or unmet demand or claim to occur in a homeland they have come to idealize.

It is thus not surprising, the fundamentalisms and separatist claims frequently emerge *in* the diaspora (in the case of Badami's novel among Sikh radicals in Great Britain), based on the diaspora's enforced notion of a collective identity and the limited but sensationalized news received from afar. The diaspora is also an important source of funding for such movements, not least of their carrying out fundamentalist terrorist actions; an aspect at one point explicitly stated:

“Didn't know?” Rani was suddenly angry. “How could you not know? It is people like you, sitting in foreign countries, far away from everything, nice and safe, who create trouble. You are the ones who give money to these terrorists, and we are the ones who suffer!” (CHNC 326)

Ironically, this lecture is given to Bibi-ji while she is with Pa-ji on a pilgrimage at the golden Temple and only minutes before the raid of Operation Blue Star on the temple would kill Pa-ji. While Bibi-ji and Pa-ji had met Dr. Randhawa, a fundamentalist campaigning for financial aid in



Vancouver, they had dismissed him back then.<sup>157</sup> Yet the above quoted lecture did not have a lasting effect. After these events in India that had also caused Pa-ji's death, not only Bibi-ji, but many Sikh in the diaspora turned fervent supporters of the movement for an independent Khalistan; a development that eventually resulted in the division of the diasporic community in the novel: "The Indians had humiliated the Sikhs and they had killed her Pa-ji. It was now a question of defending the faith, the thing that gave them, as a tribe, a face and a distinction" (*CHNC* 343).

This notion expressed through Bibi-ji as the focalizer character is immediately juxtaposed by a letter from her niece Nimmo, who expresses her fear of dividing communities – in her case all of India – because this would inevitably lead to a "*sea of anger*." With a premonition that foreshadows the later events that would leave her the sole survivor of her family in Delhi in a rampage murdering of Sikhs throughout the nation following the murder of prime minister Indira Gandhi, she ends the letter "*I hope we don't all drown in it*" (*CHNC* 344). The immediately following chapter set in New Delhi is titled 'They' thus further highlighting the impending divisions into exclusionary groups and us/they dichotomies.

As much as the content level focuses on traumatic historical events, the text structurally subverts the idea of (diasporic, collective) trauma, being a sudden rupture to the texture of either body, mind, or community. It clearly outlines the narrative construction of trauma insofar as it follows the mode of history writing, creating a continuous narrative explaining the sequence of events through causal links. Although at instances the narrative includes flashbacks, these do not result in a chaotic, disrupted structure. Furthermore, the traumatic events are not experienced by the diaspora, but received in the form of narratives (news reports, letters from home etc.). The novel's structure with its largely linear temporal sequence and a lack of fragmentation inhibits reading the novel as trauma narrative.<sup>158</sup> The reader experience is rather one of a cohesive causal development, honing a critical attitude towards the diaspora's increasing involvement in the Khalistan movement rather than evoking the reader's support of the diaspora's development.

While Badami's text in its retelling of 20<sup>th</sup> century Sikh history from an imagined personal dual-perspective (from the diaspora and from the center in terms of New Delhi) depicts the dangers inherent in trauma-governed re-actions, and fundamentalist collective identities, it

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<sup>157</sup> As Clifford also already pointed out in his evaluation of diasporas, "[d]iaspora experiences and discourses are entangled, never clear of commodification. (Nor is commodification their only outcome)." (Clifford "Diasporas", p. 313)

<sup>158</sup> Trauma narratives, as Michelle Balaev noted, "employ a nonlinear plot or disruptive temporal sequences to emphasize mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the experience" (Balaev 2008, 160).

presents an alternative model in the third central figure and focalizer, Leela Bhat and her story. Leela Bhat had suffered marginalization in the family of her childhood due to her mixed heritage – her mother was of German origin. She later found respect in her husband's family in Bangalore, but, grudgingly, agreed to follow him to Canada. And, although she too suffered from nostalgia of the homeland and held on to the myth of return for much of her life, she, in the end, acknowledges and embraces her transnational identity. Leela's development is also mirrored by a story from Hindu mythology which is frequently used in diaspora literature: that of King Trishanku.

Trishanku wanted to enter the heavens in his mortal form. Sage Viswamitra granted him this wish, but thereby angered the gods and they refused entry for Trishanku. As earth refused him re-entry after he had already left, the sage built him his own heaven, where he is now hanging upside-down between the heavens and the earth for all eternity. In her childhood, this story was used by her grandmother to illustrate Leela's non-belonging. This is also the way this myth is often evoked by other South Asian diaspora writers who describe a kinship between migratory communities and Trishanku, like the writer and critic Uma Parameswaran: "People who move away from their native countries occupy (not only inherit but also bequeath to subsequent generations, actually) a liminality, an uneasy pull between two cultures. In my poetry, I call this Trishanku's curse" (Parameswaran xlv).

Leela's interpretation of the story in Badami's novel, however, turns into a self-affirmative one. While she had been a marginalized Trishanku in her childhood, she ends up a transcultural migrant, belonging to two worlds and cultures, maintaining close ties with both of them. It is, of course, not lacking in irony that Leela should die in mid-air in the Air India flight 182 on her first return journey to India. She is not only literally between heaven and earth but also about half-way between Canada and India as it happens.

The novel ends with a positive outlook towards a transcultural future in the depiction of Leela's children who are not stifled by collective cultural identity or trauma and by Bibi-ji's nephew Jasbeer who attempts a new life regretting his earlier involvement in fundamentalist causes. At the very end, Badami includes two newspaper clippings from 2005, one on the slaughter of the Sikhs in India, the other regarding the Air India flight killing Canadians. Both of them are about police investigations and legal trials which took almost 20 years and brought no results, no identification of or punishment for culprits. These two pieces of news could be read as statements on the profound deficiency of the judicial and social systems in the context of this text. However, I rather see them as a commentary on collectivity, in so far as it would be impossible to identify individuals responsible for these crimes, as they were resulting from deeper currents in social

developments and persuasive collective trauma narratives that resulted in a lack of tolerance and in exclusionary politics. Furthermore, as mentioned at the beginning, these two clippings conclude the structural frame of the text. Even though it is a novel focused on the very specific South Asian diaspora and Sikh history, framing it by historical documents and events that clearly show the intricate connections of histories beyond national frames, holds Canada accountable too for events not typically regarded as Canadian history.

## 5.2 The Always Troubled Second Generation

Generational conflicts between immigrant parents and their children growing up in the new country are a staple of ethnic and diaspora fiction, often used as the backdrop for negotiations of identity and belonging between the ‘here’ of their present social reality and the ‘there’ that stands for their cultural heritage.<sup>159</sup> A classic example would be Anzia Yeziarska’s 1925 novel *Bread Givers*, the story of the youngest of three sisters from an immigrant Polish-Jewish household who goes against family and tradition to find happiness and success, but eventually also reconciles with her orthodox father and her heritage. A similar example would be Frank G. Paci’s *The Italians*, depicting a different ethnicity much along the same lines, with the youngest of three children struggling to find the middle path between his Canadian, hockey-loving self-image and the Italian cultural heritage of his family that he experienced as stifling while growing up.<sup>160</sup> Early examples<sup>161</sup> of such ethnic fictions that relied heavily on generational conflict for their plot development may have invited a simplistic reading practice that leads back to Marcus Lee Hansen’s argument in his 1938 address to the Augustana Historical Society, published in 1952 under the title “The problem of the third generation immigrant.”<sup>162</sup> Hansen argued that the first generation was focused on material means of settling in the new environment while largely maintaining the language and customs of their old world. The second generation then is the one

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<sup>159</sup> The continued interest in the second generation as negotiators of cultural identity between heritage and mainstream culture is evident from the uninterrupted outpour of research on the issue in sociology, cultural and literary studies. A quick search for recent studies on the issue would yield: Bandana Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World*, 2005; M. Vaul-Grimwood, *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation*, 2007; or Yndia S. Lorick-Wilmot’s study *Stories of Identity among Black, Middle Class, Second Generation Caribbeans: We, Too, Sing America*, 2017.

<sup>160</sup> Paci is one of the first and most prominent voices in Italian-Canadian literature. Writing in the realist tradition, the majority of his books explore the tensions of living in-between cultures and resulting generational conflicts. He, like many others, also employed the genre of the *Bildungsroman* for several of his novels.

<sup>161</sup> Early here cannot refer to a fixed historical period but rather signifies early voices or examples of diasporic or ethnic fiction for any group. Each ethnicity gaining literary voice in North America was initially received along these lines of interpretation, in particular those novels that followed the model of generational conflict for identity negotiations.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Sollors p. 214ff.

wanting to assimilate into the host culture, and according to Hansen is the generation that “wanted to forget everything: the foreign language . . . the religion . . . the family customs.” (Hansen quoted in Sollors, 215). Hansen regarded this generation as traitors, and goes on to claim that the third generation, then, wanted to remember what the second tried to forget. Hansen’s claim that the problem of the second generation was “how to inhabit two worlds at the same time” (Hansen quoted in Karakayali, 331) highlights a ‘there vs. here’ dichotomy that became so widely accepted it was termed ‘Hansen’s law’. As Sollors exemplifies,<sup>163</sup> many critics have taken up issue with Hansen’s statement, yet, it continues to be a popular argument, not “in its explicatory precision, but in its delineation of a moral map. Hansen developed not a ‘law’ of historical progression but a moral choice between a wholesome third and a deficient second generation.” (Sollors, 220 f.). However, any investigation that only applies a two-world-view misses the point that negotiations of cultural identities between the two worlds at the same time manifest a desire to escape such an identity and already produce a third, fluid and hybrid form. A focus on the two opposing cultural options merely reproduces its own limitations by reiterating the two-world concept.<sup>164</sup>

Despite the continued occasional reductive reading of identity negotiations in ethnic literature as a ‘here vs. there’ dichotomy, critical studies at least since the 1980s have emphasized the complexity of hybrid cultural identity formations around the hyphen, not least since the publication of Werner Sollors’ comprehensive study *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986). Sollors’ work emphasized that there was no essentialist culture at the root of any ethnicity, but that ethnic groups are rather “cultural constructions (the codes, beliefs, rites and rituals) which were developed in America to make sense of ethnicity and immigration” (Sollors, 9). Members of the group are not just born into an ethnicity but socialized into it; or, as Sollors’ subtitle emphasizes, it is a matter of *consent and descent*.

By the same token, the concept of ‘generation’ is not “obviously natural” (ibid., 208), nor is it a clearly measurable historical delineation. However, as Sollors outlines, the concept has been part of and shaping the story and self-image of America “both as an instrument of cultural criticism and as a rhetorical device that is used to create a sense of cohesive kinship” (ibid. 210). Taking a closer look at the common narrative of the second generation’s rejection of their roots, Sollors first elucidates the different generation’s attachments to their cultural heritage. The first generation’s attachment is to a specific place and people they had left behind, an attachment and experience the foreign-born generation could not possibly share. As they were raised in a culture they did not experience outside of their family or immediate social circle, the second generation

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<sup>163</sup> Cf. Sollors p. 216 ff.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Karakayali’s investigation of “Duality and Diversity in the Lives of Immigration Children.”

would necessarily be far more conscious of and debate their ethnic identity. The third and later generations in contrast, would (by consent rather than descent) form a more generalized, abstract attachment to the ethnic group that lacks any specific local connection founded on actual experience.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, Sollors argues that “[o]n a deeper level . . . the metaphor of a declining second generation - precisely, perhaps, because it was such a prominent focus for the migrants’ fears - strengthened the sense of common peoplehood and destiny: by scolding different people as a degenerate second generation one may in fact be molding a family” (ibid. 222). People of a diverse ancestry whose concrete local attachments are only loosely related, can develop a sense of community around this fear of a (possibly even invented) second generation denouncing the heritage and thus having their cultural roots being lost. “[T]he generational metaphor may thus function as a community building symbol” (ibid.). In doing so, the rhetoric not only summons newcomers of heterogenous heritage into the fold of the group, but even more powerfully constructs a common threat around which future generations, including the second generation itself, bond to preserve what must, by the very logic of its being threatened, be something of value.

It is thus hardly surprising, that generational conflicts are a common theme in ethnic literature, reiterating the metaphor and depicting a second generation’s struggle in their identity negotiations. An especially productive and useful genre for such narratives is the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of formation,<sup>166</sup> as this story-telling format as such focuses on a protagonist’s psychological struggles into maturity and finding his or her place in society.

### 5.2.1 The Bildungsroman

The term ‘Bildungsroman’ was first used by Karl von Morgenstern around 1820 in two lectures and essays describing the ‘essence’ and the ‘history’ of this type of novel.<sup>167</sup> However, both of these publications happened in rather obscure and local journals, and so Wilhelm Dilthey’s 1870 biography of Schleiermacher and his 1906 *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* are usually credited with standing at the beginning of discussions of the genre.

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<sup>165</sup> Sollors presents this reformulation of Hansen’s law with reference or as a summary of Nahirny’s and Fishman’s argument in their 1965 essay “American Immigrant Groups: Ethnic Identification and the Problem of Generations,” published in *The Sociological Review*, Volume: 13 issue: 3, page(s): 311-326, here p. 322.

<sup>166</sup> As James Hardin points out in his introduction to the volume *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* these are not strictly synonymous terms, at least for some critics. With reference to the work of Melitta Gerhard Hardin distinguishes: “the *Entwicklungsroman* is the more general term which embraces those novels that treat the confrontation of the individual with the world and the protagonist’s maturation and development . . . ‘Bildungsroman’ is the term applied to a concrete, historic genre” (Hardin xvi) that of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For the purpose of the present argument, however, such more detailed differentiations have no bearing and the terms will largely be used synonymously here.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. Martini, Fritz, “Bildungsroman – Term and Theory,” in James Hardin, ed., *Reflection and Action*, 1-25.

It is commonly agreed that the *Bildungsroman* not only has its origin but also its strongest tradition in Germany in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>168</sup> One of the earlier attempts at a definition or classification of the genre in English is Jerome Hamilton Buckley's study *Season of Youth* (1974). Buckley's approach is descriptive and focuses mainly on principal plot elements, summarizing these as "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (Buckley 18). Even though he concedes that no novel would "precisely follow this pattern" (*ibid.*) he insists that, "none that ignores more than two or three" (*ibid.*) can be called a *Bildungsroman*. Finally, even though Buckley admits that "[t]here are of course many degrees of identification between author and hero and of detachment from each other" (*ibid.* 24), he insists on a strong autobiographical trait in most novels of the genre. His descriptive approach as well as his claim that most of the texts bear autobiographical elements unsurprisingly resulted in criticism from other scholars in the field. Marianne Hirsch in her essay on "The Novel of Formation as Genre" (1979) laments his "exclusively thematic" (Hirsch, 295) approach and James Hardin dismisses Buckley's classification altogether in the Introduction to *Reflection and Action* (1991), stating that Buckley "in effect capitulates in the face of the difficulty of defining the term" (Hardin x) and as a result resorted to the mere descriptive approach.

Hirsch takes a more structural approach than Buckley in her attempt at a definition. Her goal is to develop categories, both thematic and formal, for a European rather than a German *Bildungsroman*,<sup>169</sup> though her investigation is largely limited to the historical period that saw the first peak of the genre, the nineteenth century. For the German context, Hirsch draws a distinction between the terms *Bildungsroman* (following Goethe's conception of *Bildung*), *Erziehungsroman* (novel of education), and *Entwicklungsroman*, which for her forms the umbrella term for a wider, more general application.<sup>170</sup> For the European genre that she tries to develop and which seems fairly synonymous with *Entwicklungsroman*, she chooses the term 'novel of formation' as it

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<sup>168</sup> Cf. Hirsch, Marianne, "The Novel of Formation as Genre: Between Great Expectations and Lost Illusions," *Genre* XII (Fall 1979) 293-311. Hirsch, in what might from the title seem to be a discussion of the genre in general, restricts her interest and investigation to what she calls a European genre. She juxtaposes the German archetype with emerging French and English variants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jeffrey Sammons, however, questions the centrality of the genre to German literature at the time (Cf. Sammons Jeffrey L. "The *Bildungsroman* for Nonspecialists: An Attempt at a Clarification," in James Hardin, *Reflection and Action*, 26-45).

Hirsch's essay also barely touches the twentieth century and thus largely leaves out the significance of the genre in, for example, a postcolonial context. Yet, even if only in a side remark, Hirsch is likely the first author to acknowledge the productivity of the genre for fictions of identity politics.

<sup>169</sup> The term European is rather misconstrued, as she is actually only concerned with French and English novels in addition to the German canon of the genre. Yet some of her remarks (cf. 299f.) significantly broaden this limited horizon and her list of features as well as the clarification on the terminology (cf. 294) form a fitting typology for the genre in general and decidedly beyond the European examples she specifically addresses.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Hirsch 294.

carries – with the word ‘form’ as part of the term ‘formation’ – something of the word-play of ‘Bild’ in ‘Bildung’.<sup>171</sup> Following her definition, the central features of a novel of formation are: a focus on one central character who, exposed to events beyond his/her control, shows developmental growth; both a biographical and a social concern; the plot of a quest story in linear chronological and causal order; the protagonist’s development of selfhood as well as his place in the larger society; ironic distance between discourse and plot level; specific roles like educator, companion and lover for side characters; and a didactic purpose.<sup>172</sup> Hirsch, furthermore, emphasizes that “[t]he novel of formation’s dual focus, inward toward the self and outward toward society, makes it one of the major fictional types of European realism” (ibid. 300).

The confluence of the Bildungsroman and realism had also been the focus of Mikhail Bakhtin’s study “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)”. While it was originally composed in the 1930s, the surviving fragment of his thesis was only translated into English in 1985.<sup>173</sup> In distinguishing the genre from other forms of the novel – travel novel, novel of ordeal or the biographical novel – this genre, according to Bakhtin, is of particular relevance to the study of realist fiction because, in contrast to these other forms, it is constituted by the duality of a development of (1) the hero (2) in historical time.<sup>174</sup> “[M]an’s individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence” (Bakhtin 1986, 23). From this central feature Bakhtin derives the conclusion that the protagonist of the realist Bildungsroman

is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. . . . Understandably, in such a novel of emergence, problems of reality and man’s potential, problems of freedom and necessity, and the problem of creative initiative rise to their full height. The image of the emerging man begins to

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<sup>171</sup> Cf. Hirsch 295.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. ibid. 296ff.

<sup>173</sup> Bakhtin had originally written a book length study around 1936-38 of which only a small fragment survived. Common lore has it that he used the paper on which the larger thesis had been written to roll tobacco and smoke it during the German invasion (cf. for example Michael Holquist’s introduction to *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, it is also mentioned in Caryl Emerson’s study *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, or Boes’ “Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman” p. 236). The remaining fragment is from the introduction and in it he primarily discusses Goethe’s prototypical work. In general, Bakhtin’s focus in the fragment of this study is less on defining the genre than on analyzing the centrality of this genre for the emergence of the realist novel determined by time-space rather than older narrative forms of unchanging worlds or heroes.

<sup>174</sup> The inseparable link between man’s emergence and historical emergence that Bakhtin diagnosed also lies, though in a different way, at the heart of Franco Moretti’s study *The Way of the World*, which looks at the role of the Bildungsroman in European culture. Moretti diagnoses that the culture of the golden age of modernity, the long 19th century, was characterized by youth, or rather a new conception of youth and its role for European culture. Youth was no longer just ‘not yet adult’, but became its own symbolic age, “the age which holds ‘the meaning of life’” (ibid., 4). The French and the industrial revolution had brought about a disruption of the social order and a new mobility. This destabilization brought about a yearning for exploration of the world and the self in the world, which was realized by this new idea of youth. Consequently, Moretti argues, mobility and interiority became the determining factor of youth and the Bildungsroman emerged as the genre that exemplified this new generation. Moretti, in fact, claims that the Bildungsroman was “the ‘symbolic form’ of modernity” (ibid., 5), as European culture has to attach a meaning not only to youth, but more importantly to modernity itself.

surmount its private nature (within certain limits, of course) and enters into a completely new, spatial sphere of historical existence. (Bakhtin 1986, 23f.)

In the emphasis on the chronotope and man's development in time-space, Bakhtin already anticipates the continued resurrection of the genre by different groups and at various times. Bakhtin's summary of the genre's features illustrates why it would hold appeal as a vehicle for storytelling for disenfranchised groups throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even though its necessarily realist mode of narration fell out of style with modernist and postmodernist writers.

As the Bildungsroman is defined more by plot development and character configurations than by formal attributes, it is hardly surprising that there is no consensus among critics about how to define the genre or even with what terminology to refer to it, as James Hardin summarizes the debate in his introduction to the collection *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* (1991). Hardin, as mentioned, is dismissive of traditional approaches that simply list features. He finds them not only too restrictive, but points out that they fail to account for the inherent ambiguity of the genre, as already encompassed in the German meaning of *Bildung*. *Bildung* connotes both "a developmental process and . . . a collective name for the cultural and spiritual values of a specific people or social stratum in a given historical epoch" (Hardin xi). Hardin therefore calls for an embrace of ambiguity instead of opting for a conclusive definition. This is not only necessary with regard to the multiplicity of approaches and positions represented in the collection,<sup>175</sup> but also to keep the term productive for the Anglophone literary circle beyond a German historical ideal. The collection centers largely on classical examples with only a few contributions venturing into the twentieth century. Hardin sees a decline of the genre in the twentieth century because of what he calls "the pervasive pessimism of modern literature" as novels no longer end in harmonious reconciliation.<sup>176</sup> Regarding definitions, Hardin stresses – with reference to Sammons essay – that the important element of the genre is *Bildung* regardless of whether it 'succeeds' or 'fails' – it is less about coming to terms with society than about negotiating positions between the individual and the larger social, or as the title of the collection has it, about 'reflection and action.' Implicit in this position is not only the quest and formation of a protagonist and the development of his/her relation to the social, but – as already encountered in Hirsch's approach – a foregrounding of distance between an acting central character and a reflecting narrative voice.

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<sup>175</sup> The collection in general sees itself as an overdue contribution to increase the discussion of the genre in the Anglophone and especially American scholarly field. While it provides a comprehensive record of the variety of scholarship on the subject, it at the same time does not open radically new territories or inroads.

<sup>176</sup> Neither Hardin in his introduction, nor any of the essays in the collection focus on or take into account the revival of the genre in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century in minority literatures.



To summarize this debate on the definition of the Bildungsroman, several central characteristics can be established: The first is a particular affinity of the genre with times of disruption or upheaval in which an established social order may no longer be applicable to the protagonist's experience; and consequently a development of both, the *Bildungsheld* and the social around him or her, which results in a didactic element or a moral that is relayed to the reader. This development is usually narrated in form of a quest, using a realist narrative style and chronological order of events, and most importantly, through employing a narrative distance between the events unfolding and the narrative voice.

It is this distance between reflection and action that makes the Bildungsroman such a compelling genre for *littérature engagée*, fiction with a political agenda or of a representative nature. The plot level engages the reader in the hero's actions, while the narrative distance provides insights and commentary that can (and frequently is) interwoven with a message or morale. The element of *Bildung* of the genre is not limited to the hero and the world around him (or her), but also engulfs the reader. It is thus hardly surprising that the twentieth century saw a dual development of the genre: on the one hand as parody, highlighting the postmodern age's cynic approach to didacticism in general;<sup>177</sup> and on the other hand as a particularly useful literary support vehicle for social movements and a form for transporting the ideology of identity politics.<sup>178</sup> This form of the Bildungsroman consequently saw a strong resurgence not within its traditional realm of male writers of the dominant culture, but rather, as Bonnie Hoover Braendlin pointed out in her essay on "*Bildung* in Ethnic Women Writers", it was revived

by societal outsiders, men and women of marginality groups . . . it expresses their struggle for individuation and a part in the American dream, which society simultaneously proffers and denies to them . . . it evinces a revaluation, a transvaluation, of traditional *Bildung* by new standards and perspective. (Braendlin 75, emphasis in the original).

Braendlin continues by stressing that this revival was far from "a return to an outmoded, unfashionable historical genre; rather it presumes a theoretical genre, one governed by widely shared, if not universal, experiential phenomena and interpersonal relationships" (ibid. 76f).<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Cf. Braendlin 75.

<sup>178</sup> Cf. for example the strong revival of the genre in feminist writing from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced in studies like Esther Kleinbord Labovitz' *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century – Dorothy Richardson, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Christa Wolf*. American University Studies: Ser. 19, General Literature 4, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986; or Laura Sue Fuderer, *The Female Bildungsroman in English: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism*, New York: MLA, 1990; or Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "The Female *Bildungsroman*: Calling It Into Question," *NWSA Journal* 2.1 (Winter 1990) 16-34.

<sup>179</sup> Creating an analogy with Moretti's argument in *The Way of the World* (where he sees youth as the new symbolic age negotiating a changed society due to the effects of the French and the industrial revolution), the new factor of society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is no long youth, but the 'other', and the Bildungsroman continues to be a productive literary vehicle for negotiations of this 'other' and the society around them. As in Moretti's argument, the

Braendlin's initial diagnosis here is on point in so far as the genre has not become outdated and is not resurrected as an 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century literary form, but as a theoretical genre that is adapted and provides a new productive form. However, this is not so much due to "universal, experiential phenomena and interpersonal relationships" as she argues, but rather to the genre's ideological implications, as more recent research, like Martin Japtok's 2005 study *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism & the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction*, or Joseph R. Slaughter's compelling investigation of the confluence between the Bildungsroman and human rights discourses in his book *Human Rights, Inc.*, published in 2006, has demonstrated.

In *Growing Up Ethnic*, Japtok draws parallels between the Bildungsroman and nationalism in so far as both strive to impose a sense of order in a seemingly chaotic existence. The Bildungsroman suggests order through the chronological and thus usually teleological narrative, while nationalism imposes boundaries and a rationale of belonging. Ethnic nationalism, which according to Japtok feeds into and seeps through the ethnic Bildungsroman, however does not position itself in opposition or competition with mainstream nationalism. Rather, "mainstream nationalism claims a territory and the hegemony of an often racially defined group in that territory" (ibid. 137). Ethnic nationalism is transcendental and aims at a metaphysical territory (ibid. 153) and can therefore coexist and thrive within the nationalist boundaries as a difference.

Japtok investigates the parallels between nationalist discourse and the Bildungsroman by turning towards early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnic examples of the genre. Although he is careful not to draw any immediate correlations between African-American and Jewish-American experience or literary production, he outlines interesting parallels in the use of an ethnic-nationalist ideology and the Bildungsroman as a dominant literary genre. While the novel, and in particular the realist novel, is deeply rooted in European culture (and given the historical period of the emergence of the genre, also in imperialism), the (formerly) oppressed appropriated the genre, because, as Japtok argues, it lends itself to "ideological reinterpretations" (Japtok, 148). The novel may have been criticized as an art form that normalizes social values and actions,<sup>180</sup> but by the same token it is also a suitable space for resistance. Appropriating the tools and methods of the colonizer or oppressor makes these a particularly apt vehicle to assert identity because the form allows and facilitates entrance into the dominant culture and the inscription of the minority's experiences and histories.

The ethnic Bildungsroman is caught between two ideologies and it has to address both and the space of in-betweenness that the hero experiences. That means to also address mainstream

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experience of the previous generation(s) may no longer hold much guidance for, for example, new immigrants to Western societies, and they have to find their own new middle ground.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. Lennard Davis' *Resisting Novels: Ideology & Fiction*, discussed above in chapter 2.

culture's idea of ethnicity and prevailing stereotypes. However, the underlying idea of presenting “‘authentic’ views of ethnic life to mainstream readers” (ibid., 25) is complex, as it may also reinforce stereotypes as much as dispel them, or even create new ones.

Furthermore, such an appropriation or adaptation necessarily also means a transformation of the genre. Japtok identifies certain differences between the traditional and the ethnic Bildungsroman; differences which again are not arbitrary but rather function to reinforce the changed purpose and ideology of the genre. The most important of these is that while the traditional Bildungsroman was exclusively focused on the hero, the ethnic novel of formation gives more room to others around the protagonist. “What may be called the ethnic transformation of the Bildungsroman consists, then, of a development away from the more exclusively personality-oriented plot of the traditional Bildungsroman and towards a more political and social vision” (ibid., 27). As a consequence, the plot lines, too, depart from a more individualist model towards a more communalist one, not infrequently with a more idealist outlook. “Rather than only being expressive of an individualist world view, ethnic autobiographical novels come to embrace communalism in the form of ethnic solidarity” (ibid., 148). The protagonist is usually faced with a “social environment that offers more hindrance than support” (ibid. 28), and as a consequence, in the end, embraces a more ethnicity-focused life. Recurring themes, according to Japtok, are “most prominently the oppositions of materialism and idealism and of individualism and communalism” (ibid., 134). The protagonists negotiate their belonging through a balance of descent and consent.<sup>181</sup>

The Bildungsroman, an individualist form, is rewritten for communalist purposes and becomes the vehicle for an ideology which uneasily combines essentialist and constructionist views of ethnicity, inasmuch as it has to summon to life what it claims is or should be alive already—group cohesion based on similarity of traits. (ibid. 155)

The typical ethnic Bildungsroman will be an embodiment of ethnic nationalism. The hero/heroine, struggling to belong to mainstream culture, will ultimately find it lacking and recognize the cultural superiority of his/her ethnicity, reconnect with his/her heritage and the community upholding its values, while leading a successful existence within the territory of the host nation.<sup>182</sup>

While Martin Japtok in his investigation of ideological implications of the Bildungsroman foregrounds the differences between the traditional and the ethnic novel of formation, Joseph R. Slaughter detects a certain continuity in the ideological focus of the form insofar as he claims that

from its inception, the bildungsroman has made human rights claims, whether in the social protest novels of the nineteenth and twentieth century, or in the late eighteenth-century progenitors that sought

<sup>181</sup> Cf. Sollors' discussion of ethnic belonging in *Beyond Ethnicity*.

<sup>182</sup> A typical example for such a text from the category of South Asian ethnic writing would be Jhumpa Lahiri's acclaimed novel *The Namesake* (2003), which was also turned into a successful movie adaptation by award winning South Asian North American filmmaker Mira Nair in 2006.

to legitimize the emergent bourgeoisie as the dominant social, political, cultural, and economic class. (Slaughter 2011, 97)

Slaughter's main focus, as the title of his study shows, is with the relations of the Bildungsroman and human rights discourses, because both represent "a normative process of human personality development" (ibid., 43). His particular interest in the literary and legal genre is in their discourse and structure, their linear chronology and ideological implications. "The movement of the subject from pure subjection to self-regulation describes the plot trajectory of the dominant transition narrative of modernization, which both the Bildungsroman and human rights law take for granted and intensify in their progressive visions of human personality development" (ibid., 9). Both presuppose "that the person *is* a person in order to effect the person *as* a person" (Slaughter 2007, 26). Specifically, the first-person narratives exemplify this, as reconciliation at the end of the text is a form of closing the narrative gap; of

bringing the past into conjunction with the present and the earlier protagonist self into correspondence with the later narrator self, producing the *Bildungsheld* as the narrator-protagonist (citizen-subject) of its story . . . the elder narrator acts as guarantor . . . of the younger protagonist's enfranchisement. This narratorial agency bends teleological linear development into a reflexive structure of narrative self-sponsorship that repairs the initial diegetic split between protagonist (man) and narrator (citizen). (Slaughter 2006, 1415)

Seen this way, the narrative distance characteristic of the novel of formation already preconfigures the plot's outcome, anticipating reconciliation in voice and tone. At the same time, this distance also automatically constructs the teleology and linearity of the traditional novel of formation, turning it into a narrative of becoming what one already is.

Both, human rights and the Bildungsroman, through the form and structure of their discourse make "common sense commonsensical" (Slaughter 2007, 7) which however, in its tautology implies the interdiction of *other* criticism outside the frames defining these texts.<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, a certain familiarity is necessary for the didacticism of the novel to be effective as the reader only discerns deviations from the accepted and thus familiar norms. For recognition in general as well as the acceptance and thus recognition of critique, a shared frame is essential.<sup>184</sup> In the Bildungsroman this familiarity is not only situated in the quest of the struggling individual, but also embedded in the formal presentation of this quest as a chronological life narrative employing a realist mode of narration.

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<sup>183</sup> This critique of the genre, which can also be found in Japtok, also evokes the argument of Lennard J. Davis about the ideology of the novel in general. According to Davis, the "the regularizing and normalizing features of the novel" and the act of reading "prevents or inhibits social action" (Davis 17). The novel through its well-structured characters, places, and action creates a familiarity that at the same time limits perception to the consciously chosen elements that make the text. While the reader engages with the text, alternative options get largely obliterated. Cf. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction*. 1987.

<sup>184</sup> For the dynamics of recognition between reader and text see Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, esp. chapter 1.

What Slaughter's focus on the function of the Bildungsroman as social discourse and its complicity with human rights narratives does for the definition of the genre, is first and foremost to comprehensively outline the complexity of the genre's ambiguity, not only in terminology, but in its didactic and formal core. The shift in emphasis in the definition process from plot features to discursive function then is also the key factor in explaining why the traditional white male Bildungsroman declined in the twentieth century, while discourses of collective identity appropriated the genre with intensity.

In his definition of the genre in *The Encyclopedia of the Novel* (2011) Slaughter accounts for the expansion of the variety of texts to be considered a Bildungsroman emphasizing that

the term's scope has expanded to cover almost any novel that narrates the struggle between the rebellious inclinations of the individual and the conformist demands of society. If the great mass of novels we read as bildungsromane do not manifest the idealism of the early examples, we might conclude that the genre persists more in the breach of its original conventions than in their observance. (Slaughter 2011, 93)

As Slaughter's summary implies, it is less (the end or subversion of a) form, than (the persistence of a) function that marks (the continued popularity of) the genre. A function that has resulted in the Bildungsroman being "consistently described as a didactic genre that performs what it thematizes, encouraging the reader's cultivation through its depiction of the protagonist's development" (ibid. 96). That is to say, while the genre on the one hand is rightfully accused of normalization and naturalization dynamics in its presentation of the social, it is also a genre ideal for the incorporation of social change and critique. Following Bakhtin's argument, both the Bildungsheld and the world around him evolve in the novel of formation. That makes this format also an ideal outlet for frustration with the status quo and an instrument of critique of the (institutionalized) social.

The didacticism and social critique of the genre are not a new development, as Slaughter emphasized,<sup>185</sup> because the genre's function had from the beginning been to "[conventionalize] a narrative pattern for participation in the egalitarian imaginary of the new bourgeois nation-state, a plot for incorporation of previously marginalized people as democratic citizen-subject" (Slaughter 2006, 1410).<sup>186</sup> It was always a genre to critically reflect on social conditions and suggest alternatives of conceiving of the social order. Over the past decades this has become to increasingly mean groups disenfranchised in our society who are struggling for recognition.

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<sup>185</sup> Cf. for example Slaughter 2011, 96f.

<sup>186</sup> Joseph R. Slaughter takes the term "egalitarian imaginary" from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), esp. chapter 4 "Hegemony and Radical Democracy" (149-194), and he argues that both the Bildungsroman and human rights found their normative and naturalizing project in a discourse of common sense that is bound to the ideal of an egalitarian social imaginary (cf. Slaughter 2006, 1408 and Slaughter 2007 esp. chapter 3).

Distorted plots of alienation have been used to great effect by writers from socially, politically, culturally, racially, sexually, and economically marginalized groups to expose the discrepancy between the ideal of equal opportunity and the actual discriminatory practices of modern social formations. (Slaughter 2011, 94f).

Both, Slaughter's and Japtok's investigations of the complicity of the genre with ethnic nationalist and human rights discourses conclusively demonstrate that the Bildungsroman is a productive tool for collective identity negotiations. However, one has to be cautious to not automatically draw the inverse conclusion: collective identity negotiations are *not* an inherent feature of the genre. Slaughter is careful to make this point and demonstrate throughout his study how such a complicity with identity claims is rather a naturalized assumption throughout modernity that has resulted in the equation of the novel of formation's central plot theme of an individual finding his/her place in society with the notion that this was an identitarian quest of group belonging, both in the reconciliation with a larger social as well as in the allegorical quest of the *representative* individual. Yet, more recent developments in the literary market show that the genre continues its popularity even though, or maybe even *because* collective identity discourses are no longer the dominant characteristic of such novels.<sup>187</sup>

Several interrelated reasons are grounds for this continued success story of the Bildungsroman, like the market demand, a (re-)turn to a more realist narrative mode in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>188</sup> the didacticism inherent to the novel of formation, or the continued, if fundamentally changed idea of progress. First and foremost, however, the continued popularity of the genre links back to its general qualities or characteristics outlined above. Even though the Bildungsroman was throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century largely used as a literary vehicle to cement collectivity, to (re-)connect the individual with the society around them, the central theme is not group membership, but this struggle of the individual within the larger social. As Bakhtin already recognized, the traditional form depicts an individual between two epochs; man and the world around him emerging at once - a transition phase that is mutually effected. Slaughter, too, investigates this central theme and concludes that what it all comes down to was a struggle for incorporation.

[T]he historical prominence of the genre – in the globalizing twentieth-, as in the nationalizing eighteenth- and nineteenth-, century versions, corresponds to periods of social crisis over the terms and mechanics of enfranchisement, over the meaning and scope of citizenship, over, that is, the process and prospects of incorporation. (Slaughter 2007, 27)

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<sup>187</sup> Recent novels of formation by writers of ethnic heritage frequently focus on collective identity rather to critique it, deconstruct it or simply subvert it through parody. See for example the following discussion of Satyal's novel *Blue Boy*.

<sup>188</sup> After the avantgarde movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the introspection of modernism and the fragmented metatextuality of postmodernism, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a resurgence of a more realist mode of narration, especially in minority writing, though one deeply informed by the preceding movements.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century humankind once again finds itself on a threshold of a changing world order, man and the world are emerging yet again, however, the final destination is unknown and only becoming. The stronghold of the nation is diminishing, and questions of citizenship and the future of the concept of citizenship as such are as prevalent as ever, yet with a different agenda due to the forces of globalization. This internationalized frame lacks clear administrative institutions and thus fixed points of reference marking the social or historical consciousness, which accounts for the uncertainty we find reflected in the contemporary novel of formation.

The continued appeal of the Bildungsroman to Western readership is intertwined with a complex tension between continuity and change that conditions the self-perception of the global social. The sense of progress, which had shaped all of modernity, prevails even today; a notion that explicitly finds expression in the novel of formation (not to even call it its driving force). However, globalization is changing the underlying assumptions of progress, which now are understood as considerably less teleological and causally related, especially in the social field. Contemporary novels of formation are still marked by a continued belief in progress and development, both in plot as well as structure, however, this notion of progress signifies neither a teleological causality nor a value statement presupposing beneficial evolution or growth. The contemporary idea of progress is just one of the inevitabilities of change, which, however, is open in its outcome and in itself value free. Change as such is non-directed; and causal only in so far as a multiplicity of changing factors causes change - but in largely unpredictable or shapeable ways. This notion of progress can be either idealist and hopeful or dystopian, it is driven by desire and therefore future oriented, but also resulting in uncertainty rather than resolution.

Not only the underlying idea of progress continues to shape the genre, but also its basic didactic function. The continued appeal of the text type lies to some extent in its inherent suggestion of explaining the individual's position in society, a function that seems to grow in importance as the relationship between individual and the social increases in complexity in the age of globalization.

Finally, regarding the market situation, the genre continues in popularity because it has been well so established in the market, especially within the framework of ethnic fiction.<sup>189</sup> As Slaughter pointed out with respect to the postcolonial Bildungsroman: "rather than assume . . . that these novels simply reflect current sociological and cultural facts of life in the Third World,

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<sup>189</sup> The identitarian narratives of the last decades not only served to inscribe the minority into mainstream culture, but also fulfilled the readers' craving for the exotic. Though, as Graham Huggan stressed in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), exoticization is not only a tool of western hegemony, but is also consciously employed by 'marginalized' writers, both for greater market appeal (which makes them complicit with the hegemonial project) and as subversive strategy. These writers may be affected but are not governed by commodification, (cf. Huggan, 27).

we must recognize the impact that the highly centralized Western markets (both popular and academic) have on global literary production.” (Slaughter 2007, 37). Publications of great impact usually reach that position *because* they are largely consumed, taught and critically discussed in the West.

Thus, such novels are not unmitigated evidence of some irrepressible march of freedom and human rights; rather, part of the social forces and formations that these *Bildungsromane* make legible are the global power dynamics and market relations in which both their publication and human rights are implicated. (ibid. 39)

Publishing houses will continue to promote the genre as long as it sells, and it does well because it fulfills several levels of reader engagement. The largely chronological narrative structure and realist mode of narration mean that the novel of formation is a fairly easily accessible type of text, appealing to a large potential readership. Furthermore, as the Bildungsroman is complicit not only in offering a stage to negotiations of socialization, but also in (re-)producing the frame for these in the first place,<sup>190</sup> it creates a setup of characters, plot developments and settings that facilitate the reader’s relating to the fictive world.<sup>191</sup> Finally, it serves as an outlet for frustration with and critique of societies, and at its best uses parody or satire for such a critique through the narrative distance characteristic of the genre.

One example for such a new contemporary novel of formation would be Abha Dawesar’s *babyji* (2005). In its depiction of the coming of age of a lesbian teenager who engages in multiple socially unacceptable sexual relationships across age and caste barriers, the novel calls social standards and norms into question on the plot level, while the narrative structure reinforces the changed notion of progress. Although it is a chronological narrative of the protagonist’s negotiations of her position in the Indian and in the end the larger global society, the structure is episodic and therefore enforces no teleological causality. On the contrary, the need to ‘make sense’ of the world and occurrences around her are explicitly presented as a retrospective consciousness construction. The structure and form also serve as a critique of classifications and assumptions as the text persistently plays with and subverts reader expectations. The 27 short chapters are each headed with a title that teases the reader to draw assumptions based on the previous plot developments, which the following pages then subvert. The reading experience heightens our apprehension of how easily we draw conclusions along the most conventional lines of thought

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<sup>190</sup> “By definition, both literary genre and law are normative. Although the idealist Bildungsroman and international human rights law respond to issues of rightlessness, they do not begin by imagining in what the rightless (the victim of human rights and undemocratic social formations) consist; they begin by imagining the normative, rights-holding citizen-subject . . . Out of this enabling fiction, the rightless and marginal emerge as creatures who lack (either innately or practically, depending on the rhetorical politics of the praxis) what the incorporated citizen-subject enjoys” (Slaughter 42f.).

<sup>191</sup> Cf. the discussion of Felski’s analysis of various forms of reader engagement in chapter 2 above.



that may quite frequently turn out to be incorrect if we bother to engage with the actual events and people concerned.

The protagonist's quest in *babyji* is marked by attempts to come to terms with the variety of emotional involvements and different relationships she sees herself entangled in. In order to do so, she turns to Enlightenment ideas of rationality, natural sciences, and ideas of teleology, but throughout the story finds them falling short in the face of the complex reality of her everyday existence. Anamika's different relationships at the same time also serve as triggers to reflect on the politics and morality of the larger Indian society as it struggles, yet fails to emerge from communal conflicts and social injustices like the caste system.

The narrative voice in *babyji* is a fitting example of Slaughter's argument that the genre is always ambivalent, serving as a vehicle of criticism and a form of normalization at the same time. In *babyji*, the teenage protagonist<sup>192</sup> criticizes the constraints put upon the social by outdated norms and customs, yet she at the same time never fully transgresses these boundaries. She has a love affair with their servant from a lower class and cares deeply for her, yet she never stops to see her as a servant or to see her caste as a stigma on their relationship.<sup>193</sup>

In the end, the novel also does not conclude with the formation of the individual so much as with her embarking on a next phase of formation, stressing the idea of becoming of identity rather than reconciliation with and finding a place in a supposedly given or created society. In the deconstruction of Anamika's patriotism and by extension any fixed notion of identity or place in society, this novel diverges crucially from the traditional idea of the Bildungsroman. Life as described is not teleological, not causal even if chronologically narrated, nor is it actually progress oriented. It is episodic, requiring the individual to constantly make decisions and then to try and rectify their consequences.<sup>194</sup> Although the novel does not end in the resolution of the quest, in a

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<sup>192</sup> The narrative voice is suffused with insights and ironic commentary, indicating the characteristic narrative distance of the Bildungsroman. Yet it remains at the same time consistently the voice of an adolescent, oscillating between being confused, needing to make sense of the world and her feelings, and of being overly self-confident and self-righteous. It exhibits the typical mood swings, changing loyalties, and a need to experience everything to the fullest with little consideration for consequences that are characteristic of that age.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. for example *babyji* p. 123.

<sup>194</sup> At first glance it may appear that *babyji* could also be classified as a female or as a lesbian Bildungsroman, however on closer examination, the novel does not share the core features of either sub-genre. In the early study on the female novel of formation, *The Voyage In* (1983), Abel et. al. offer a plot focused, thematic definition of the subgenre and see it to largely deal with female protagonists later in their life, escaping the stifling social conventions and expectations of marriage and motherhood. Their struggle is less with society as a whole, and rather with male norms imposed on them. Following such a definition, *babyji* would not fit any of the characteristics. It depicts a young protagonist who freely follow her sexual relationships, unencumbered by male suppression (aside from the generally patriarchally shaped society). If anything, Anamika repeatedly takes over the role of a (male) oppressor or superior in her relationships with her classmate, whom she even rapes, and her behavior towards Rani, their servant. With regard to being a lesbian Bildungsroman, Bonnie Zimmermann in her essay "Exiting form Patriarchy", included in the same collection sees the dominant factor classifying a lesbian novel of formation in the coming-out moment (cf. Zimmermann, 244 f.). Yet in *babyji* we have no actual coming-out. While several other characters know of one or more of her lesbian relationships and Anamika in some instances even brags about them,

reconciliation of Bildungsheld and society, but rather with the suggestion of a new or continued quest, the form of the protagonist's rejection of the social she was coming of age in offers an ending appropriate of the genre. It still serves as the result of her *Bildung*. She became aware of the intricate complexities of actual life and lived experiences, as opposed to the rationalist and teleological world-explanation models of her schooling and the society of her upbringing. Her reconciliation with the social is not so much that of finding her place within that social, but of deciding it might that place may be elsewhere, concluding in her celebration of global mobility.

Like *babyji*, also Dawesar's other novels focus on the transgressions of taboos. In all of them her approach is to subvert taboos by simply not addressing them; she just does not construct the conflict a taboo breach usually results in. As a consequence, Dawesar's plotting hardly ever results in negative consequences for the characters due to social norms. In this respect the stories confront and at the same time rupture readers' expectations while challenging the very notion of norms and taboos. However, the stories are not naïve optimistic narratives of a utopian social outside of the necessity of regulations and punishment. The novels end in an ambiguity of loss, isolation, detachedness, and uncertainty on the one hand, while at the same time conveying a positive spirit towards new beginnings or opportunities. The notion of rupture and loss is not suffused with nostalgic longing so much as the momentary mourning for the end of something, while it is simultaneously directed towards an uncertain future.

The same pattern can also be found in another example of a novel of formation although one that significantly differs from Dawesar's novel in style and voice, Rakesh Satyal's *Blue Boy*.

### 5.2.2 The Innocent Flamboyance of Difference

The growing complexity and uncertainty of the social requires ever more critical observation against too simplistic explanation models. In this context, as Slaughter's work so comprehensively argues, the novel of formation has the dual capacity of explaining and reiterating and, in the process, manifesting social norms and frames, while at the same time providing an effective vehicle for critique of the social. The novel of formation, as Satyal's *Blue Boy* shows, can call such norms and their limiting frames and values into question through the very presentation of society and its naturalized assumptions. Satyal's text does not present alternatives, but instead feeds on and into the clichés of culturalisms prevalent in American society with regard

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she does not really have a coming-out. She continues to conduct her relationships in secrecy and the majority of people around her remain oblivious. While the text depicts her sexual awakening as a lesbian, she does not have to stand her ground being confronted by society or chose between accommodation or exile based on her sexual identity, which would be the characteristic struggle of the lesbian novel of formation according to Zimmermann.

to ethnic community values as well as gender normativizations. The novel effectively highlights the hypocrisy of such imposed value systems. The power of the narrative of Satyal's text lies in the parody created by the ironic distance of the narrative voice. In its matter of fact presentation of the child or early adolescent world-view and beliefs, the text elicits the readers' sympathy and pity for the boy, yet deeply amuses through the naïveté of the protagonist, and the occasional sarcastic commentary of the temporally distant narrative voice.

*Blue Boy* is the story of Kiran Sharma through the early months in twelfth grade from the first week of school to the fall talent show. It is set in 1992 in Ohio. Kiran is an only child in a loveless marriage with an overly doting mother, who also regularly feeds him all kinds of medications as he frequently suffers from migraines. With his defiance of traditional gender roles and the closeness to his mother, his father appears somewhat at a loss in interacting with the boy, unable to find common ground or forge a deep connection. Kiran's existence oscillates between his life at school and his weekend-life at the temple with the Indian community. In school he is frequently the subject of teasing and bullying, especially by Melissa and Sarah, the two dominating girls in his class. His only friend-like relationship is with a boy named Cody, a boy with a physical deformity. However, this relationship too is one of convenience rather than emotional proximity. At temple and in the ethnic community he is no better integrated; the children there also make fun of him and his various peculiarities. To make matters worse, Kiran is just on the verge of discovering sexuality. Though he is exhibiting many queer characteristics and, in his path towards sexuality, finds himself stimulated by male bodies as much as female ones, he remains an ambivalent gender identity; searching rather than finding his sexual orientation. The text characterizes Kiran but does not categorize him.

Like Dawesar's *babyji*, *Blue Boy* too uses a homodiegetic narrative voice, which thus provides a grammatically ungendered first-person narrator, and even more so than Dawesar's text, *Blue Boy* plays with reader assumptions, making the reader revisit, revise and yet again rethink conclusions drawn based on common identity markers. Throughout the prologue and much into the first chapter, the text keeps the reader guessing and drawing false conclusions with regard to the Bildungsheld's gender. Although the title of the book clearly refers to a boy, Satyal plays with his readers, both those with a Western background and those with knowledge of South Asian identity markers, by repeatedly subverting textual clues previously established. This starts with the protagonist's name, Kiran, which is a gender-neutral name that can be given to boys and girls alike.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> It may be argued that this ambivalence is lost to Western readers. However, at least a literature affine public might still remember Kiran Desai winning the Man Booker Prize in 2006 and consequently expect a female protagonist. Furthermore, for those readers on whom this factor is lost, the novel makes sure to catch them up at the very end,

*Blue Boy* opens with the child confessing that s/he frequently applies her/his mother's make-up. However, the text then attributes male identity markers to the protagonist, first in dress code, as s/he is described as wearing "the standard lazy-boy uniform in these parts" (*BB* 1). Shortly thereafter s/he is addressed by the mother yelling "Kiran, *beta!*" *Beta* means son in Hindi; and yet, in colloquial usage it may also be used as gender-neutral address, referring simply to 'child.' Thus, neither the attire nor the address fully dispels the ambiguity of the initial sentences. To add to this gender indistinctness, Kiran - for both readerships at this point potentially marked as male - attempts to "scurry away as I have learned in ballet class" (*BB* 1). The suggested male gender is challenged by the stereotype of ballet being predominately a girls' activity.

The at this point thoroughly undecided reader follows the child into the master bathroom, where the protagonist secretly applies the mother's make-up, another almost exclusively female trait. The child's need for secrecy for this act is not likely interpreted to be due to a gender non-conformity, but rather to the more obvious fact that s/he was not allowed to play with the mother's expensive cosmetics. "Surely she must notice her cosmetics diminishing every day. Surely, she has noticed that the ends of her lipsticks are rounded, . . . that her eyeshadows have been rubbed to the core" (*BB* 1). Observing the product of this transgression in the mirror, the text further substantiates the reader's suspicion at this point that we are encountering a female protagonist. "I am entranced by the eyes in the mirror once again . . . The girl in the mirror has grown so beautiful She puckers her lips, and winks, applies another layer of her Magenta Lipstick" (*BB* 5). The protagonist refers to her/himself in the mirror as a girl, the most powerful gender identification for the reader up to that point. "'Stunning,' I whisper to the mirror girl, doing my best Joan Rivers impression. The girl giggles, and when she bats her lashes, they look like enormous blue feathers." (*BB* 5). The reference to female idols or stars here further cements such a conclusion.

On this day, Kiran is eventually caught in the act. The mother is shocked when she opens the door seeing the child with make-up. Initially, this horror of the mother could be interpreted as shock over the discovery that her young son was engaging in femininely coded activities. However, just prior to the mother's approach, the protagonist had become so enthralled with the blue eye shadow, that s/he had started applying it on his/her entire face; adding ambivalence to the mother's reaction as well as offering an escape route: Kiran claims that s/he was pretending to be Lord Krishna. Thus, the mother is appeased and the reader is left with a male identifier, and

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as it states that this name, meaning 'ray of light' could be given to girls and boys alike. This piece of information is revealed in an exasperated comment by the father addressing his son, begging him to be more conformist to social norms. "'Your mom thought it was the perfect name. I wasn't totally sure because 'Kiran' is sometimes a girl's name.' His voice catches here. 'But you weren't a girl.' He pauses. 'You aren't a girl.'" (*BB* 223).

a reconciliation of reader expectations based on the novel's title, for both the 'blue' and the 'boy' of the title seem to be established and explained.

Not for long however, as the first chapter starts out with Kiran's narration of the first week back in school after the summer vacation and of how the two most adored and self-assured girls in the class asked her/him to join them for recess. "Me?" I say, raising a hand to my chest and widening my eyes as if the girls have just pronounced me Miss America" (*BB* 13). During recess they then interrogate Kiran about his/her opinions on Barbie dolls, and whether s/he likes Malibu Barbie or Evening Gown Barbie better. "Evening Gown Barbie," I say. It just comes right out of me, but once I say it, I can't stop. 'She is posh and elegant. But my preferred doll is actually Strawberry Shortcake'" (*BB* 16). The author's game-play with the audience ends in a final mocking subversion. This whole encounter with the two girls and the protagonist's passionate outburst about dolls likely once again conjures up the clichéd stereotypes of little girls; yet, just as the reader might comfortably settle into having solved the gender riddle, the text itself firmly manifests the protagonist's sex: "You talk funny,' Melissa says. 'It's because he studies extra language arts with Mrs. Goldberg after school,' Sarah says. 'He's a smarty-pants.'" (*BB* 16). This delayed act of gendering of the protagonist has the additional effect of dramatic irony as the reader now – in the dissonance between Kiran's behavior and traditional gender-roles – already anticipates the maliciousness he would soon be exposed to, while the child himself continues to happily babble away about Barbie dolls. This turn from ambiguity to dramatic irony had already been set in motion at the outset of the chapter with the foreshadowing comment that this was a tale about "the Other Big Event: Kiran Being Wronged by Two Cold-hearted Snakes" (*BB* 12).

Moreover, through this playful suspense game in the reading experience, the text, in a subtle way, not only introduces the theme of the Bildungsroman as the search for identity, but also makes the reader partake in this questioning or quest, at least with respect to gender. The novel then continues to skillfully and humorously depict Kiran's almost prototypical Bildungsheld struggles. That is to say the text not only matches the genre definition in theme, form and narrative technique but moreover even fits almost all of the plot elements that Buckley had listed in his early, plot driven, descriptive definition of the genre into the short span of a few months the book covers.<sup>196</sup> Buckley's descriptive approach focuses mainly on principal plot elements, summarizing these as "[a)] childhood, [b)] the conflict of generations, [c)] provinciality, [d)] the larger society, [e)] self-education, [f)] alienation, [g)] ordeal by love, [h)] the search for a vocation and a working

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<sup>196</sup> Referencing Buckley here should by no means indicate that I subscribe to his rather uncritical approach in defining the genre. It is merely used to emphasize to what extent Satyal's text conforms to the traditional genre, almost as if following a checklist. He fits all the typical plot elements into the short and extravagant coming of age period depicted in the novel - only a few months - while he completely subverts the genre into parody.

philosophy” (Buckley 18). He furthermore emphasizes sexuality, claiming that the protagonist’s “direct experience of urban life . . . involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraises his values” (Buckley 17). Even though he concedes that no novel would “precisely follow this pattern” (ibid.) he insists that, “none that ignores more than two or three” (ibid.) can be called a Bildungsroman. Kiran’s quest is a) firmly located in his childhood, b) his father is unable to relate to him at all, while the mother is overly doting and in her misguided level of care actually poisons him.<sup>197</sup> c) The story is set in Ohio and has a small-town, provincial feeling to it, which for Kiran results in d) a generally hostile society whose norms and values are not congruent with his experiences and self-perception. One is the American society of his school life, or what he sees as his ‘normal life’, and the other is the ethnic enclave of South Asians that makes up his weekend life at the temple and at community gatherings. e) In his quest to understand his place or identity, he becomes enthralled with the idea of Lord Krishna and using sources from both societies, educates himself and draws his own conclusions about the Hindu God. h) Becoming this god, then, turns into this vocation. Even though he has to concede failure in the end, it still helped him to develop his philosophy of difference that stands at the end of the novel. f) His general alienation from both societies is palpable in every scene. The only element possibly missing is an ordeal by love, however, sexuality is certainly a central element and Kiran experiences both, a debasing sexual encounter at the outset of the novel where the two girls want to see his penis and to avoid that, he plops down on old playground equipment and gets a splinter stuck in his buttocks, making him the laughing stock of the class for weeks;<sup>198</sup> and an exalting sexual encounter, when he skipped school and went to the park where he happened to watch three teenagers, one girl and two boys, engaging in a threesome, gets caught by a park ranger and later has a homoerotic dream about that ranger. This together with his graduation from *Playboy* to *Penthouse* and other more explicit porn

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<sup>197</sup> The child’s necessary and inevitable separation from the parents in his formation is clearly marked by actions of secret deviance and even explicitly voiced as such. “Once I have managed to eat the butter without any detection from my father, I feel like I have triumphed over him in the same way that I have over my mother. Just as I have managed to put on her makeup, I have managed to eat my father’s nutritional enemy. Something I have never felt before becomes clear to me: I am taking a sort of hurtful pride in being devious to them. I am transforming my weaknesses into ruses, and in doing so, I am becoming surer of myself I am the calm in the middle of the battle” (BB 73). The final reference about the battle again is the link to the deity he fashions himself after, as Krishna appeared before Arjuna at the beginning of the Kurukshetra War depicted in the *Mahabharata* and gave him calm and perspective for the fight.

<sup>198</sup> “Imagine them settling on the foreign kid, the one who wears bright, primary-colored sweatsuits, the one who sings to himself, moves his hips and dances when he thinks no one is looking, who draws intricate pictures of pretty girls, sometimes, even of these conniving girls. Imagine the ‘Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee’ scene from *Grease*, that bevy of tough chicks, smoking and boozing and stuffing their bras with quilted Kleenex, then think of what those girls were like in elementary school, what Rizzo did with her biting sarcasm and animalistic instincts before sexing them away in the back of secondhand convertibles. . . . Now imagine what those heartless hussies would do if they saw the foreign kid get a splinter up his ass. . . . Over the next few days, the beautiful girls I once deemed my saviors lead the anti-Kiran rally.” (BB 18)

magazines helps him reappraise his values, or rather sexual interests. From what he learns about sexuality from these sources, he concludes that the female part is less interesting as it has the rather passive role, seeing them woman acting just as receptacles.

In Satyal's attention to the model of the classical Bildungsroman in telling the hilarious story of Kiran's quest to become Lord Krishna, the text both, uses the genre to transport its message, and simultaneously subverts it into parody. The child's struggle and search for an identity are real and the overall moral or criticism, in the lack of acceptance of his queerness by the larger society and the pigeonholing into cultural identity, is topical and accurate. Yet, the very short time span in the protagonist's life and during a fairly insignificant time in the process of coming of age, the rather childish absurdity of the quest, the hilarious flamboyance of his actions, and the utter lack of or being able to adequately interpret the reactions of the social around him, combined with the narrative distance that is palpable in every sentence, not only make this book an amusing read but also turn it into a parody of the genre itself.

Throughout the text, the reader encounters Kiran's struggle to fit into either one or both social circles that he is situated in. Preconditioned by the experiences of his parents and the rest of the ethnic community his family is a part of, Kiran too is quick to attribute his being ostracized in school to such an ascribed cultural identity:

“Normal” is a troubling word, though. I have never been able to decide which life of mine is normal, my school-bound American one or my party-bound Indian one. On the whole, I seem to think of my school life as my real life. I spend five days out of the week at school, and the people there, since they are part of my everyday life and part of my hometown . . . are the ones that matter on a regular basis. I do not, on the contrary, think of Indian kids as my reality. . . . When you are used to expending most of your energy on living with the difference of your skin, it is hard to think of people whose skin is the same as yours as ‘regular.’ (BB 125)

Kiran clearly incorporated the attitudes of the majority culture and the ‘fact’ of his cultural difference. He is unable to regard his own body and appearance or the visible marker of non-white origin as normal, which also shows an ingrained complicity with the majority culture's value system.<sup>199</sup> Yet Satyal's text also always subverts any ethnicity focused reading. Already in the very first pages of the prologue he had taken up the issue of skin color, reiterating the common desire to obstruct this difference, make the differentiating skin color disappear – as familiar from ‘passing narratives.’

There is something about the contrast of the blue against the Magenta, the way that the brown of my skin disappears under the blue marking, that I find irresistible, that moves my hand as if by magic across the contour of my face. (BB 5f.)

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<sup>199</sup> A dominant theme in much postcolonial criticism, most famously in Frantz Fanon's work, leading back to Hegel's master-slave dialectics.

But instead of a desire for ‘passing’, for blending in and assimilation, the protagonist desires to stand out. He is not compelled by the disappearance of his brown skin so much as by the appearance of the blue, the artificiality, the brightness, the extraordinariness of difference.

It makes me wonder why women don’t make their faces blue instead of tan or brown . . . there is something to be said for creating a natural-looking face, but there is also something to be said for standing out, entrancing, glowing. (*BB* 5f.)

Moreover, his skin color is only a secondary factor in Kiran’s visible otherness. He is ostracized by both peer groups, his school mates as well as the children of the other Indian families due to his peculiarities, which manifest themselves visibly in the bright primary colored sweat suits he usually wears, or his occasional mishap with his mom’s beauty products resulting for example in him sporting a “shiny, sticky pompadour” (*BB*, 112) one day because the special soap of his mom did not wash out properly.

Kiran is othered because of his non-conformity, which especially at this age is critically judged by peers, rather than because of a categorical difference like cultural heritage or sexual preferences as such. His struggles are with social standards of what is considered ‘normal’ as he feels utterly unable to meet these. As a result, he is conditioned to always already expect disapproval: “I realize that my first impulse was to expect the worst. I have been conditioned to feel ashamed. By my classmates. By the other Indian kids. By my father” (*BB*, 111). However, this permanent experience of disapproval does not result in a deeply ingrained inferiority complex. On the contrary, it triggers a haunted arrogance. Although he would like to be accepted and belong, he concludes that his peers and the society around him simply lack the artistic and intellectual capacities to appreciate his distinctiveness. This is evident from his grand self-images, especially with regard to his performances or any artistic expression, an aspect to be explored in more detail below.

Nonetheless, the child Kiran continues to look for explanations of his being othered in his cultural heritage and to some extent implicates the reader in the task. The novel is suffused with identity markers, tempting the reader to go along and read this text as ethnic fiction. Such ethnicity markers start in his nuclear family, as both his parents clearly belong to the diaspora, which is most obvious in the family’s spending every weekend exclusively with other South Asian families, even if that entailed a long drive to someone else’s house. Throughout the book there are the clichéd identity markers of food and dress; the repeated stereotypical idea of Indian parents wanting their child to become a doctor, an MBA or at least an engineer; and of course, repeated



mentioning of the outdated custom of arranged marriage. Satyal's text grazes every traditional exotic cliché of South Asianness.<sup>200</sup>

Moreover, the text not only presents ethnicity in plot and characters. The genre, narrative structure, mode, and voice, too, are evocative of ethnic literature. The novel of formation, as mentioned above, is a very productive genre for representative fictions like ethnic literature. Kiran, a true *Bildungsheld*, is struggling to find his place in society and his identity, and the text establishes the expected frames of reference of ethnic literature, from weekly visits to the temple, exotic food and clothing items, and the occasional foreign language idiom set in italics for additional visual distinction,<sup>201</sup> to create the familiar setting for an ethnic novel of formation.

The realistic mode of narration with a child focalizer character further invites such an approach in reading. As Caroline F. Levander in her recent book *Cradle of Liberty* stresses, the child is the site where politics and social and cultural formations are inscribed, where racial logics and liberal-democratic systems are put into action by being incorporated as 'natural.'<sup>202</sup> She claims, "American literary and political texts do not so much include child subjects as depend on them to represent, naturalize, and, at times, attempt to reconfigure the ground rules of U.S. national belonging" (Levander 4f.). While her focus is mostly on the 19<sup>th</sup> century and on the systemic inscription of racism in the liberal-democratic state, the centrality of the child in American Literature is of relevance, as it was in a more general sense used to act "as a founding myth through which the new nation comes into being" (ibid. 5). With reference to Walt Whitman, she observes that the child in literature is often seen as the original source for authenticity due to its naturalness, its yet "pre-social, pure, and innocent self" (Levander 9). Levander sees "the idea of the child as a rich site of cultural meaning and social inscription . . . as a series of representative possibilities rather than as a biological category" (ibid. 16). Her study persuasively outlines the complicity of the child narrator with naturalizing social discourses.

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<sup>200</sup> Cf. for example pp. 32f., 36, 62ff.

<sup>201</sup> Cf. *BB* 127 ff. While such idioms peppered throughout the text, especially when the family is interacting with the diasporic community, are largely limited to 1 word items like *sari* or the greeting *Namaste*, p. 127 also includes a full sentence to more emphatically mark the code switching within these gatherings: "*Arre, Kiran Beta, kya hal hai?*", which translates approximately to 'Oh Kiran, son, how are things?' and thus is a statement of little content value. Earlier in the novel the narrator had already explained the language issue in detail, stating how the use of Hindi within the diaspora ranged from families who hardly used English at all to his own family where Hindi was only used for emphasis (cf. *BB* 33). In addition, while the utterance here remains untranslated, on other occasions the text offers explanations to actually emphasize cultural differences carried in idioms, for example when he inquires about the Hindu gods Krishna and Radha his mother is delighted: "*Bahut acha, beta*" – *very good*" (*BB* 65, emphasis in the original). The emphasis in this example is further carried by the typeset as the English words, too, are set in italics.

<sup>202</sup> Cf. Levander, "Natal Nationalism: The Place of the Child in American Cultural Studies," introduction, 1-28. See also Anthony Giddens' chapter on Family in his small volume *Runaway World* regarding the drastically changing role and view of the child in society throughout modernity.

Especially with the popularity of the novel of formation for disenfranchised groups, the link between identity formation through the literary genre and the myth of origin and belonging sustained through the child protagonist cannot be ignored. The centrality of generational conflicts in texts dealing with hybridity and acculturation in both Canadian and U.S. American fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century further highlights this correlation. Alicia Otano in her study *Speaking the Past: Child Perspective in the Asian American Bildungsroman* (2004) and Naomi Sokoloff in her earlier analysis *Imagining the Child in Jewish Literature* (1992) also both indicate a strong tradition of employing children's voices in ethnic literature. On the one hand, the child is the ultimately dependent and thus disenfranchised element in the social body. Such a narrative perspective can help to further highlight the marginalization of other groups or individuals on the fringes of society. On the other hand, the child, similar to other characters of limited comprehension, great naïveté or even stupidity, like the picaroon or the fool, is used to present a critical subversive yet comical approach often of a fresh directness uninhibited by social norms,<sup>203</sup> which renders this narrative approach popular in novels of social criticism.

Otano further claims that for investigations of hybridity, heterogeneity and multiplicity, a child perspective is suitable, because “within the multiple differences of origins, cultural practices, languages, and religious beliefs . . . the experience of ‘otherness’ is highlighted when experienced by the child, precisely because of the sensory impact on the ‘subject-in-the making’” (Otano 26). In the duality of a child focalizer character and an adult narrative voice – as is common in the novel of formation – the return to childhood and thus the formative years of the individual further heightens the impact of a transcultural experience. The themes of such texts are often characteristic of conventional ethnic fiction in general, though enforced by suffusing these with the key elements and anxieties of a child perspective.

Abandonment is a theme consistently interwoven into all of the works . . . [t]he disappearance of a parent figure through death or physical and psychological abandonment becomes an impetus for the seeking out of other mentor figures or surrogate parent figures. In all cases one parent figure, absent or not, represents the ‘home’ culture. This former world’s culture is considered a haven for the child who finds refuge there. The outside world is very often the country the family has immigrated to or will soon leave for. (Otano 31)

In her admittedly fairly generalizing list of features Otano then continues to emphasize elements also central to the novel of formation, like the journey out as a highly symbolic transgression of boundaries or actual borders. But, as her focus is on ethnic and diasporic literature, she equally stresses the journey back home, or a return from a journey. So, according to Otano, there is a cyclical journey motive in ethnic child fiction, yet one with a progressive focus in terms of the child's perspective, especially on how s/he sees the idea of home. “[T]he

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<sup>203</sup> Cf. Otano 12 and Sokoloff 25.

protagonists learn to don and shed their different cultural personalities as they enter and leave the home and outside world's environment" (Otano 33). These characteristics hardly differ from ethnic fiction conventions as such, but the child perspective, as Otano argues, gives these themes an additional pronouncement.

Following such a model, one could read Kiran's quest to become a reincarnation of Lord Krishna to be his childish interpretation of and approach to his cultural identity. However, his attempt can only result in more or deepening experiences of difference and cannot provide the closure or direction he craves for, nor do these frames provide for the eventual reconciliation with society the genre stipulates.

While Satyal's text may, on the surface, present all the common markers of ethnic literature, he at the same time forecloses such a reading practice through irony and parody. The text portrays the image of an innocent child (not in the moral sense, but in his approach to life) but the ironic adult voice presenting his failures at identity formation and socialization into groups deconstructs such narratives of cultural identity politics. It highlights how Kiran's search is misguided by these established frames of reference, which he tries to evoke for himself as a life-line.

The narrative voice furthermore ridicules the ethnic identity his parents' generation clings to on a linguistic level by further stereotyping the community through inserting a heavy accent to all speech acts of ethnic subjects except the protagonist's. His own supposedly superior grasp of the English language - he takes additional language classes at school - is sharply juxtaposed with his parents' and eventually all other Indian characters' English pronunciation. Their speech acts are transcribed into the text with an inability to properly pronounce the English sound for 'w' in English, which is in each instance substituted by 'v', for example in his father's speech on a healthy, butter-less diet "Vhat you eat now vill affect your whole life" (*BB* 70).

The novel also has an underlying critical attitude towards cultural group membership insofar as the diasporic community is presented as acting the same as the cultural majority in their exclusion of difference and their treatment of Kiran. It is presented as a social crutch for the parents to hold on to for a sense of belonging, but as largely devoid of actual meaning for the second generation. This is emphasized in the many depictions of temple scenes, where Kiran enjoys to play the cymbals, but understands nothing of the actual ceremony, not only because he lacks knowledge of the languages (Hindi and Sanskrit) used. For example, instead of grasping the deeper meaning of Holi, the Hindu spring festival, Kiran essentially sees it as the Indian version of a kid's talent show.

Kiran's lack of connection with his cultural heritage is most obvious in his approach to his quest of becoming Krishna. He has no deep understanding of Indian culture or Hindu religion. On the contrary, he is a perfect embodiment of Stanley Fish's concept of "Boutique Multiculturalism".<sup>204</sup> He enjoys the exoticism of it all, the vibrant colors, the theater of the temple rituals, the bells and fragrances, but has no actual knowledge of Hinduism. As far as the reader knows, he has never been to India, and in some of his statements about the diasporic community his commitment to the group remains ambiguous not only because he is ostracized. It is evident in stereotyping generalizations, like "Indians need their tea, or at least the promise of it, as soon as they finish eating" (*BB*, 127). Such statements remain ambiguous as to whether the protagonist counts himself as among this group or not. They often seem more like a (snarky) outside commentator's generalizations than an informed comment about one's culture.

Cultural references by the boy that are personal and identitarian are all rooted in American mass culture, from the clothes he wears to his love for Disney movies, the music of Whitney Houston, or most of all toys, especially his deep love of Strawberry Shortcake dolls over Barbie. All of the cultural artefacts that make up his immediate space clearly mark him as an American child of the 1990s,<sup>205</sup> despite being the son of Indian parents. He is keenly aware of his parent's Indian background and how that roots him in the Indian community on a weekly basis. Moreover, his parents Indianness is part of his everyday life in his mother's food items, her stories, and her wanting him to learn Indian dance like *khatak* rather than ballet. However, this awareness only results in the boy constantly turning to discourses of cultural difference for answers of his being othered. Through, contrasting his 'two lives,' he emphasizes how the people of either would be surprised if not even shocked to get to know the other side of his everyday existence.<sup>206</sup> Although he is keenly aware that either group of children has a strict social pecking order and that he finds himself at the bottom or outside of either of the social hierarchies, he continues to largely cling to the concept of cultural difference when looking for answers to his otherness.

Yet his conceptions of culture never scratch the surface of stereotypes, whether it is Indianness or Americanness that he describes. With regard to American culture he repeatedly revisits the trope of American arrogance in conjunction with ignorance, for example when stressing that 'History Day' as an opportunity at his school to dress up, really meant 'American

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<sup>204</sup> Cf. the discussion of Fish's distinction between 'boutique' and 'deep' multiculturalism in chapter 3 above.

<sup>205</sup> The issue of Americanization of the ethnic subject is also playfully taken up on a metatextual level in the chapter headings throughout the book. Many of those are clever puns and word games on staples of American culture like song titles and lyrics, or other expressions, though often with an Indian twitch: "Choosing my Religion" (echoing the REM song title "Losing my Religion") "Singh Singh" (a pun on imprisonment and the common Punjabi last name Singh), or "Chai for Two (and Two for Chai)" (an obvious reference to the famous Doris Day movie and the lyrics from the title song "Tea for Two").

<sup>206</sup> Cf. for example *BB* 170 ff.

History Day’ as “none of us dressed as anyone foreign – no Winston Churchills or Golda Meirs or, of course, Mahatma Gandhis” (BB 85). Here the ‘of course’ ironically highlights the difference and by implication irrelevance of South Asianness to his peers, or rather his school life.

Ironically, despite this awareness and his recognition of his parents’ culture, Kiran himself does not show any signs of being rooted in or deeply connected to his ethnic heritage. Kiran’s approach to South Asian culture is more akin to that of mainstream American, as evident in his exoticization of cultural practices, or religious rites and myths. This then culminates in his imagining himself as the reincarnation of Lord Krishna. Trying to get to the essence of the god’s being, to embody him, he exhibits a rather reductive notion of Krishna, centering on alleged habits and appearance only – “1. *Blue Skin*, 2. *Show-off*, 3. *Flutist*, 4. *Butter eater*, 5. *Girlfriend*” (BB 44) – instead of his relevance in Hinduism, first and foremost Krishna’s lecture to Arjuna that now forms one of the religion’s central books, the *Bhagavat Gita*.<sup>207</sup> Kiran is drawn to the God not for spiritual reasons. He relates to him because of his visible difference of his blue skin. A simile that further establishes that Kiran in his quest to belong is identifying the wrong aspects as relevant, attributing his outsider status to his skin color and by extension his ethnic background rather than his personality traits.

Kiran, then, takes his task and identification with Krishna a step further:

If I’m going to reclaim Him, if I’m going to assert that the reason I feel so different from everyone is because I am in fact godly, I am going to have to mold my current life after my past life. I’m going to have to mimic His behavior. Somehow, I know that this has something to do with the talent show, this reorganization of my character. (BB 41).

The novel’s culmination point – the talent show – again focuses on issues of transculturation and hybridity in the boy’s rationalization of his act. Describing his intended project, he claims an identitarian need – epitomized in his choice of song “How Will I Know” – to perform his dual-cultural identity, to merge them “so that, again, there is an homage to my Indian self while still paying tribute to my current existence. I simply want the piece to evoke a certain romance mixed with the grandeur of Krishna’s spirit, all the while showing the audience why I deserve both” (BB 169). The wording of this demand for recognition already acknowledges the ‘romance’ of such notions of belonging, as well as the performative quality itself. Furthermore, his exoticizing approach based on his actual cultural ignorance can again at best enforce stereotypes. In a garish costume he made out of a bright pink salwar kameez of his mother and feathers and glitter stolen from the school art class, he dances to a Whitney Houston song in a “part-ballet, part-*khatak*, part-

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<sup>207</sup> The text does reference Hindu mythology and mentions the central battle of the Kurukshetra War that is the scene of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, several times, and Kiran even recalls the story he had hear from his mother many times, as he is compiling this reductive list, in his personal desire to get to the ‘essence’ of Lord Krishna, which he boils down to these five ‘central characteristics’.

bananas technique that I employ” (*BB* 254), his recorder wrapped in tin foil, his face covered in blue eye shadow. He is, ultimately, saved from immediate humiliation from his school mates by passing out from a migraine at the end of his act. Though the reader can anticipate that his intention of making his peers see him as special or precious would not pan out quite the way he envisioned it.

As this climax of his quest demonstrates, a large part of Kiran’s social awkwardness results from his individual non-conformity in terms of child-gender-roles, his love for dressing-up, for dolls, bright colors – first and foremost pink – for performance and especially for ballet. Kiran is keenly aware of his social pariah status, but consciously decides not let that impinge on his actions. Even though he at one point explicitly mentions that his default approach was to expect negative reactions, he does not or cannot compromise in his mode of being.<sup>208</sup> Almost to the contrary, he regards his difference as a form of superiority that makes him special and is simply misunderstood by his peers and society at large, as they lack the capacity to recognize his greatness. Except for the mother’s unconditional love – which in its *being* unconditional is equally problematic – he hardly finds social acceptance.

The ‘failure’ of ethnicity as a stabilizing factor for Kiran is unsurprising, as his ‘otherness’ is less a cultural than a queer one, which is further complicated by the sexual awakening of the young protagonist. Already the very first episode, “Kiran Being Wronged by Two Cold-Hearted Snakes” (*BB* 12) culminates in sexual embarrassment as the girls, talking about Barbie and Ken, conclude that Ken was missing ‘something’ and that Kiran should show ‘it’ to them. The embarrassment then however is again diverted from a purely sexual one to a cultural one, as Kiran reflects that he was, in that respect Americanized:

“John Griffin . . . said yours looks like an elephant.”

“It does not!” I say, knowing what they mean. I had my traumatic ‘naked father’ moment years ago, at which point I realized there was a certain flesh-related discrepancy between my father’s privates and mine. Apparently, the only thing I got as first-generation Indian was *forethought*.

(*BB* 17)

The subsequent development of the narrative repeatedly hints at other people’s perception of Kiran as possibly gay. In school and in the Indian community his peers tease him about his ‘oddities’ and frequently call him by derogatory terms referring to homosexuality. Yet, his sexual development is just beginning, he is confused in his gender-role and even though there is a decided leaning in his strong feminine traits and attraction (also) to male bodies he sees in porn magazines, the novel rather stresses the ambiguity and non-categorization of this sexuality. In addition, given

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<sup>208</sup> “When someone motions to strike you, when someone throws something at you, you flinch or wince. But I have *always* felt that something is being hurled at me, so I guess I could say that I have lived my life in a perpetual flinch.” (*BB*, 111).

his age, the text does not explicitly differentiate in his attraction to any body whether this attraction was a sexual in nature or one fed on a desire of emulation.

Admittedly, the novel does offer various scenes that would allow for a decidedly gay-coming-of-age reading and interpretation. Kiran is initially intrigued by the naked female body he sees in the *Playboy* magazines at his friend Cody's house, as reiterated repeatedly in "the universal intrigue of a tit" (BB 46) and then his thirst to learn "how sex works" (BB 48) which results in his buying/stealing an issue of *Penthouse*. Aware of the impermissibility of his act, the boy ponders whether he should even venture into the bookstore on this quest, weighing his options. "I think the choice is clear: Tits tits tits" (BB 53). Once he actually sees images of the sexual act – *Playboy* had not offered that but was focused mostly on the portrayal of the semi-clad female body – his interest decidedly shifts towards the male part, both in the magazine and in his attention towards adults. Furthermore, when he observes three adolescents in the park, two boys and a girl, he emphasizes first her androgynous features and then her passivity. "The girl's body acts as a vessel for its lovers" (BB 163). This encounter is followed by an explicitly homoerotic dream about the park ranger who had caught him twice spying on people. However, these sexual encounters are not the essence of his quest.

The story's focus is on the boy's profound experience of difference in all areas of life, none of them fitting into categories. While the initial parts may be constantly juxtaposing established frames of social classifications, the novel increasingly emphasizes the boy's experience of individuality as an outsider.

I look at the SS candle in my room, I focus on the blue of its flame and make a connection to my own life: I am like that flame. I may not be as normal or confident as the other kids I know, but I feel things much more intensely than they do. I *burn* more intensely than they do. Haven't John Griffin and his goons called me a "flamer" before? I know what they mean by that – a boy who is so sissy that he is "flaming gay." Perhaps I am, just not in the way that they think. They have no idea what sort of emotional flood rages in my every day, how alternately high and subtle my sexuality can be. Like a fire that works and rages to provide a glow but whose efforts are invisible to us, I struggle secretly but powerfully. (BB 244)

Yet, at the same time, this awareness of singularity produces a desire for collectivity, hoping or yearning for others like him, of "other 'flamers' who have the same sexual desires I do, just not overtly. I am the figurehead of a secret, sacred brotherhood of blue flame souls – the first blue boy" (BB 244). Kiran has learned to transpose his experience of difference from culture to sexuality. But again, a simplified reading of an emerging gay-identity would be too reductive here. His self-apprehension, of course, is increasingly queer, as this passage emphasizes, but not a form of 'queerness' to be categorized. His identity-idea is still firmly steeped in the re-incarnation myth. 'The first blue boy' is ambiguous as it simultaneously means the leader of the brotherhood, re-

emphasizing the god-like status, but also the first in terms of sequence, the first, but not the only one, re-emphasizing the need for community his queerness and exclusion created.

Especially in this context we need to take into account the protagonist's age and the short time span of merely a few months that the narrative covers. At the age of twelve the boy would be just on the brink of adolescence or as the renowned early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan defined it in his interpersonal theory: at the outset of early adolescence.<sup>209</sup> While preadolescence was characterized by a need for a single best friend<sup>210</sup> and the child's experience of intimacy with others, early adolescence sets in with the emergence of a lust dynamism. For Sullivan this was also the stage of a shift from same-sex intimacy to include (a lust for) intimacy with the opposite sex. Consequently, "the early adolescent was confronted with a confusing double standard for men and women concerning the expression of lust. With these conflicts, a new kind of social awkwardness entered relationships with others" (Evans 120). In Kiran's case, while there is a growing awareness of the sexual body of the other sex and a lust element, the female body loses or changes in its sex-appeal once Kiran has witnessed the male body in sexual action in the pages of *Penthouse*. What previously was perceived as 'tits' turns into objects of ripe beauty. Yet that does not automatically form a same-sex lust dynamism. On the contrary, the scene of this revelation is conjoined with another one, that of his religious quest. "I braid my physical desires with this vision of godlike beauty. My fascination is becoming a real quest: a quest to find and live up to my lost Krishna self" (*BB* 58). Kiran's lack of any intimacy is compensated in his identity formation with his alter-ego-idea.

The religious paintings are ordaining me to be this glowing man of lust. Perhaps, I think, it is not a question of getting affection from other people, being desired, but understanding the pull of our own desires that should fuel us. . . . The path of smut has led me to a higher level of edification than I could have ever imagined. From this moment onward, I will not discount lust as an extraordinary force. I will let it grip my body and lead me the rest of the way.

This is all an elegant way of saying that I start jerking off like it's my job. (*BB* 58f.)

The adult narrative voice's humorous comment here already adds perspective to the child's epiphany in his identity quest, highlighting the psychological mechanisms the scene is suffused with. In the absence of close social ties, the boy turns inwards, justifying this turn as a metaphysically superior approach. The turn from female to male to metaphysical bodies to lust after simply emphasizes the early stages of the boy's sexual development. While there is a clear element of queerness, his sexual identity is far from formed. To read *Blue Boy* as a homosexual

<sup>209</sup> Cf. F. Barton Evans, *Harry Stack Sullivan: Interpersonal Theory and Psychotherapy*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), esp. chapter 5 "Developmental Epochs of Childhood through Adolescence: The Expansion of the Interpersonal World."

<sup>210</sup> This relationship, too, had not been realized satisfactorily as the friendship of Kiran and Cody is one of convenience rather than intimacy.



coming of age narrative would omit many of the sexual ambiguities the text holds and largely disregard its core characteristic, the humorous and ironic take on the boy's insecurities.

Furthermore, the boy's self-perception forecloses such an exclusive approach. Even though Kiran is repeatedly portrayed as aware of his friends' idea of him as a 'sissy' a 'flamer' and 'gay,' when alone he is utterly untroubled by these categorizations or social stigma these carry in the communities he belongs to. He may occasionally be afraid of being detected because he knows of these acts of categorizations, but whenever he feels safe in his solitariness he very unselfconsciously puts on make-up, plays with dolls or dances and sings. Kiran also has no clear idea of what 'being gay' actually means, until a homoerotic dream about the park ranger brings the homosexual act to his consciousness – a very Freudian move in terms of textual strategy. Yet even here and even though he feels he has to choose between “conformity or delectable deformity” (*BB* 204), his identity is not being defined. He rather once again chooses a third path by reinforcing his desire to become Krishna. In the end, this novel of identity formation then highlights not a reconciliation with society by growing into or – as Kiran put it – conforming to social roles and categories. Rather, through his path of fantasies of the divine, the boy develops an awareness for alternatives, individual agency, choices, and the distinction between internal and external apprehension of the self. Identity in the psychological sense is experience, in the social sense it is performance.

The frequently explicit focus on sexuality stands in sharp contrast to Kiran's otherwise prominent child-ness, a feature that further emphasizes the coming-of-age element in an additional splitting of the central character. Although, the sexuality in the story is used to emphasize the 'otherness' or queerness of Kiran, these episodes are also the parts least embarrassing, or rather versions of embarrassment familiar to everyone. It is more in the focus on his child-characteristics, his innocent and naive approach to his peers and social environment that touch the reader, evoking pity, shame, laughter and indignation at the same time.

The main source of humor in *Blue Boy*, then, stems from this discrepancy between adult awareness and child experience and perception of the world. As Alicia Otano pointed out in *Speaking the Past*, the child perspective offers the impression of a certain freshness, innocence, naïveté and unpremeditated perception. A child's approach to the world around him/her can – under these premises – result in a peculiar humor and simultaneously offers a frame for social criticism through the dramatic irony created between a child character's cognition and adult reader's awareness.

Representing the child's consciousness as it 'tells' us about events becomes a skillful means of presenting irony. The ignorance or freedom from preconceived notions, which the child figure

represents through his or her presentation of events, many times serves to shed an ironic light on behavior or institutions which are normally taken for granted. (Otano 12).

In a humorous way, the narrative presentation in *Blue Boy*, makes the reader only too keenly aware of the child's social oddities and often anticipates disasters which Kiran walks into with open eyes and yet unseeing. This naiveté has the effect of hilariousness with a high cringe factor, but it also makes the reader to some extent complicit in the exclusion and bullying the boy suffers from, as the readers' anticipation of these reactions from other members of the social signifies a reinforcement of what is considered to be the 'norm.' While we may side with and pity the boy, our anticipation or at least lack of surprise at the same time reiterates that these social behaviors are common and widely established.

The cringe factor of the child's outlook on and participation in the social is, for one, rooted in his no longer quite age-appropriate and not generally regarded to be gender-appropriate infatuation with the doll Strawberry Shortcake and her friends.

For several years, I have been in love with Strawberry Shortcake. Whoever created that ragamuffin princess knew exactly what they were doing. [ . . . ] I like everything about her. Her wacky sense of style, those green-and-white-striped leggings, that fit snugly around her toes, and all the way up around her tiny waist. [ . . . ] This I what I do many weekend afternoons in my bed: pull my pink blanket all around myself and look at the light pastel tent it makes around me, all the while munching on a little treat I've brought to enjoy [ . . . ] I lie in my bed with SS on one side and my sweet treat on the other, and I think about marriage. (*BB* 60f.)

Kiran had discussed the matter of marriage with his mother that day, and not for the first time one may assume. His mother, as a typical representative of the American-Indian diaspora, naturally told him her rules for choosing a wife: she must treat the parents well, be Indian, a good cook, pretty, and ideally a well-educated Punjabi of a family they already know and like. Kiran continues to match his dolls traits with his mother's list and she only comes up short on the issue of being Indian: "Even though I know SS is perfect in almost every other way, I know this is a big flaw of hers." (*BB* 62).

However, the boy is not completely ignorant of society's frowning upon his infatuation with dolls, not least because his father makes it explicitly known. Yet, the dolls provide him with an emotional safety blanket, he is, for once, not ostracized in their midst:

Of course I know that SS is only a doll. And I know that I shouldn't even be playing with dolls in the first place - not just because I'm a boy, but because I'm probably getting too old to play with dolls anyway. But this is my fantasy, and I wrap myself in it like I do my pink blanket, leaving reality and maturity behind. (*BB* 62)

Strawberry Shortcake, accordingly reappears in one form or another throughout the novel. Even while Kiran reflects on being a 'flamer' and states that he would like to be the first 'blue boy', these reflections come while looking into the flame of his SS candle. The permanent presence of

this childish marker within other contexts provides humor and at the same time serves as a constant reminder of the boy's naivete, young age and unfinished development.

The primary source of humor, however, lies in the irony created by the adult voice and in the matter of fact presentation of the child's actions. That is to say, Kiran's general lack of awareness of how he is perceived by his peers, teachers or other adults. This is most obvious in his descriptions of his artistic endeavors, in particular in his recollection of his past talent show contributions, which he approaches via a sweeping dismissal of the performances of his peers for lacking real artistry (most of them are just lip-syncing to pop songs).

The talent show is a big deal. An enormous deal. And not just because it allows me the opportunity to show my worth to the rest of the school. It also allows me the opportunity to erase all of my past wrongs. I am the reigning king of the fall talent show, having successfully executed three routines, in third, fourth, and fifth grades. . . . My past routines, in chronological order, were as follows

1) **Third grade** – a rousing rendition of ‘Do Your Ears Hang Low?,” that old classic, which I sang in three variations: regular, staccato, and adagio.

2) **Fourth grade** – a rousing rendition of Dionne Warwick's “I'll Never Love This Way Again,” a touching ballad;

3) **Fifth grade** -

You know, fifth grade is too epic for me to tack onto a numbered list. (*BB 79*)

This introduction to the then following detailed recollection of his fifth-grade performance makes the reader sharply aware of the disparity between self-awareness and other's perception. From the narrator's (irony creating) choice of adjectives like ‘enormous,’ ‘rousing’ or ‘touching’ and his claim of being the ‘reigning king’ of the show, the reader can only draw the conclusion of him being an awkward kid and the laughing stock of the school – especially given that Kiran's outsider status at school and in the Indian community is firmly established at this point of the novel. Kiran sings himself, while his peers lip-sync, and his choice of both artists and song titles is highly age and gender inappropriate. The text continues with a detailed description of Kiran's fifth grade performance, which cannot but evoke a flinch in the reader as well as amusement over the garishness of it all. In fifth grade he had decided to take an age-appropriate source and yet again an inappropriate scene: the love song of Sebastian the crab from Disney's *Ariel* movie.

My Eric and Ariel . . . were Eric Banner and Lindsay Bailey, the two fattest kids on our class. . . . Eric, a wisp of a mullet curling off the nape of his neck . . . sweated so badly that twin circles of perspiration tainted the fabric under his arms. This sight was deflected somewhat by Lindsay's getup: since she didn't own a red wig, she took a fringed cheerleading skirt – an oddity, since I don't think Lindsay ever cheered in her life due to cellulite reasons – and put it on her nappy, dirty-blond tangles. Instead of Ariel's stately navy blue dress, Lindsay put on what looked like a cassock . . . Still, the way I place Eric and Lindsay center stage, each perched on one knee, and told them to stare at each other unmoving and unflinching, was as masterly a situation as could be staged.

As for me, in order to look like the crab-crimson Sebastian, I donned the best and smoothest of my red sweatsuits. But the kicker was the enormous red beanbag I used for a crab shell. . . . I set up shop upstage right, prostrating myself stomach-down on the dusty floor, flipping the beanbag onto my back, and then taking up the microphone. . . . There was no accompaniment – how else could the audience really hear me? – but this made for a dramatic effect, and the stunned looks on the parents' faces after I finished singing told me – at least at the time, that they had just witnessed a piece of theater better and

more moving than anything they had ever seen.

Like all great artists, however, my genius was not justly greeted by my peers. (*BB* 80f.)

This episode is then followed by similar events, like a misguided costume choice for History Day, or a misunderstanding in art class. While Kiran is immovably convinced of his artistic talent in all fields, the oddity of his frequent exhibitions is the actual cause of his social pariah status. Kiran is caught between the constant exterior experience of apparent inferiority, as he is treated like a lesser member in his social circles, and a simultaneously interior experience of being misrecognized, when in his own opinion he was actually superior to the rest of his peers.<sup>211</sup>

While the final act of self-humiliation in front of his peers, the 6<sup>th</sup> grad talent show and his impersonation of Krishna, would result in isolation, it was the catastrophe that led to Kiran's reevaluation of his situation and the importance he attributed to certain factors in his life. Thus, the novel clearly ends with a reconciliation of hero and the social around him, first in his self-definition, and then in the final image at the temple he and his parents had avoided for a month after he had embarrassed them among their Indian peers. The pundit presents him with a set of cymbals to join the musical performance during the prayers, thus acknowledging him as a member of the community.

I don't exactly have any friends . . . but I have realized just how much more I know than they do. What do these bullies know of lust, of sex, of the fine line between divinity and depravity? It would be one thing if they knew what I felt and could understand it and then made fun of it. But they do not have the ability to empathize with what I feel, and that makes them completely meaningless. I live in a kingdom of one. . . . I know that I will never be like them, and now I don't even want to be. I am not meant for basketball, just as they are not meant to dance and dress up. My imagination is for creating my own private world, and I'm wasting it if I try to be a part of theirs.

Why have I felt it so necessary for us to be the same? What is it about that confining, brick fortress of a school that has made me believe it is the only place that exists? I only go to this school because my parents happened to come to America, to move to Ohio, just happened to build a particular house in a particular area of this town and send me to the closest school. If any one of those steps had not happened, I would be somewhere else. (*BB* 263f.)

The text ends with this optimistic proclamation of being an island of one, no longer either seeking belonging in collective identities nor perceiving their normativizing discursive frames as lasting. He rather sees his current existence as a stage that will pass but does not define him. The awareness of individualization and the agency that comes with it has been reached through the previous experience of not only social ostracism throughout the plot, but moreover a general precarity of his existence. The novel ends with his awareness of both fragility but also transitoriness of his current state.

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<sup>211</sup> This dichotomy, in an ironic way, recalls a central aspect of postcolonial criticism, of the complexity of the colonial inferiority complex as well as scholarship in the vein of Partha Chatterjee's thesis formulated at the outset of *The Nation and Its Fragments* about the spiritual superiority of the colonized.

As the introduction to the collection *Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature* emphasizes, “[t]he relative inarticulateness of children makes any representation of their consciousness necessarily a tentative and fundamentally artificial construction of adult writers and audiences” (Goodenough et. al. 3). Especially in the case of an ostensible child voice an awareness of syntax and vocabulary and whether and in how far they may differ from adult characters serves well in the analysis of such text.<sup>212</sup> Such a discrepancy between focalizer character and narrative language is very marked in Satyal’s novel, where it also serves as the dominant indicator for the narrative distance in the text that is a common feature of the novel of formation. Contrary to Dawesar’s *babyji*, where the narrative distance is explicitly marked, *Blue Boy* is almost devoid of such markers. On the contrary, it employs several narrative strategies that would suggest a certain immediacy, like the use of present tense and the use of frequent contractions.

The use of the present tense suggests a simultaneity of discourse and narrative level, which would technically preclude narrative distance. Furthermore, a present tense narrative seemingly forecloses an editorial dimension as well as a definitive labeling for example of Kiran’s sexual identity, as this narrative tense is necessarily undetermined. The present tense foregrounds the processual, ongoing nature of events and precludes fixedness. The novel thus enforces its emphasis on the ambiguity of identity even grammatically.

The frequent use of contractions adds to such a sense of immediacy, as contractions evoke spoken language rather than written text, which again suggests the absence of an editorial process. The impression of spoken language and a loosely narrated text is further emphasized through the frequent analepsis as the focalizer character in order to give ‘accurate’ depiction of his current situation and motive frequently ventures into memory narratives. The oral narrative style is enforced through incomplete sentences or utterances divided by full stops regardless of their grammatical correctness.<sup>213</sup>

At the same time, however, the narrative distance in this text is undeniable in the use of vocabulary as well as reflections and an analysis of situations and plot developments that do not align with the naiveté of the child focalizer the novel depicts. The elaborate vocabulary is not only beyond a twelve-year old boy’s capacities, even one who takes extra language lessons, but furthermore uncharacteristic of spoken discourse, which also holds for the abundance of literary

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<sup>212</sup> For a linguistically focused study on child narrators cf. Mary Jane Hurst, *The Voice of the Child in American Literature: Linguistic Approaches to Fictional Child Language*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), but also Otano offers a linguistic focus in her analysis of child vs. adult speech act characteristics.

<sup>213</sup> Cf. for example: “The one true redemption of temple is that it is full of colors, fragrances, and flames. In short, theater. Which Christians have, yes, with their rosaries and wine and candles and Nativities” (*BB* 22).

tropes used, especially alliterations and similes.<sup>214</sup> Moreover, the discourse frequently includes metatextual commentary, for example concerning descriptions on the plot level. When Kiran is first exposed to – though yet unaware of – the maliciousness of Sarah and Melissa, he feels pride and embarrassment when they seemingly praise his smartness: “I ‘blush.’ That’s in quotes because the only blush I can get is from the sun’s reflection off my red sweatsuit” (*BB* 16). Even though this is also a reference to his darker skin that marks him as culturally other, the reference to the textual component of quotation marks is a metadiscursive comment as well as a signifier for the ironic distance between narrative and plot. This particular reflection and self-awareness is suggestive of an adult consciousness rather than that of a twelve-year-old.

The narrator’s commenting style is suffused with irony, enhancing the impression of distance.<sup>215</sup> While studies on child voices in literature frequently mention the humorous aspects and dramatic and situational irony these texts are often shaped by, the comical characteristic of this narrative mode invites a closer look. Irony, as an intellectual capacity, is commonly outside the child’s realm, especially if the focalizer character is of a very young age. Seeing as the text portrays Kiran as naïve, with a lack of apprehension of people’s reactions to him, the probability of irony *in* the focalizer character is rather limited. Irony is necessarily commentarial, which requires a broader understanding of social and ideological contexts. Irony can only be situated in this dramatic distance of narration and interpretation, as Otano put it, in the dual perspective of an adult narrator and a child focalizer.<sup>216</sup>

Another effect of both the irony of tone and the present tense narrative is a general unreliability of the narrator. The text ridicules the boy’s artistic outpourings and his mishaps in social interactions, but it also subscribes to the general self-image of Kiran as being extraordinary, if misunderstood. An overtly sympathetic self-assessment by the child is especially palpable in passages describing other people’s reactions to his artistic output or other expressions of genius. The boy obviously has a strong artistic leaning and most likely some talent, but any such reference to his artistic performance reeks of embellishment, thus immediately subverting the content of any

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<sup>214</sup> Cf. for example Kiran’s experience of crossing a road: “Black holes of expectorated gum dot the surface, along with one particularly pronounced scuff of car wheels” (*BB* 157), or his description of the three teenagers in the park as resembling “a human calliope” (*BB* 160).

<sup>215</sup> To give just a few examples of such commentaries: Kiran looks at the bookstore through its shop window to find out where *Penthouse* could be found. “The magazines are all at its entrance, arranged like an arsenal on one wall-hugging rack. (No pun intended.)” (*BB* 52). Kiran in his attempt to embody Krishna decides to eat pure butter. “Surprise of surprises – well, I guess the surprise of surprises would be if my current behavior were considered sane – but surprise of surprises, it tastes good” (*BB* 72). Or, when going to the library to learn more about Krishna he observes: “The librarians are so stereotypically librarian that they may have singlehandedly given rise to the stereotype” (*BB* 99).

<sup>216</sup> Cf. Otano p. 15.

such statement. Examples abound throughout the text. There are the depictions of Kiran at the temple “I ring and clang with a virtuosity never before heard in these parts” (*BB* 25) or his opinion on why he has extra-curricular one-on-one language teaching, when in fact – as can be deduced from Melissa and Sarah’s comment at the beginning of the text – he may receive additional classes because his language level was sub-par due to his ethnic background: “I started studying with Mrs. Goldberg because other teachers didn’t have time to teach me. At least that is the reason I was given. In truth, I think it’s because they just don’t know enough to be able to teach me advanced language arts” (*BB* 106). Then there is his elaborate temporal gap of the moment of showing Mrs. Goldberg his paintings. In his anticipation of her reaction the narrative suddenly shifts to future tense “In a few seconds I will find out that Mrs. Goldberg loves the drawings. Her face will break into a proud smile and she will embrace me . . . telling me how creative they are and how sophisticated the artistry is even though I am so young. (‘So young!’ she exclaims over and over, as if proclaiming herself equally young with each squeal)” (*BB*, 111). The sincerity of the child’s descriptions of his actions juxtaposed with the irony and ridicule that suffuse the narrative tone leave no room for objectivity or reliability of the narrative.

Discrepancies of perception have also been one of the dominant motives throughout the writing process, as the author states in an interview. “What I wanted to play with was the discrepancy among what we wish to be true, what we want to be true, and what must remain pure fantasy to keep us on our toes.”<sup>217</sup> The epilogue at the temple emphasizes that Kiran cannot escape social norms and frames, but he has agency over his attitudes towards them, or as the final sentence has it “[s]ometimes we are so consumed by the flame, burning so painfully in its heat, that we can’t see the utter gorgeousness of the fire” (*BB* 265). In the end, then, Kiran not only – in true Bildungsroman fashion – finds a mode of reconciliation with the social and thus between what he wants to be real and what is generally accepted as real, but he also accepts the fantastical. He recognizes its unreality while at the same time emphasizing that his extravagant imaginations were essential for his identity formation. Through them, he found the strength and perseverance on which to base his identity formations.

Despite the dominating presence of conventional motives, themes and images of ethnic literature, Satyal’s novel emphasizes the limits of an ethnic reading and ethnicity-based reader expectations through the subversiveness of parody. At first glance, *Blue Boy* seems steeped in

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<sup>217</sup> “Our Parents’ Capacity for Understanding Is Actually Much Bigger Than We Might Think at First,” interview with Nate Brown for the *L-Magazine*, August 24, 2009. <<http://www.themagazine.com/gyrobase/our-parents-capacity-for-understanding-is-actually-much-bigger-than-we-might-think-at-first/Content?oid=1244527&showFullText=true>>

tropes of negotiations of cultural differences and recognition discourses, but at a closer look the text in fact ridicules and transcends these in form, style, and even the final plot development.

Kiran's quest grinds against the two dominating models of collective identity formation that are also prominently represented in literature as outlined above in the discussion of the genre: gender and culture/ethnicity. The identity he establishes for himself is a singular one that does not preclude the possibility of collectivity, of others like him, but it is not an identity based on or formed from any identitarian collectivity. Nor does it, as the final scene shows, bar him from other forms of belonging or participation. It furthermore acknowledges both society as such and his position in it as temporary. Reconciliation does not mean adaptation to existing norms and standards so much as the realization of these as just that: established codes – ritualized, observed, constructed in a specific context. Which means, the individual has the agency to comply, to rebel and refuse participation or simply to select different contexts or different set-ups. There is no teleological causality. Life is an accumulation of situations, spaces, and collectivities, mostly by chance and circumstance.

The texts discussed above challenge or move beyond certain expectations or frames of diasporic literature, however, ethnicity is still a driving force of the storytelling. This may be inevitable in the case of historiographic fiction set on the South Asian subcontinent and/or dealing with historical events of the region. It may be employed as a tool that serves a booming market niche, as in the case of much of Divakaruni's fiction, or it may be blatantly toyed with, simultaneously feeding into and subverting reader's expectations, as in Satyal's *Blue Boy*. However, if Satyal's treatment of the topic is any indicator, ethnicity is clearly losing its status as *the* dominant concern in the writing of authors of ethnic background.

This development becomes even more obvious in a selection of recent fiction by writers of South Asian heritage where ethnicity seems to no longer play any particular role anymore at all. In some texts, ethnicity may be altogether absent, without being significant through that very absence,<sup>218</sup> or it may be relegated to the realm of an insignificant feature hardly more relevant than hair colors or clothes a character wears, or it may be brought up only to show the limitations of an ethnicity-based interpretation of a character's actions, desires or character traits. The development is, for example, evident in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction that moved from a diasporic imaginary in her first collection of stories towards a new globalized cosmopolitanism in her main

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<sup>218</sup> That is to say, in contrast to a postcolonial reading of certain texts of the Empire that shows how the absence of the colonial subject or slavery is significant and relevant for the interpretation of the text, cf. most famously Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, first published in 1993.



characters in her more recent fiction, in Saleema Nawaz's compelling stories of the impossibility of care, or in Abha Dawesar's novels, whether they are, like *babyji*, set in India, or among the cosmopolitan globe-trotting elite of artists, or in a deliberately unspecified location (even if identifiable as India's capital), as will be explored in the subsequent chapters.

## 6 New Cosmopolitanism

One common approach to transcending the ethnicity frame is by embracing a more cosmopolitan perspective, which signifies the intellectual choice to be a ‘citizen of the world’ rather than opt for an ethnicity based ethnic group membership. Cosmopolitanism, as briefly discussed in chapter 3, is of course also a highly contested and not clearly defined term. In fact, it has come to represent almost polar opposite positions. On the one hand there is the citizen of the world approach that celebrates cosmopolitanism as an ethical project, emphasizing human rights, allowing for difference, and offering a corrective to the exclusivist positions of nationalisms and groupisms. This view of cosmopolitanism as an ideal dates back to Stoic philosophy of ancient Greece and can be found in the discussions on ‘new cosmopolitanism’ most prominently represented by Martha C. Nussbaum.<sup>219</sup> On the other hand, cosmopolitanism has met with severe criticism, especially in the times of globalization, on the grounds that it was a project of privilege, primarily found among intellectuals and in academia, and that cosmopolitanism, in practice, masks inequality.<sup>220</sup> Moreover, as a third element to the debate, cosmopolitanism of a different sort also exists on a growing scale at the opposite end of the spectrum of privilege in the form of the most disenfranchised who are forced to migrate and live as ‘citizens of the world’. Homi Bhabha termed this kind of marginal cosmopolitanism of migrant workers and refugees, of people forced into migration by violence and poverty ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’.<sup>221</sup>

While politically engaged literature offers many examples of marginalized characters, struggles of disenfranchisement and the exploitations of migrant workers,<sup>222</sup> examples of ethnic literature that aim to step outside of the ethnicity frame, like the novels discussed in the following, rather embrace Nussbaum’s concept of cosmopolitanism, celebrating mobility and opportunity and enjoying a certain level of privilege.

Cosmopolitanism in this respect presents as a counter project to nationalism, including ethnic nationalism in the form of ethnic collective identity discourses. Where reader expectation may be geared towards an ethnicity focused reading based on initial ethnicity markers, we are met with cosmopolitan characters instead, citizens of the world who come from a certain ethnic

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<sup>219</sup> Cf. Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?*, including her summary of the origins of the term in ancient Greek philosophy, pp. 6-9.

<sup>220</sup> Cf. Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World*, also briefly discussed above in chapter 3. Brennan in particular sees writers and critics of Third World ethnic heritage as complicit in this masking of inequality, as their voices are represented as voices of ‘the other’, while in fact writers like Rushdie, for example, write themselves from a very privileged position.

<sup>221</sup> Cf. Prina Weber, “Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” 497.

<sup>222</sup> A recent example would be Marina Lewycka’s novel *Two Caravans* (2007) about a group of strawberry harvest workers in Great Britain.

background or upbringing, but choose to inhabit the earth wherever opportunity would place them. Such characters, like for example the title personae of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story cycle "Hema and Kaushik"<sup>223</sup> or Abha Dawesar's novel *That Summer in Paris*, would largely fit Kwame Anthony Appiah's definition of a cosmopolitan patriot. "[T]he cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of one's own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people." (Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots" 618). Both, Lahiri and Dawesar in these two texts do not deny their characters a cultural identity or heritage. Their characters simply chose to venture beyond such a frame, not only in terms of their localities or mobility choices, but more importantly with regards to questions of ethics.

## 6.1 Cosmopolitan Detachment

New York based acclaimed short story writer and novelist<sup>224</sup> Jhumpa Lahiri's early fiction would, in a more traditional diasporic way, belong to the above discussed group of the troubled second generation.<sup>225</sup> Both, her first short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), and her first novel *The Namesake* (2003)<sup>226</sup> abound with children of South Asian immigrant parents and their struggle to find their place in-between cultures.<sup>227</sup> But, even though a diasporic imaginary may decidedly shape Lahiri's early fiction, it does not define it.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Sally Dalton-Brown in her 2011 essay on the author calls this second part of *Unaccustomed Earth* a novella, while Bidisha Banerjee in her investigation of Lahiri's work in the 2011 paper "Diaspora's 'Dark Room'" talks of a 'long story' and a 'three-part story.' However, given the three distinct narrative modes and perspectives of the three parts of "Hema and Kaushik" I rather opt for calling it as a short story cycle.

<sup>224</sup> Among the prizes and awards she received are, for example, the PEN/Hemingway Award 1999 for her first short story collection for which she also received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000, furthermore, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002 and in February 2010 she was appointed a member of the Committee on the Arts and Humanities by U.S.-president Obama.

<sup>225</sup> Lahiri's biography, too, could be counted into this group as she was born in 1967 to Bengali-Indian parents in London and grew up in Rhode Island. After receiving a B.A. in English literature from Barnard College, she continued her education at Boston University and earned master's degrees in English, Creative Writing and Comparative Literature as well as a PhD in Renaissance studies. For further biographical information see the biographical entry on "Jhumpa Lahiri" in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 282. Detroit: Gale, 2010, accessed via Literature Resource Center Online (<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1125670000&v=2.1&u=fub&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w> Aug. 5, 2010).

<sup>226</sup> This novel has also been made into a film by famous South-Asian North-American filmmaker Mira Nair, released in 2006.

<sup>227</sup> In this peculiar focus, she is also a prime example for the heterogeneity of what is commonly referred to by the shorthand 'South Asian' or 'Indian' diaspora in critical scholarship. The diasporic groups depicted in her fiction are largely if not exclusively Indian-Bengali of upper-class educated élite background. The social matrix of her characters is consequently a rather specific one, so the reader might be well advised not to read these as representative for a South-Asian diaspora in general.

<sup>228</sup> Take for example her most famous book to date *The Namesake* - at first glance a prototypical ethnic Bildungsroman. Yet the conclusion the protagonist and the social around him - in particular his nuclear family - reach at the end is more complex. While the protagonist, who had rejected his ethnic background growing up,

Moreover, her later work is increasingly leaving the ethnicity framework behind, even though it too is populated with immigrant Bengalis. Characters are depicted in an increasingly more cosmopolitan mode of existence and state of mind. Their struggles are no longer dominated by finding a cultural identity but rather by creating or claiming a place for themselves in a chaotic contemporary world.<sup>229</sup> The short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* and especially the short story cycle “Hema and Kaushik” that forms the larger part of the book, exemplifies how Lahiri departs from traditional diasporic writing towards a more individualists, highly mobile globalized existence. These stories show hardly any residue of cultural collective identities, or, if featured in a story, notions of cultural collectivity serve as a phenomenon to be criticized for limiting the individual. That is not to say that shared cultural heritage is regarded as irrelevant or derisory in social interaction. Lahiri’s continued characterization of personae as South Asian ethnics would already attest to the contrary. But, these stories caution against assumptions made about individuals’ value systems or conduct based on geographical origins. If her stories call ethnicity into question, they don’t do so to negate collectivity due to shared cultural heritage, but to challenge the assumption of collective *identity*. Ethnicity is just one feature of the characters populating her stories and the traditional assumptions about them that this feature stimulates are just as often right as they are wrong. This way the ethnic heritage is kept meaningful in her fiction without becoming the determining angle for meaning creation.

The collection’s title is taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House” with the respective passage forming the epigraph to the text:

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long in a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Hawthorne 14 / *UE* front matter)

This epigraph already places a value on cultural as well as geographical mobility – an aspect that is taken up in various ways in the first part of the story collection, and that forms the constant undercurrent of the second part, the short story cycle “Hema and Kaushik,” which comprises the three individual stories “Once in a Lifetime,” “Year’s End” and “Going Ashore.” All three stories are suffused with tropes of individualism and social detachment emphasized through a preoccupation with distance and death.<sup>230</sup> This topic is not only dominating the plots of the three

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reconnects with this identity, other members of the family progress towards a more transnational identity, in particular the mother figure, which is especially significant, as mothers are conventionally revered as the keeper of traditions, upholding the cultural superiority in a foreign and often hostile environment.

<sup>229</sup> Vijay Mishra in his evaluation of Lahiri’s work in the context of a ‘new diasporic imaginary’ in Indian diasporic literature also noted that the binary of ‘here’ and ‘there’ “in recent times no longer confines the aesthetic to a poetics constrained by the politics of identity and recognition” (Mishra 2007, 191).

<sup>230</sup> Sally Dalton-Brown calls “Hema and Kaushik” “a meditation on death and displacement, and on whether love can provide the means to survive a life beset by accidents” (Dalton-Brown 341). While I agree on the centrality of

stories, but is also the driving force of the narrative voices, the style and narrative mode, as well as informing language and imagery.

The title of the short story cycle, “Hema and Kaushik,” rings of the tragic love stories of world literature like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tristan and Iseult*, or *Layla and Majnoon* from the South Asian cultural context, and like these, Lahiri’s tale does not have a romantic happy ending. However, while each of these tragedies from past centuries resulted in the lovers’ separation, isolation and, ultimately, death due to some external force, fate or malevolence, Lahiri’s lovers are clearly a couple of late modernity and the age of globalization – not only in their migratory lifestyles and their careers, but also because of their lack of (a desire for) identification with traditional social groups and their execution of a freedom of choice. Their story, like the tragedies of yore, ends in separation and death, but it is brought about by free choice based on the rational weighing of options. Even though Kaushik tragically dies in the end in the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, and thus by a fateful external force, this happens after the lover’s separation. Death simply added finality to the previous decision to sever their bond.

The three narratives, which make up this cycle tell the story of two children from migrant South Asian families. “Once in a Lifetime” focuses on the two families who had once been closely acquainted in Cambridge, in a typical South Asian diasporic community of academics, until Kaushik’s family moved to Bombay for professional reasons in 1974. Seven years later, they return to Cambridge, and initially stay with Hema’s family, but, this spatial proximity only serves to emphasize their actual distance from each other. Whereas they had shared a typical diasporic friendship in the 1970s, bonded by shared heritage, the family’s return (from the homeland into the diaspora) brings their actual (social, economic, personal) differences to the fore and they are unable to rekindle their old closeness. The distance, then, is further aggravated by Kaushik’s parents keeping the reason for their return – the mother’s terminal illness of breast cancer and her desire to die in isolation – a secret. “Once in a Lifetime” is set around Hema’s memory of

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accidents or rather the uncontrollability of life as being highlighted in the text, I do not see love to be as purposive as she positions it. Love and friendship, too, are very much accidental. This is emphasized in a different way in each story. In the first one the forced friendships within the diaspora prove to be unsustainable over geographical distance, time, and difference in economic status. In contrast, in the second story, an unexpected closeness emerges out of the father’s second and arranged marriage, the bond itself however serves other purposes for both parties – economic stability for the widowed mother of two children, basic companionship for the father left alone after Kaushik went off to follow his career. The emerging closeness between the couple is purely accidental and not the focus of the text which focuses on Kaushik’s struggle with the new family situation and dynamics. The third story, finally, does a double take in this regard. First Hema and Kaushik are reunited by accident and a passionate love relationship develops. Yet that does not form the resolution of the story. On the contrary, the individual life plans of both Hema and Kaushik outweigh their feelings for each other, and they decide to instead follow their separate goals in the end. Love in Lahiri’s short story cycle is not intended to mend anything, or even to last. It is simply another component of life, just like death; and given the text’s overall detached and emotionally restrained narrative, it can hardly be considered the central driving force or focus.

Kaushik's family's departure from Cambridge in the 1970s and their return in 1981. The story ends with their moving out of her family's home after a few weeks, having found and bought a place of their own.

The second story, "Year's End," set in 1986/87, a few years after the mother's death, tells of Kaushik's first encounter with his father's new wife by arranged marriage, a traditional Indian woman, widowed with two young girls. Kaushik is astonished by his father's decision, and even more by the choice of bride as the new wife was different from his mother in every way. Kaushik makes a short-lived attempt to join in the Christmas celebrations and even develops some fondness for the little girls. However, when he finds them looking at hidden pictures of his mother, he loses control and airs his frustration at their presence and the illusion of normalcy they represented. He flees the house, taking the photographs with him, and drives north along the coast where he eventually buries these last mementos.

"Going Ashore," the final part, is set in Hema and Kaushik's adult life, when they meet by pure chance while both are temporarily living in Rome. For a limited time, before Kaushik is to take a new job in Hong Kong and Hema is to travel to India to get married, they enjoy an intense love affair. When Kaushik in the end asks her to join his future, Hema refuses. While she travels to Calcutta to get married, Kaushik takes a holiday in Thailand before taking up his new position as a photo editor, leaving behind his turbulent life as a war photographer. During this holiday, he vanishes in the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.

This plot is rather conventional and especially the (at times even stereo-)typical sketch of the families as an ethnic enclave or diasporic community at the beginning of their acquaintance is hardly innovative, neither is Lahiri's use of memory narratives by frequent analepsis into moments prior to the chronological strand of narrative to provide further background information or introduce characters. What renders this short story cycle of interest for the present consideration is its narrative mode and style, which enforce the theme of individualization as (emotional) distance and detachment.

The first two of the three stories that comprise "Hema and Kaushik" function as mirror narratives, as far as the mode of presentation is concerned. Both, "Once in a Lifetime" and "Year's End," are told by a homodiegetic narrative voice with internal focalization – the former from Hema's perspective, the latter through Kaushik. Furthermore, both narratives are distinctly addressed at one singular 'you,' the respective other of the title and they are both memory narratives, relating very personal experiences of the two narrators' pasts. The rather intimate form is further supported on the linguistic level in the frequent use of contractions, implying informality if not spoken language. As a consequence of this narrative situation in both stories, one might

ironically expect the invocation of a certain closeness, possibly even positioning the reader as an intruder to such intimacy. This, however, is decidedly not the case. Quite on the contrary, the possibility of emotional closeness remains deliberately unrealized and the discursive level and narrative style sharply contradict the intimacy of address.

The narrative discourse of the first two stories is clearly placed at a large temporal distance from the events narrated. Both voices are decidedly detached from the events related, characterized by a high degree of critical reflection on the situations and actions, and in their choice of words and metaphors predominantly relying on terminology from the realm of rationality rather than emotions, resulting in a reporting, at times almost journalistic style. This impression is further sustained through fairly straightforward sentence structure and the frequently used short simple sentences. The space created through the temporal distance is used for critical re-evaluation rather than nostalgia. The exact time of narrating remains undefined, but is repeatedly marked throughout the stories, most obviously in the interjection of singular phrases in present tense, switching from story to discourse level.<sup>231</sup>

The third story, “Going Ashore” largely differs in narrative presentation, as it is told by heterodiegetic narrative voice with repeated shifts in focalization from Hema to Kaushik and back. It ends, however, with a last short sequence on Hema’s marriage and months thereafter which are again told in the same fashion as the first story in the cycle, that is with a homodiegetic narrative voice, focalized through Hema, addressed at Kaushik as the specific ‘you’ in the story.

The larger part of this last story is comprised of nine episodes. While the first two recollect the protagonists’ lives as classics scholar and war photographer respectively, the focalization of the following four parts of their time together in Rome focuses on Hema, followed by two episodes on Kaushik’s holiday in Thailand. The end of this part is left open, as it only depicts him overcoming his fear of the ocean, immersing himself in the water, and thus symbolically reconnecting with his mother who had loved the sea. “The sea was as warm and welcoming as a bath. His feet touched the bottom, and so he let go” (*UE* 331). This peaceful image of safety and

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<sup>231</sup> An example of this would be Kaushik’s recollection of his flight from home: “My actions felt spontaneous, almost involuntary, propelled by the adrenaline of a state of emergency, but I realize now that on some level I had been thinking of running away for days” (*UE* 287). The narrator here re-evaluates the actions of the character-focalizer at the time of the action, rationalizing the development of the events. The phrasing of “I realize now” emphasizes not only temporal distance but also emotional distance.

This mode of address and switching to the discourse level is employed more obviously in the first story, and used only sparsely in “Year’s End.” However, the effect of distance and detachment remains the same. The usage is simply limited by the fact that the discourse level is not defined, and thus all instances of address in both stories are motivated by developments in the main narrative. The teenager Kaushik figures prominently in Hema’s narrative, while Hema as a character is absent from the second story. Thus, Kaushik’s addressing her only occurs in the few instances when events in the chronological strand of the narrative trigger earlier memories in which she figures.

stability is ironically deconstructed as it is immediately followed Hema realizing that he had perished in the tsunami.

In February . . . [a] small obituary ran in *The New York Times*. By then I needed no proof of your absence from the world; I felt it as plainly and implacably as the cells that were gathering and shaping themselves in my body. Those cold, dark days I spent in bed, unable to speak, burning with new life but mourning your death . . . It might have been your child but this was not the case. We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind. (Lahiri 333)

The shift back to a homodiegetic narrative voice in this ultimate part of the third story has multiple functions. First of all, it links to the first two stories in the cycle on the formal level and completes a circular notion by returning to the voice of the beginning. In addition, it emphasizes the absence of Kaushik as it eliminates the possibility of a continuation of the repeated shifting between focalization characters this third story had so far employed. Finally, as in the first two stories, the suggested intimacy of address actually serves to emphasize detachment through the temporal distance carried in the voice, an effect further enforced by the sharp increase of narrative speed towards the end. Hema's brief homodiegetic narrative, spanning but a page, covers many months, whereas the main part of the story had slowly lingered on every day and moment they spent together. This again is also reflected in the narrative mode, as the utterances are a rapid string of short statements, devoid of much description.

The stark, if not even forced emotional detachedness that marks these stories is carried out most strongly in such reporting language, the factual presentation and the rationalizing of the distanced narrative voice. Even the most stirring moments depicted are consciously distant, regardless of the emotional state the characters in any situation may be in. This also holds for instances in which emotions are directly expressed; the presentation of such expressions contradicts the emotional quality of the feelings in question. For instance, as Kaushik observes Chitra in their home:

I sat up and watched, imagining the rest of Chitra's hair turning gray one day, imagining her growing into an old woman alongside my father the way my mother was meant to. That thought made me conscious, formally, of my hatred of her. (UE 276)

His commenting on his own thoughts foregrounds consciousness over sentiment and this stress is further emphasized in the insertion of 'formally,' implying form, patterns, structure, and control, the very opposite of the intense emotionality of hatred.

To enhance the effect of distance, the text is largely devoid of descriptive references, in particular in the frequently used reported speech acts. One would expect a speech act to transport tone, mood or intonation and thus offer a directive for the interpretation of the speaker's emotion. Instead, almost all speech acts are simply accompanied by either 'said' or 'told' as reporting verbs. This almost exclusive choice of non-descript utterance verbs sometimes even verges on the absurd



if used in situation that in their composition and development would be far from the neutral descriptions used: “‘What are you doing?’ I said” (ibid. 285) is used as Kaushik enters the room where the two little girls are looking at his mother’s photographs. It is repeated once more, when he realizes what they were doing: “‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ I said now.” The anger and emotion of his words is contradicted by the neutral quality of reporting verb, even more so in the added “now”, as if merely reporting a random sequence of events. The absence of emotions on the discourse level stands in sharp contrast to the characters’ experiences. The reader’s emotive investment gets placed in this void created through the discrepancy between presentation and content.

The distancing is further carried in some recurring tropes and images, like architecture or photography, which will be discussed in more detail below, and the emotional landscape of the characters is frequently mirrored in descriptions of the actual landscape. When Kaushik, in “Year’s End,” abandons the new family to mourn the loss of his mother, he drives north along the coast. The portrayal of the sky and the sea mirror his inner darkness and turmoil:

The sky was different, without color, taut and unforgiving. But the water was the most unforgiving thing, nearly black at times, cold enough, I knew, to kill me, violent enough to break me apart. The waves were immense, battering rocky beaches without sand. The farther I went, the more desolate it became, more than any place I’d been, but for that very reason the landscape drew me, claimed me as nothing had in a long time. (*UE* 289f.)

This scene at the same time foreshadows his death in the Indian Ocean tsunami, which coincided with another mourning of loss, the loss of Hema, yet also an experience of closeness with his mother. In the later instance, however, “[t]he sea was warm and welcoming as a bath” (*UE* 331). The innocence and calm of landscape and weather then have the double purpose of ironically subverting the coming event, while again mirroring Kaushik’s emotions. Throughout the text the non-human elements of nature serve as metaphorical descriptions of the central character’s emotional states, which the narrative voices refuse to convey.

The permanent focus on loss too is replicated in the narrative techniques of the story cycle, through the demonstrative use of negations. For example, each of the stories begins with a negation - an act not done or done in a different way than customarily expected. Another striking example of this technique can be found in Kaushik’s description of his fear of his mother’s death. It employs negative forms practically in each phrase:

I could imagine nothing worse than the moment my mother no longer drew air in and out of her lungs, no longer took us in through her weary eyes. I could imagine nothing worse than not being able to look at her face every day, its beauty grossly distorted but never abandoning her. But in the days after her death I realized Mrs. Gharibian had been right, there had been nothing worse than waiting for it to come. (*UE* 268).

‘Nothing’ and ‘no longer’ in their reiteration mark absence and the continuity of loss, while the ‘nothing worse’ emphasizes the helplessness of Kaushik.

In the centrality of loss all three stories constantly oscillate between signifiers of beginning and end. This is present from the very first sentence, “I had seen you before, too many times to count, but a farewell that my family threw for yours . . . is when I begin to recall your presence in my life” (*UE* 223). The arrival and return of Kaushik’s family is framed by their initial departure, thus stressing departure and distance over arrival. The initial recall of spatial distance then translates into the insurmountable emotional distance between the families that once used to be so close. At the same time, the return and this new phase in their life is motivated and dominated by the mother’s impending death. Furthermore, each of the stories is set around the time of Christmas and New Year’s, thus also the time of year that symbolizes both, ending and new beginnings.

However, this oscillation is not to be understood as a (religiously or metaphysically motivated) cyclic perception of time and life. The text does not dwell on notions of rebirth or teleological ideas of life as progressive narrative. On the contrary, the constant juxtaposition of beginning and end, without necessarily a causal connection between them, emphasizes the complexity of existence, adds to the overall focus on choice and agency (rather than fate), and the ‘accidental’ and simply continuous characteristic of life.

As a dominant trope of endings, death runs like a constant current through the plots, accelerating developments, just like the cancer cells that kill Kaushik’s mother, accumulating and increasing in density and speed. In the first story, the presence of death is concealed, obstructed from view and knowledge. When Kaushik finally tells Hema about his mother’s terminal condition, he does it while showing her another hidden death, uncovering a row of tombstones in the woods behind their house. Ironically while in this initial story death is thus obscured, loss is highlighted as the story revolves around the loss of the past friendship that symbolized the imagined diasporic community; the idea of sameness based on cultural heritage is disintegrating, and getting replaced by resentment and disappointment.

In “Year’s End”, death dominates the narrative in the absence of the mother, as loss had already occurred. This is emphasized in the presence of Chitra and the girls, as they inhabit the space once so intimately connected to Kaushik’s mother. The effect of this absence is a sense of distance and isolation expressed through non-communication.

The third of the stories, then, has death as its major theme. The actual death of Kaushik is only the ultimate climax – more importantly both, Hema’s and Kaushik’s lives are professionally focused on death. In Hema’s case it is a more metaphorical form as she studies ‘dead’ cultures, the classics, and is just about to embark on a study on the Etruscan’s, who were preoccupied with

death. Kaushik in contrast, lives and works in the very contemporary world as a war photographer, ready to leave for any location at a moment's notice. His life and job are about witnessing and documenting death and crimes against the human body and dignity.

All these focal points of the stories – death, distance, loss – are linked in their emphasis on individualization, as they are modes of depicting dysfunctional or non-relationships. Dysfunctions result from inaccurate preconceived notions, disappointed expectations or choice, as in the reunion of the two families who come to realize that the differences between them are more relevant to their social practices and value systems, than the shared past and cultural heritage. They end up living quasi-separate lives in a small shared space in “weeks of forced intimacy” (ibid. 251), where the lack of space is juxtaposed against the distance between the people living in it.

In the second story, the absent relationship is that with the mother. Since her death, the center of the family is missing and the distance between father and son had grown, both physically, as Kaushik had decided to go away for college, and emotionally. The mother is relegated to the realm of memories, triggered by the presence of the new family of his father. Kaushik's memories of his life before that, of the life shared with his mother, are all in relation to the later events. They are not memories of her as such, but of her in a certain role, as representing difference. In addition, Kaushik realizes that the passing of time already diminishes his recollection of her: “Even my memories of my mother had begun to break apart in the three and a half years since her death, the thousands of days I had spent with her reduced to a handful of stock scenes” (ibid. 272). Loss is amplified by temporal distance.

He seeks to counter the instability of memories through the stability of the architecture of their home, a proof of his mother's existence. She had chosen and loved the place and carefully furnished it true to its original style. The modernist architecture of his mother's house then symbolizes the emotional distance between Kaushik and his father's new family. Throughout the text the building is repeatedly personified through the use of active verbs giving it agency in its inaccessibility, as it almost takes on the role of a character. A character Kaushik sees as his ally in rejecting his father's choice. For Kaushik, the house is the tangible marker of his mother's existence and death. The sterility of the space marks the absence for which it stands. Yet ultimately, the house too fails him in various ways. There is no water in the pool his mother had used daily, and it has fallen in disrepair; the father had installed handrails on the free-floating stairway to protect Chitra's little girls, thus changing the effect in the room; and Chitra's traditional sense of style slowly takes hold of the house in decorative items like table cloth or

curtains. Kaushik ultimately feels ostracized by the house and flees in the middle of the night with the box of photographs as materialized remnants of his fleeting memory.

Distance – through death and loss – shape the first two stories about the protagonists' youth. The third story set in their adulthood then foregrounds individualism and choice as the cause for distance.

From the very beginning she had felt clear-eyed, aware that in a matter of weeks it would end. In another two weeks everything would be wiped clean – they would be in different countries, the keys to both . . . apartments in the hands of other people. And this knowledge allowed her once more to step out of her jeans . . . Even the fact that Kaushik had to wear a condom helped to keep him in his place, reminding her, whenever he paused to rip open the little packet, that in spite of what they were about to do, they would remain separate. (*UE* 317f.)

As long as she knew that she retained a distance to Kaushik, Hema could enjoy the time spent together, without jeopardizing her future plans. Rome, the eternal city, was the ideal setting for their affair, suggesting the transcendence of time and by implication taking them out of the regular time-space continuum. At the same time, Rome had a significance in either protagonist's life as the city of a lost love – for Kaushik the last happy memories with his mom were from a stay in Rome, while Hema had visited the city with a previous lover – and both of them were now there for a brief respite before embarking into new phases of their lives. However, Rome as a space signifies opposites for them: Kaushik, who lives only in the present, especially in his profession, is drawn to the city as it is the only space that suggest permanence (though not rootedness) in his life. It was the only place where he rented an apartment, his only permanent space to come to. Hema, in contrast had always only visited Rome, stepping out of the continuity of her live. To her Rome is the ultimate momentariness. The different significiees the space of the city thus represents further emphasizes individualization and distance in the non-shared experience, from safe sex to places they visit. “They went outside the city walls, to places she'd never been and that he wanted to see for the last time” (*UE* 314).

Distancing techniques on the discourse level seem to emotionally keep the reader at bay, while descriptions of spaces and weather conditions reinforce the emotional turmoil the characters experience. But the most dominant trope in the short story cycle to emphasize emotions, as well as distance, loss and death, is photography, which is present throughout all three stories.

### 6.1.1 Photography: The Apprehension of Life in the Art of Death

The central themes of distance, isolation, memory, loss and death are most strikingly carried throughout the short story cycle through the art of photography and the symbolism inherent in it. Photography as the material foundation of memories suffuses the plot. Yet, memories and memorabilia, too, ultimately only signify loss. The centrality of photography provides the core

trope of desolation, which in the final scene of the text is yet again ironically subverted, as it is the absence of photographs that mark Kaushik's disappearance and likely death: there were no new photographs uploaded to his website or published in newspapers.

The next morning, I went to the newsstand and bought the papers, studying every picture, looking for your name in one of the credits, hoping you had been lucky and that you had continued to do your work. I went to an Internet center, drew up your Web site. I saw the last images you had posted. A faint sliver of the shoreline we had seen from Volterra. ... In February ... small obituary ran in The New York Times. By then I needed no proof of your absence from the world. (Lahiri 332f.)

This passage is the culmination of the text's multifaceted engagement with photography. Photographs are presented as a proof of life, however, one that is only required once that life has ceased to exist. Furthermore, photography is a means of observation only, and consequently a passive art form, a form of not participating in the events of life or at least of the life portrayed.

The first story uses photography mostly in the conventional way of private pictures of memorable moments. But already these pictures of the earlier life of both families in Cambridge, as well as those of Kaushik's family's holiday in Rome on their return to the U.S., are deceiving. The images only serve to highlight the differences between what is represented and the present time of the narrative. The images of the early years in Cambridge show a closeness and happiness the families are unable to rekindle. The pictures from Rome show a healthy-looking woman with her family, yet cancer is already destroying her from inside.

In the second story, the absence of photographs in the house marks the absence of the mother. The climax of the story is triggered by the little girls' discovery of the images of the mother hidden in the closet, which results in Kaushik's final flight from a place and family he no longer feels he belongs to. He takes the photographs with him, only to bury them in a place he would never visit again or even be able to find again if he tried.

Kaushik's troubled relationship with his mother's image in the photographs, as well as the fact that the one image he kept after her death was actually one taken when he was still a child and shot "from such a distance that it gave little impression of her face" (*UE*, 274f.), echoes Roland Barthes' essay *Camera Lucida*. Barthes investigates the essence of photography and in the second half, sorting through photographs of his late mother, takes into account the role of the spectator of photographs and what effects photographs may have on the viewer. Scrutinizing a photograph for the identity or reality of who or what is depicted will always fail. If enlarged, one is eventually left only with the grain of the paper, which emphasizes the materiality of the photograph over that which is depicted. Yet, looking at the original print will not yield smaller details, they will remain hidden within the image, and the photograph itself will only enforce pastness, that which once has been but cannot be revisited. "[I]n Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past." (Barthes,

76, emphasis in the original). The essence of the photograph is thus its evidentiality and it always manifests a pastness. The subject becomes object in the photograph, no longer constituting an identity, becoming “Death in person” (Barthes, 14).

Yet, certain photographs manage to affect the viewer more deeply than others. Barthes sets out to analyze what it is in a photograph that may capture the viewer’s attention. He divides the reaction to viewing a photograph into *studium* and *punctum*, whereby *studium* is that which is culturally coded, the socialized interest in photographs, the act of observing them. *Punctum*, then is not the spectator’s action or interest in pictures, but a picture’s piercing effect, disturbing the observation or *studium*, demanding a different attention, a personal affliction. Photographs can be shocking without having *punctum*, like pictures of atrocities that can in their literalness impact, but the pictures are still only observed. What, according to Barthes, makes the difference for the spectator, resulting in a piercing of the surface of observation, is often a detail that speaks to them. An element in the image that disrupts the *studium*, it may call up a memory, or in other ways make the viewing personal. Barthes furthermore proposes that while photographs in general objectify, depicting pastness, a photograph of a person in rare instances has the power to have captured the “air” of the person, or at least have that effect on a specific viewer. This is why Barthes in the end chooses one specific image of his mother in the Winter Garden, shot from a distance, her face barely visible. Yet, even though he cannot make out the features of her face, this photograph in its candidness captured an essence of his mother, “a kind of intractable supplement of identity” (Barthes, *ibid.* 109), much like the shot of Kaushik’s mother from a distance and from a time before he even really remembers her.

Lahiri’s text, however, does not only employ photography as mementos, but also investigates the other side of photography, that of the photographer as observer, and as a witness. Kaushik makes his living as a photographer of war atrocities and human rights violations. Such images of atrocities always carry the notion of ‘least we forget’ and with that they proclaim to constitute part of a collective memory. However, both Barthes and Sontag caution strongly against the memory-illusion of pictures, especially in the case of photographic evidence. They both argue that while photographs are a record of a past reality, they at the same time actually obliterate memory. Barthes highlighted this factor in *Camera Lucida* in his discussion of images of his deceased mother,<sup>232</sup> and Susan Sontag in her poignant essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* points out that “[t]he problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering” (Sontag 2003, 89). This theme is explicitly taken up by Lahiri

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<sup>232</sup> Cf. for example Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, chapter 36, 85f..

in the character of Kaushik and his incapability of dealing with his mother's death. Both, father and son are afraid of the memory potential of photography, yet in their strategies of dealing with it they are also, at least implicitly, aware of the fact that photographs not only remind, but also reduce the lives depicted "to a handful of stock scenes" (Lahiri 2008, 272).

What is more, as both Barthes and Sonntag argue, photographic evidence always already implies death.<sup>233</sup> Barthes even locates the 'asymbolic' idea of death of modern society in photography. "*Life / Death*: The paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print" (Barthes 2000, 92). That is to say, every photograph is always already a representation of death, even though it "does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*" (ibid. 85, emphasis in the original); it is simultaneously also representing the "anterior future of which death is the stake" (ibid. 96). The photograph is not only a document of what it depicts, but also of the temporal distance between the taking of the photograph and the presence. Things that occurred in the meantime are consequently implicit in the picture and one of these things is always the possibility of death. "Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. . . . there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die" (ibid., emphasis in the original).

Lahiri's second story, "Years End" is emblematic of both in its oscillation between present and past; the absence of the mother not only as a person, but also (to Chitra and her girls' astonishment) in the absence of visible memories like photographs, is juxtaposed by her omnipresence in Kaushik's thoughts as he is confronted with the familiarity of the house she used to live in and the unfamiliarity of the new family members. This oscillation between life and death, endings and possible new beginnings, of separation and distance is played out through the role of photography on the plot level as well as in the symbolic significance of it. Already Kaushik's fond memories of his mother in the house reiterate the company of death and photography. When his mother was helping him to develop pictures in a make-shift darkroom she is the one telling him when to pour which liquids and thus when and how to fixate the image in the photograph.

She would keep time for me with her watch, familiarizing herself with the process enough to be able to tell me when to pour the series of fluids in and out of the processing tank, both of us knowing that I'd have to buy a timer, eventually. "It must be something like this," she said once in that perfectly dark, silent, sealed-up space, and I understood without her saying so that she was imagining what it might be like to be dead. "This is how I want to think of it." (UE 278)

The metaphorical link between her impending death and thus her own running out of time cannot be overlooked here, as the comment about him having to buy a timer is not only a professional statement with regards of exactness, but also anticipates her absence. The thought is prominent in

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<sup>233</sup> Cf. Sonntag in *Regarding the Pain of Others even polemically* states "Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death," 24.

both characters' minds though not explicitly stated, as his interpretation of her comment emphasizes. The development of photographic prints is here equated with the finality of death.

If both, Barthes and Sontag, foreground the aspect of death in photography, Judith Butler when discussing Sontag's study, focuses on life. That is to say, on the fact that for death to occur, it had to be preceded by life and if we read that in relation to photography, then this means a life worth recording, documenting, thus a life apprehended as life.

But if we are shaken or 'haunted' by a photograph, it is because the photograph acts on us in part through outliving the life it documents . . . If we can be haunted, then we can acknowledge that there had been a loss and hence that there has been a life: this is an initial moment of cognition, an apprehension, but also a potential judgment, and it requires that we conceive of grievability as the precondition of life, one that is discovered retrospectively through the temporality instituted by the photograph itself. 'Someone will have lived' is spoken within a present, but it refers to a time and a loss to come" (Butler 2009, 97f.).

This apprehension of life is obvious in the memory value of photographs Lahiri repeatedly emphasizes throughout all three stories. Simultaneously, the value judgment inherent in the act of framing and documenting is depicted. For example, in the first story, Kaushik refuses to photograph life, limiting himself to landscape photographs. The opposite is the case in his later professional life. As a war photographer he takes up Butler's call for documenting mutilation to claim life and grievability for the victims. Implicit in this position is, however, also the claim that what is not turned into (visual) evidence of having existed, is obliterated. This is a crucial factor in Kaushik's relationship to Chitra. When he goes home to meet his father's new family for the first-time during Christmas, he deliberately chooses not to bring his camera – which is highly uncharacteristic of him. "This time I had left it behind, knowing that I would not want to document anything" (*UE* 280). Foreshadowing his later profession this wording already manifests that he does not simply take pictures, but thinks of it as documentation, as establishing a reality. At the same time, the act of documenting suggests an uninvolved position of the person recording events, which both marks and ironically subverts Kaushik's emotional stance. While he keeps as much of a distance to Chitra and the girls as possible, the very fact that he refuses to acknowledge their presence (by documenting it) signifies its haunting impact on him. The same aspect resurfaces later in his life when his father and Chitra visit him in Rome. Even though he cannot refuse to photograph them, he again refuses to face these documents of their existence in his life by handing the undeveloped rolls of film to his father as they depart.

Photography's documentation and assurance of a life as lived and the inherent claim of grievability is turned into a constant visual reminder of grief, once a life has actually been lost. The extent to which the loss of his mother haunts him is then implicitly linked to his choice of profession, not only because his mother always supported his taking pictures, but moreover, because it gave him the double satisfaction of ascertaining grievability while guaranteeing his



uninvolvedness, providing him with a safe emotional distance. Kaushik enforces this distance not only in being only an observer of lives, but moreover he keeps a literal distance from his earlier life by refusing to ever work in the US or in India. He only travels to New York to meet his editor, but maintains a place in Rome. His own life is largely devoid of records or memories of his past, and he is only present to his loved ones through photo credits, but not in actual pictures.

In his job of documenting atrocities, he makes lives grievable for present and coming generations, but through the necessity of selection and framing, he is just as responsible for obliterating other lives from that status. Obliteration is intrinsic to every picture, stipulated by the camera lens' abilities and limitations and the photograph's frame is driven – especially in professional (war) photography – by the need to startle, to impact the viewer. But what shocks and arrests the viewer at the same time turns him/her into a voyeur,<sup>234</sup> despite a possible moral obligation which it also transmits,<sup>235</sup> because “[n]o sophisticated sense of what photography is or can be will ever weaken the satisfactions of a picture of an unexpected event seized in mid-action by an alert photographer” (Sontag 2003, 55).

The shock value of a war-torn mutilated body stems from its being seen as abject – as human yet inhuman in its representation – and in the fact that contemporary societies regard war as “an aberration, if an unstoppable one . . . [while] peace is the norm, if an unattainable one” (ibid. 74). The unbearable content is then transposed by the method, by the art of photography, as well as the temporal and spatial distance of the viewer from the event. “Photographs objectify” (ibid. 81), but not only by turning the subject into an object of observation, but moreover by creating an object depicting (yet being detached from) a real moment in space and time. In addition, their meaning or what they signify may change in different contexts.<sup>236</sup> This is especially true for images of high impact on the audience, of high shock value, as is the case with pictures of atrocities and mutilation. However, we need to be aware that the images themselves do not carry meaning, “they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (ibid. 89).

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<sup>234</sup> Sontag even argues that this voyeuristic quality turns towards the pornographic when an attractive body is violated (cf. Sontag 2003, 95).

<sup>235</sup> As Sontag points out, the moral authority of photographic records of war only emerged with the technological advance that made snap-shots possible. In addition, the Vietnam-War marks a caesura with the now famous image of napalm doused running screaming children, as the horrid events depicted could no longer be staged. “That there have been so few staged war photographs since the Vietnam War suggests that photographers are being held to higher standards of journalistic probity” (ibid. 57f.). Ironically, however, latest technologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that enable any visual effect to be created on a computer, has now created a different form of distrust in photographic evidence.

<sup>236</sup> An extreme example would be the photographs of lynching in the US in the early 1900s that were taken as souvenirs, even made into postcards, but today tell the story of the extent of human cruelty (cf. Sontag 2003, 91).

Sontag, in her essayistic investigation of the photography of atrocities thus investigates the photographic image's power but also limit in the depiction of suffering and in creating an impact beyond an initial discomfort by the spectator. Especially in war photography or the documentation of atrocities against humanity, photography's dual characteristic is significant. As Sontag points out,

[t]heir credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were a record of the real – incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be – since a machine was doing the recording. And they bore witness to the real – since a person had been there to take them. (Sontag 2003, 26).

This duality of a witness in close spatial and temporal immediacy to the event depicted combined with this witness's limited influence on the image – regardless of framing etc. – give the photographic image a value over written or other records. But, as Lahiri's story emphasizes, the awareness of the witness in the fact of a photograph – especially if it is a haunting one – raises the question of violence in close proximity and implicitly of ethical obligations. This trajectory from horror to humanity is explicitly addressed in Lahiri's last story when Kaushik lowers his guard and lets Hema look at his portfolio, while he leaves her alone in his apartment. "He had witnessed these things, unseen and uninvolved, yet with an immediacy she had never felt" (*UE* 315), Hema ponders. Her reflection here in a nutshell sketches the photographer's position of a witness who, because unseen, is allegedly not an element of the events, not influencing them. Though, if the depicted content shows inhuman action, the image simultaneously implies moral judgment raising the question 'ought he not?'<sup>237</sup>

"Does it affect you, seeing these things?"

He shrugged, opened the cupboard, took out two glasses for wine. "It doesn't help anyone if I'm affected." . . . "It does affect me," he said afterward as they lay in the dark, awake.

"What?"

"Taking pictures, not always, but sometimes. Sometimes in ways I don't like." (*UE* 316f.)

And he tells her the story of a car accident he had witnessed the previous summer.

It turned out that the passengers were not badly hurt. Kaushik had pulled over, rushed out, but the first thing he had done was take a picture. "The first thing," he told Hema. "Before even asking if they were okay." (*UE* 317)

This scene plays out the juxtaposition of different perspective of photographer and audience, as the affect he describes here, incidentally, is not what Hema has inquired about. She wanted to know if the things he witnessed, the atrocities she saw in the pictures and which he had seen in reality, affected him. His answer was on how the everyday practice of his job affects him. How

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<sup>237</sup> Sontag, too, draws the parallel between growing ethical awareness, yet an experience of impotence as a duality in the social dimension of globalization, when she states that "[m]aking suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to 'care' more. It also invites them to feel that the suffering and misfortune are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention" (Sontag 2003, 79).

the distance he craves and creates by looking at the world and its wickedness through the lens that limits his perspective, sharpens his view but also obliterates to the extent of dehumanizing him, because his first reaction was a mechanical one, to document, rather than get himself involved in the action. In addition, the episode he relates is one of a random car accident and not one of the regular and large-scale mutilations he professionally covers.

In so far, his reactions show the potential of horror and its limitations. Constant exposure and involvement are less likely to rattle an individual than a singular and unexpected event. The experience of the car accident for Kaushik actually mirrors the effect his photographs have on many of their viewers who are confronted with these images over their morning coffee in newspapers or on the internet, it haunts him. In addition, his answer to Hema, also moves the discussion from empathy to ethics. The question he raises for himself is not one of emotional affect, but of proper conduct towards others.

There is also a third level to Hema's question, one that Lahiri's text decides not to investigate, and that is the value of the content of his pictures. The art of photography is a means of characterization and narrative style in these stories, however, the actual images of war and atrocities, that are the subject of Sontag's study and Butler's review of it, are not part of the text; they are not described or relevant for the plot development.

The only exception is the first pictures of death Kaushik took that eventually propelled him into his career, which is yet another instance of the text's emphasizing that the course a life takes is directed more by accidents and coincidences than planning and teleological developments. On a graduation trip through South America, Kaushik had met a journalist in El Salvador. Having a coffee, they suddenly are made witnesses to a young man being shot dead on the street. Espen, the journalist, tells Kaushik to take pictures.

He did not have a long lens with him, had to get in close . . . When he thought back to that afternoon, he remembered that his hands were shaking, but that otherwise he felt untouched, unmoved once he was behind the camera, shooting to the end of the roll. When he was finished, the calls for a doctor had stopped; the man was dead.

Kaushik was the only person to document what had happened. And though he had not saved the man's life, he'd felt useful, aware that he had done something to mitigate the crime. (*UE* 304f.)

Lahiri's story thus mirrors – though in a twisted way – the double edge of the photography of atrocities.

Photographs of the suffering and martyrdom of a people are more than reminders of death, of failure, of victimization. They invoke the miracle of survival. To aim at the perpetuation of memories means, inevitably, that one has undertaken the task of continually renewing, of creating, memories – aided, above all, by the impress of iconic photographs. (Sontag 2003, 87).

Kaushik's pictures testify to the existence of the subjects he photographs and his images can serve as icons for others' memories. Ironically, his photographs, though never depicting him, are also

continued testimony of his survival, existence and often the only way of his family to trace his whereabouts. In the end, the eventual absence of his continued testimony will testify to his own death.

As mentioned, the actual violence depicted in Kaushik's shots is only described in one instance in the story, and even then he, as the focalizer character subverts the anticipation of horror of his dual audience, Hema and the reader, by foregrounding the mechanisms of the act of photography - the need to get close because he did not have the right lens with him, the fact that once behind the camera he was untouched by the act in front of him. However, as images of human atrocities are an element of our everyday life, the repeated mentioning of his profession and products suffices to turn this aspect into a central theme and permanent undercurrent against which the reader perceives his life story. The very need of distance and proximity inherent in the task of photography, but also the materiality of the art are repeatedly expressed by Kaushik: "he knew that in his own way, with his camera, he was dependent on the material world, stealing from it, hoarding it, unwilling to let it go" (*UE* 309).<sup>238</sup>

However, by our very familiarity with images of war and atrocities, as Sonntag points out, "photographs of the victims of war [have themselves become] a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus" (*ibid.* 6). War photographs select what becomes part of an archive for collective memory and at the same time homogenize that which is depicted, even elating it to a general level beyond the individual portrayed. Consequently, there is a great potential of distortion inherent in this allegedly most objective mode of recording,<sup>239</sup> not only in the framing and selectiveness, but even more so in the very rhetoric of photography. In addition, the image depends on interpretation, that is to say on a context that is, first and foremost, usually provided and thus defined by a caption (often giving location, time, names), and secondly the context of the presentation which also guides the viewers reading towards "what [the photograph] *should* be saying" (*ibid.* 29, emphasis in the original).

This 'should' not only includes an ethical obligation, but moreover emphasizes viewer expectations. Today "the very notion of atrocity, of war crime, is associated with the expectation of photographic evidence" (*ibid.* 83), media reports are built around the promise of shocking

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<sup>238</sup> Here again Lahiri uses a subtle foreshadowing of his later fate in the phrase of 'letting go' which is reiterated at the end of his life when he leaves the camera behind in a boat before conquering his fear of the ocean. The very last line in the story referring to Kaushik's life is "and so he let go" (Lahiri 2007, 331).

<sup>239</sup> "Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were a record of the real – incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be – since a machine was doing the recording. And they bore witness to the real – since a person had been there to take them" (Sontag 2003, 26).

proof. This evidence is not self-contained, but always echoes other photographs – especially in the case of wars and atrocities. Consequently, “morally alert photographers and ideologues of photography have become increasingly concerned with the issues of exploitation of sentiment (pity, compassion, indignation) in war photography and of rote ways of provoking feeling” (Sontag 2003, 80). It is not only the feelings of shock and horror such images stimulate, but, inherent in the depiction of the barbarous is the question of responsibility.<sup>240</sup> This is a complex issue that has two sides to it, one is looking for blame, the other is to implicate the spectator. Looking for blame implies that while we acknowledge the atrocity as an atrocity we also position ourselves on a moral hierarchy superior to the actor as the act of looking for culprits means that we ourselves are not to blame, the question stipulates the innocence of the questioner. But the photography of the horrific, especially aspects of mass displacements of people or wars or political actions cast a wider responsibility that may implicate the audience.<sup>241</sup> Consequently, even if, as Sontag claims, images cannot convey meaning but only haunt, she closes her book on an urgent note:

Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: this is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget. (ibid. 115)

The complicated mix of empathy, blame, horror, yet also distance evoked by a photograph may result in a particular desire to engage in the conflict at hand. As Sontag aptly diagnoses, “[c]ompassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated” (ibid. 101). While the spectator’s initial response may be a desire to alleviate the particular suffering depicted, Sontag rather calls for a less comfortable approach:

[t]o set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark. (ibid. 102f.)

By the continued mentioning of wars, refugee camps, or other atrocities Kaushik has witnessed throughout the last story, and the readers familiarity with such imagery, Lahiri’s test implicitly also suggests these ethical considerations to the reader, though without actually shocking them in the meticulous description of haunting images.

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<sup>240</sup> Cf. Sontag 2003, 93.

<sup>241</sup> There is a second set of testifying to the horrific that focuses on the perpetrator, but shows the normalcy of their existence, shows them to have families of their own, or a nice house or car. In humanizing the perpetrator, the photograph suggests that we all as humans are capable of committing horrendous acts, we are after all not that different from the individual in the picture.

What the text portrays with respect to the art of photography and especially in using this art to characterize Kaushik, who is so deeply haunted by the loss of his mother that he is unable to allow himself to strike roots or form deep emotional attachments, is mirrored in the narrative voice. Photography is not only the dominant image throughout the text, its central characteristic of the detached observer, and of visual presentation rather than interpretation, also inform voice and narrative mode. The purely observing style, the reporting clauses and the general disassociation the text creates parallel the qualities characterizing photography. Furthermore, in its temporal structure, the time and space distance between the taking of a photograph and its being viewed, is taken up in the memory narratives that throughout the stories occasionally reach a narrative present in the evocation of a 'now' as if pictures are presented to an audience. This effect is further emphasized in the parts narrated by a homodiegetic voice and addressed at a distinct particular 'you.'

Photography thus shapes these stories in narrative mode, voice, presentation, imagery and theme, all of which highlight individualism, detachedness, mobility, interconnectivity, and the precariousness of life. These tropes, then, set this collection of short stories apart from Lahiri's earlier fiction in so far as the identity struggle of "Hema and Kaushik" is an individual, situated in specific situations, featuring contemporary human existence in a globalized world, but not in a particularly diasporic way.

As outlined above, I do not object to seeing Lahiri's work in general, as fairly representative of contemporary diasporic writing in North America, most explicitly in her first collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and her novel *The Namesake*, which encompasses both, emerging transnational cosmopolitan identities as well as the identity struggles of hybrid existences especially prevalent in second generation immigrants. Lahiri's early fiction is in fact such a figurehead for South Asian diaspora literature, that it seems difficult for some critics to look beyond a diasporic reading practice. One such example is Bidisha Banerjee's study of "Hema and Kaushik" in her essay "Diaspora's 'Dark Room'". Despite some insightful observations, especially with regards to the treatment of photography in the short story cycle, Banerjee's analysis in this essay remains problematic, as she reads the text locked within diasporic frames of reference, when Hema and Kaushik have both moved decidedly beyond the struggles of the central character Gogol in *The Namesake*. Their engagements with the world around them are informed by diasporic mentalities based on their upbringing, but these are not determining factors in their life paths or identity formations.

In her representative reading, Banerjee draws conclusions that do not hold up when put in relation to the overall text. For one, she reads Kaushik's uprootedness as a sign of his diasporic

identity, and the loss he is suffering from as the “phantom loss” of the second generation of immigrants of an unknown homeland. She argues that Kaushik’s

efforts are constantly undermined by the fact that representing a moment photographically takes the form of a haunting: photographs ironically heighten loss by resuscitating memory. Instead of providing him with roots and access to the past that would give him a secure sense of diasporic identity, photographs and photography simply exacerbate Kaushik’s sense of phantom loss and diasporic mourning. (Banerjee 446)

While I agree that Kaushik is a haunted character and photography heightens the sense of pastness of the images and the impossibility of a return to this past, his flight and restlessness are not expressions of a diasporic mourning but of a very real experience, the loss of his mother; an experience heightened by the imposed presence of Chitra and the girls in, what he considers to be his mother’s house.<sup>242</sup> Nor is he yearning for a diasporic identity or group membership and belonging. His hauntedness cannot be resolved by embracing a cultural identity.

His professional engagement with photography reflects the psychological experience of loss and individual uprootedness insofar as he chooses to remain an observer, recording events, rather than participating and getting involved. He is not looking for the security of a stable diasporic identity, but finds safety in the emotional distance he keeps, from his father and the world at large. His refusal to strike roots in any – accustomed or unaccustomed – earth is aptly represented by his profession. The camera is his mode of not only capturing but also perceiving the world. As Susan Sontag has pointed out, photography is a non-interventionist art form, a choice of recording over acting,<sup>243</sup> but in the recording still lies agency as well as presence. “Every photograph is a certificate of presence.” (Barthes 2000, 87). Kaushik is present, as Banerjee, too, acknowledges in her essay, not through presence but through photo credits that inform about his being alive and his whereabouts.

There are several moments in the story when Kaushik’s photographs “stand in” metonymically for him. Travelling the world, he consciously distances himself from his family . . . Kaushik’s photographs bestow upon him the Barthesian certificate of presence, rooting him to a particular time and place. (Banerjee 449)

Although Banerjee is correct here to emphasize how the act of photography comes to stand for Kaushik’s presence in the world, this act is not a form of rooting, quite on the contrary, his

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<sup>242</sup> As Banerjee aptly puts it, “[i]t is as though by not photographing this particular Christmas, he is denying it legitimacy.” (Banerjee 448). However, she continues to read Kaushik’s “cold professionalism” (ibid.) at only handing his father undeveloped rolls of film when later in life his father and Chitra visit Rome, as the disavowal of “his pain at not being able to make himself part of the new family unit with Chitra at its centre” (ibid.). I would, in contrast argue, that it was a mixture of disinterest (not only in Chitra, but also in the pictures themselves as they held no artistic potential), emotional distance (to both his father and Chitra) and still the continued melancholia over his mother’s loss that resulted in Kaushik’s ‘cold professionalism,’ but not a diasporic mourning for belonging. Thus it was a decision (and in so far represents individual agency) rather than impotence (and by implication diasporic self-victimization) that triggered this act.

<sup>243</sup> Cf. Sontag, *On Photography*, 8.

profession forces a mobility on Kaushik which he embraces. He chooses an uprooted lifestyle in the sense of his global mobility as well as in a decidedly fluid identity concept that is not weighed down by any particular attachment to heritage or culture.

“Hema and Kaushik” repeatedly resists Banerjee’s attempt at reading the short story cycle as representative fiction and trying to force it into a diasporic framework of collective identity negotiations. Admittedly, both central characters are deeply haunted by a past, Kaushik even more than Hema whose unhappy love life results in her choice of an arranged marriage – a choice offered her due to her cultural heritage, yet her own decision not born out of a diasporic longing. Even though the narratives depict two people in flight and in the end aiming for a more stable future, they do not provide harmonizing identity narratives either individually or collectively. The life choices – based on rationality rather than emotions or notions of belonging – are in both cases deliberate compromises, not reconciliations with a culture, a past, or a group. Moreover, the diasporic community from which both protagonists originate, is depicted as instable and constructed on illusions of sameness that do not hold, as reflected in the parents’ failure to rekindle their previous friendship. Insofar, Lahiri’s short story cycle is devoid of a ‘diasporic imaginary.’

At first sight, a reader may find an array of the familiar scenes and images of diaspora literature; especially the first part is strewn with depiction of ethnic identity markers like food and clothing, as well as pieces of information relevant to the formation of what Vijay Mishra called the ‘new Indian diaspora.’ For example, the need for community in the early years of living in the USA is highlighted in the initial analepsis of the first story, and most explicit in the depiction of the first meeting of the two mothers.

Our mothers met when mine was pregnant. She didn’t know it yet; she was feeling dizzy and sat down on a bench in a small park. Your mother was perched on a swing, . . . when she noticed a young Bengali woman in a sari, wearing vermilion in her hair. “Are you feeling all right?” your mother asked in the polite form. . . . They became instant friends. (*UE* 224f.)

The fact that Kaushik’s mother would approach a total stranger in the park just because she looked Bengali, the stress on the vermilion in her hair as a culture specific sign of matrimony and, most of all, the narrator’s apparent need to point out that the linguistic form of address was a the polite one, serves as an array of cultural signifiers in this brief passage.<sup>244</sup>

The ‘instant friendship’ is based exclusively on a shared cultural background, and while this was enough to initially sustain a close bond while the women began to spend their days together, Lahiri’s text also emphasizes the limits of such a basis for closeness. First, following

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<sup>244</sup> The full linguistic implication here may be lost on English speakers with little or no knowledge of foreign languages. The question asked, although quoted in the text in English, was – it is suggested – uttered in a South Asian language, likely Bengali, because English does not grammatically distinguish between polite and casual forms of address (e.g. in its variants of personal pronouns) as sharply as many South Asian languages do.



immediately after the story of their initial meeting, the text points out that both families come from Calcutta, which closely connects them in the diaspora. But at the same time, the narrative also stresses that the two women would likely never have met in the city of their births as they came from very different social circles. This way, the text creates an awareness for the artificial constructedness of a diasporic community which later on is also the reason for their inability to rekindle this closeness when reuniting after several years. The artificiality of the diasporic community is further emphasized in the fact that the apparent emotional closeness was not sustained over spatial distance: “[t]he friendship did not merit the same energy my parents devoted to their relatives . . . My parents spoke of you rarely, and I imagine they assumed that our paths were unlikely to cross again” (ibid. 227).

If one were to try and force a diasporic reading, it could of course be argued that the only two characters who are devoid of ethnic group affiliations or desires to form bonds based on shared cultural identity, Kaushik and his mother, are the two characters who in the course of the story are met with death. Hema’s family had never left their diasporic group, Kaushik’s father marries a young Indian woman and eventually sells the house to relocate to a neighborhood with more Bengali families, and Hema chooses the path of an arranged marriage. Based on these developments one could try to make the argument for a symbolic reading and claim that the surviving characters, for their survival, chose the support of the ethnic group, and that isolation would lead to destruction.

However, while there certainly is some diasporic ambivalence in Lahiri’s text that adds to the complexity of identity negotiations, the short story cycle is decidedly critical of diasporic collective identity discourses. That is to say, although Lahiri’s writing emerged from a literary diasporic tradition, it is not rooted in it. First in the depiction of the inexistence of a real friendship between the parents, second by Kaushik’s cosmopolitan life-style that, despite its being a haunted running from a past, is not suffused with a diasporic longing for rootedness and community. Kaushik does not struggle through negotiations of cultural differences of the ‘here’ and ‘there’ but is rather depicted as very adaptable to any surrounding. Even his deep (re-)connection with Hema is based on the actually shared past rather than an imagined shared collective identity of a distant cultural past. In general, this collection emphasizes the individual over the collective. Hema and Kaushik both have a cosmopolitan highly mobile existence in a network of global interconnectivity and with friends and acquaintances all over the globe. Globalization and its impact is furthermore outlined in the last story, which is the only one set in the contemporary era, not only through the frequent references to modern technology and the media in the form of Kaushik’s profession, but the story, in this occupation of war photographer, also highlights the

fragility of human lives, the atrocities committed every day and it raises questions of ethics in its course.

## 6.2 Transience and Transgression: Abha Dawesar's *That Summer in Paris*

Like Lahiri's text, Abha Dawesar's third novel *That Summer in Paris*<sup>245</sup> centers on privileged cosmopolitan characters, but where "Hema and Kaushik" is marked by isolation and detachment, Dawesar's text basks in sensuality and invites the reader to partake in the experience through an immediacy of voice, enhanced by abundant dialogue, and the intense stream of visual, auditory, sensory and not least of all gustatory sensations, as we follow the development of an unlikely romance between a 75-year-old literary Nobel Laureate and a young woman at the beginning of her writing career.

In *That Summer in Paris* the fleetingness of transience forms not only the persistent undercurrent of the plot development but also shapes the narrative mode through a juxtaposition of the supposed timelessness of the arts – especially writing, sculpture and painting – with the individuals' experience of the ephemerality of life. Set in a contemporary cosmopolitan elite environment of intellectuals and writers in both New York and Paris, this central theme on the plot level culminates in the protagonist's death, after increasing allusions and in-depth discussions of the topic among different characters in a variety of scenes and contexts. On the level of narration, transience is tangible in the changing focalization, frequently interwoven memory narratives that, if not nostalgic per se, still foreground the loss of bygone loves, and at times in a narrative style that approaches stream of consciousness narration.

The narrative constantly and in overlapping fashion oscillates between four central themes: the arts, food, sexuality and death. The story, which largely centers on the male protagonist Prem Rustum, slowly unravels the protagonist's life from a Bombay childhood to his fame as a writer and Nobel Laureate, almost exclusively through ultimately tragic love stories in a non-chronological fashion. In the course of this plot, a myriad of social taboos is transgressed, or rather simply ignored, at no consequence. These transgressions range from generally established taboos to mere socially frowned upon acts, from incest, to verbal abuse, slight violence and sodomy, intercourse with young girls who could be his granddaughters, and with more than one partner, as

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<sup>245</sup> Which stands in no relationship to the much earlier book of the same title by the Canadian novelist Morley Callaghan (first published in 1963), which is a memoir of Callaghan's being part of the expatriate scene in Paris in the 1920s, including an infamous boxing match between himself and Ernest Hemingway, that had F. Scott Fitzgerald as referee.

well as an affair with a friend's wife, to finally focus on the attraction and love between partners with a 50 year age gap, that builds the frame story that is triggering the various memory narratives.

The red thread connecting the various episodes is the question or rather the impossibility of truly shared experience. Two people may listen to the same concert in the same room, look at the same pieces of art side by side, enjoy the same culinary feast, and yet their individual experience of each event differs from that of their counterpart. The unsharability, as well as an unrepresentability of experience is a well-researched aspect of trauma psychology and trauma fiction.<sup>246</sup> What holds true for the unspeakable horrors of trauma also, in essence, applies to any personal experience as such, whether horrific or pleasurable. The actual emotional, psychological experience will always and can always only be singular and individual, as it hinges on our socialization, past experiences, memories, personality, interests, and mood, to name just a few obvious factors. In Dawesar's novel, Prem had been to Paris many times throughout his life, for various reasons and collected memories that are now triggered and overlap everything he experiences with Maya as they (re-)visit certain places. Maya, in contrast, is in the city for the first time, everything is new, and she is brimming with excitement to take it all in. Her experience of the Louvre, French food, or just the city streets stands in stark contrast to Prem's. Maya is focusing on the present and the future, while Prem time and again is pulled into the past as he remembers prior visits, love relations, or other episodes from his life.

Insofar, Dawesar's text represents a curious case, especially if one were to attempt a symptomatic reading in the context of ethnic literature. Memory narratives are a central feature of collective identity constructions; and fictions of memory, as outlined above, are a common vehicle in ethnic literature to write stories of the 'margin' into the center's canon. Dawesar's text is composed of a frame narrative in the present that is interspersed with memory narratives of Prem's life. Yet, in the text's insistence on the singularity of experience, the novel – in its constant and increasingly more forceful reiteration of this fact – at the same time creates a sort of counter-narrative to the traditional model of memory fiction as representative literature. While ethnic memory narratives focus on a collective identity construction by means of a representative character's story and past, resulting in a present state through causally linked episodes,<sup>247</sup> Prem's recollections highlight the episodic, almost random character of a life's story and the fact that

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<sup>246</sup> Cf. for example Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, or Alexander, Jeffrey C. et al., eds. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, or the essay "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" by Balaev, Michelle in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 41:2 (2008) 149-166.

<sup>247</sup> This technique can be found in a subverted form, for example, in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which fulfills clichéd reader expectations only to question such a simplistic symptomatic reading in the narrative tone. See my discussion of Hamid's novel in the introduction and in chapter 8 below.

experiences can ultimately not be shared. Furthermore, the text emphatically resists a representative reading in the uniqueness of the central character, a Nobel Laureate and privileged cosmopolitan, and even more decidedly forecloses such an interpretation through the protagonist's prevailing promiscuity and the manifold transgressions of taboos throughout these episodes.

Thematically then, *That Summer in Paris* is an investigation of the potential for transposition of experiences and ultimately of the impossibility of it. This begins with memories, which can at best be reduced to and related as narrative; it covers art and taste in art, as well as taste in the literal sense as a sensory experience; it is further explored through various sexual encounters, before the book ends in death, the ultimately non-shareable experience.

The book opens with the aging Nobel Laureate Prem Rustum in his study, feeling somewhat exhausted by life. The fleetingness of existence is already present in style from the first page, as the introduction of the main character as the text flitters from his current bored exhaustion to a phone call with a friend, his fame, his writing style, aches in his body, his grandson and family in India, to his latest publication all in the span of a page and a half; without real causality, and with no aspect receiving more attention or being imbued with more relevance than any other, almost as a stream of consciousness narrative.

His attitude changes after he meets 25-year old Maya, an aspiring writer and ardent fan of his work. The plot develops from a triangular love-story situation that is deliberately alluding to Philip Roth's novel *The Ghostwriter*.<sup>248</sup> The contact between these two protagonists comes about through the young writer Roger Johnson, who met Maya online, and Prem at a dinner party. While he establishes a relationship with Maya, he introduces Prem to the world of online-dating sites, where Prem, too, then contacts Maya, who is initially smitten with his writer's persona, while Prem is taken by her beauty and spiritedness. Maya's relationship with Roger is cut short as she leaves to spend the summer in Paris, having won a fiction fellowship. Prem, who had in the past spent many summers in Paris visiting his best friend and fellow writer Pascal, decides to follow Maya there. The main part of the novel, then, has them enjoy a variety of sensual experiences in the city together. Initially, these center mostly on the arts and food, but increasingly physical contact and erotic longings come into play, suffusing all other experiences as well.

This chronological narrative is frequently intercepted by memories of Prem's past love relationships as well as reflections on the books he wrote and how each of these related to his life, both being informed by it as well as shaping his perceptions.

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<sup>248</sup> Dawesar's novel in toto abounds with intertextual references especially to Roth or his work, beginning already with the protagonist's name that bears the initials of the American writer, to explicit citations used in epigraphs, to playful, tongue in cheek allusions, like the emphasis on this PR having actually won the Nobel Prize.

In the chronological narrative strand, the story interweaves various small subplots, like Maya's relationship to yet another young writer whom she met on her first day in Paris, Jean-Pierre. They have a brief love-story that is halted in its course as Maya's infatuation with Prem intensifies and she starts to find Jean-Pierre's physical presence suddenly insufferable. Maya also establishes a friendship with one of her neighbors in Paris, Nadine, a dancer who gives her advice on how to overcome her creative paralysis and how to act on her emerging passion for Prem. With regard to Prem, the chronological narrative focuses on his long-standing friendship with Pascal Boutin, their various discussions on art, the literary scene, their past, and love, as well as a joint excursion into the countryside. Furthermore, Prem's relationship to his family, that is his nephew Homi and Homi's son Ratan, are part of the narrative from the first page, even though not a dominant matter. They also serve as one element in deferment of the love-plot, as a family visit to Paris briefly halts the increasing physical tension between the two protagonists.

Two additional subplots are added and briefly intercept the chronological plot development, to give further information on two characters. The first one tells of Roger Johnson's years at Harvard. The second tells the story of Judith Q., an obsessed fan of Prem, who attempted unsuccessfully to stalk him, wrote him frequently and through these increasingly improper missives, became an intrusion to Prem's life which he then turned into a character in one of his books. The Judith Q. episode not only tells of the irrationality of obsession, which distinguishes passion from pathology, but in her pathological quest also plays a role in the final scene of the book. The novel concludes with both, Prem and Maya, relocating back to the U.S. and Maya moving in with Prem to start a love relationship on a time budget of 500 hours. However, after finally consuming their love and having sexual intercourse, Prem dies in his sleep the very first night. The memorial service for Prem then brings all major characters together, as not only friends and family gather, but also Judith Q. resurfaces and commits a final disturbing transgression by stealing a part of Prem's ashes. The novel ends with Maya talking to Johnson after the service and deciding to 'write' Prem.

In terms of structure, the novel is organized in seven parts each of which headed by one or more epigraphs that indicates a theme or focus of the segment and by extension the book. For example, the first part, unsurprisingly, is introduced by an epigraph from Philip Roth's novel *The Ghost Writer*: "*When you admire a writer you become curious. You look for his secret. The clues to his puzzle. – Zuckerman to Lonoff in Philip Roth's The Ghost Writer*" (TSIP, 1). The second part, which has both writers relocate to Paris, is headed by a quote from Marguerite Duras' *Writing*: "*I preserved the solitude of these first books. I carried it with me. I've always carried my*

*writing with me wherever I go. Paris. Trouville. New York*” (TSIP, 63). In addition, this part includes an in depth outline of Prem’s writing process, which is based on the careful and extensive mapping of character relations and the resulting plausible and implausible plot developments.<sup>249</sup> This chapter thus deals with mapping in its manifold meanings, from literal maps of places and spatial mapping in the encounter of a new city to the conceptual mapping of relationships which then again is visualized in actual graphic drawings. Other examples for these epigraphs would be a quote from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “*It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors*” (TSIP, 93), for a chapter that has Prem and Maya visit the Musée d’Orsay, but also looks at the concept of mirroring, and art and spectator in general. Other epigraphs from Baudelaire and Appollinaire are about passion and obsession, about sexual transgression, the need for expression, on desire, and death.

Moreover, each one of these epigraphs is already introduced or hinted at in the last lines and context of the ending of the respective preceding chapter. The effect of foreboding this inclusion of epigraphs, that range from the ancient Rigveda to Philip Roth, have is closely linked into the general structural and stylistic undercurrent of the text. The momentum of the reading experience and the enchantment of the text lies largely in its technique of deferment. The whole text, the plot development as well as a multiplicity of singular instances, depend on this style of (non-)disclosure. In the central love plot between Prem and Maya deferment turns the chronological strand of this sensual text almost into something like a long erotic foreplay, relocating the sensual experiences in their individual encounters into realms like music and the arts, thus appealing mostly to the visual and auditory perceptive apparatus, or food, foregrounding gustatory and olfactory impact. Deferment of the action and a sense of dalliance in the chronological plot is further enforced by small events that result in the repeated temporal separation of the two protagonists, like a dispute between them, Prem’s going away for a few days, or his family visiting him. Ultimately, the novel ends in an ironical act of structural narrative deferment that results in an anti-climax for this plot line. The novel only turns its narrative focus to the erotic sensuality of the eventual intercourse between Maya and Prem after already establishing Prem’s demise and relating the details of his funeral. Thus, the possibly created sense of an increasing erotic tension, instead of finding release, is deflated by first including information of Prem’s death and Maya’s desolation.

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<sup>249</sup> The literal maps he draws can cover the floor space of whole rooms, spawn off sub-maps and have inspired the work of a friend and computer scientist who had, when he first encountered these, been one of the forerunners in artificial intelligence. He claims Prem’s maps of decision mapping processed and plausibility analysis catapulted computer development forward by decades. Now one of his maps was housed in the Smithsonian behind bullet proof glass.

Deferment is also the structuring method with respect to the interwoven memory plots. The respective stories from Prem's past are never disclosed as full stories,<sup>250</sup> but rather in installments that are increasingly transgressive in nature. Even though the deferment again serves to increase the reader anticipation and enchantment, the partial revelations do not function as cliffhangers. The stories are seamlessly interwoven, the plot fading back and forth between past and present, because these memory narratives are not addressed at anyone. Rather they are the often very personal memories of the focalizer character, triggered by something in the present. Consequently, only the triggered memory shreds would resurface. At the same time, the character remembering has no need to contextualize or relate full tales or details, as she or he would naturally be aware of any such context. The effect is that the reader is held in suspense on multiple plot strands. The increasing level of transgression, in terms of social taboos, that the memory narratives unfold, further heightens reader anticipation. This is most prominent with regard to Prem's first love to his sister Meher, but also the very first narrated memory plot about his later lover Vedika. In both cases, the consumption of sexual desire is increasingly suggested, but the stories are delivered in installments of different foci. The full extent of the erotic involvement of Prem with the respective women is only eventually disclosed. The more intense his involvement or the less socially acceptable, the more intricate the deferment and the more prolonged the eventual disclosure.

The mode in which the erotic suffuses this text, not least in the fact that each of Prem's love stories is transgressive of social taboos, is reflective of George Bataille's analysis of taboo and transgression, most prominently his study *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality*. In fact, Bataille is mentioned in the novel on several occasions. First as a literary reference to his novella *Story of the Eye*,<sup>251</sup> which not coincidentally<sup>252</sup> details the transgressive and increasingly perverse sexual relationship of a pair of teenagers, a topic the reader will eventually reencounter as they get to know about Prem's incestuous relationship to his sister as they were growing up, but it may also come to mind when a 65-year old Prem Rustum enjoys the sexual attention of the two teenage granddaughters of his friend while staying at their summer residence.<sup>253</sup> Bataille is again

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<sup>250</sup> A very different way of interwoven memory narratives can be found in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the frame narrative creates a situation between a narrator and a listener to whom the stories from the past are actually told. As a result, these narratives are clearly structured, largely chronological, and serving a purpose in the present rather than being momentarily triggered by an experience in the present. See chapter 8.

<sup>251</sup> Cf. Roger Johnson's recollection of his years at Harvard where he attended literary parties. "He could speak in that wonderful music of writerspeak, where a single page in a book conveyed worldviews and mere references to possessive proper nouns like Bataille's Simone delivered hard-ons," p. 41f.

<sup>252</sup> Cf. Leonard Davis' argument in *Resisting Novels* where he compellingly outlines how nothing in a literary text was arbitrary and that every detail fulfills an ideological function.

<sup>253</sup> However, neither relationship of Prem should be compared to the perversions and violence of Bataille's story. The similarities end with the age of the participants and the fact that taboos are being transgressed. The sexual acts and their depictions in the two texts bear no similarities.

mentioned when Maya first meets her French lover Jean-Pierre, as he originates from the city the writer is buried in, which – in line with Bataille’s argument – immediately aligns the budding eroticism between the two young writers with death.<sup>254</sup> Bataille’s study of eroticism, death, taboo and transgression finally is explicitly mentioned by the French girls who seduce their grandfather’s 65-year old friend: “We have heard our *parrain* and his guests discuss the nature of French secularism and the eroticism of Bataille and Sade” (*TSIP* 112). The girls use this as their argument why it would be absolutely fine for them to seduce him and that he need not worry about their age, as they were well versed in the world of the erotic.

In *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, Bataille investigates eroticism as that which differentiates human sexuality from that of animals, as the inner experience regardless of reproduction. By looking at eroticism as physical, emotional and religious, he allocates it a mystical quality, or “sacramental character” (Bataille, 16), aligned with the experience of life and death. Even if we share an experience, we are all discontinuous beings in life, whereby death denotes continuity, reminding us of our finiteness. “[D]eath does not affect the continuity of existence; continuity of existence is independent of death and is *even proved by death*” (ibid., 21 emphasis in the original). Erotic activity, then, in its attempt to dissolve the discontinuity between two beings, also creates an awareness of continuity and disrupts the everyday awareness of our discontinuous existence. Insofar, eroticism is akin to death.<sup>255</sup> Moreover, it is equated with violence. “[T]he domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation” (ibid., 16), both in the sexual act of penetration as well as in the violation of social taboos, as sexuality and nakedness often carry notions of shame. Social existence strives for order and productivity, yet these can only be established and asserted through their violation and transgression. Erotic excess “suggests disorder” (ibid., 170). More importantly, the taboo, whose function it is to combat violence, could not exist without its transgression. The two are co-dependent. Transgression “suspends a taboo without suppressing it” (ibid., 36), it doesn’t deny the taboo, but rather transcends it and thus completes it.

Bataille’s argument of eroticism as inner experience, as persistent transgression, and as akin to death seems to suffuse Dawesar’s *That Summer in Paris*. Yet, the novel is not just narrating a string of sexual transgressions like Bataille’s rather pornographic *The Story of the Eye*.

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<sup>254</sup> The meeting also entails several other intertextual references, not least of which to Philip Roth, as Jean-Pierre is carrying a book he is reading and upon Maya’s inquiry tells her it was *Carnovsky*, which in fact is the fictional novel (and a fictive version of Roth’s actual novel *Potnoy’s Complaint*) that the fictive Nathan Zuckerman had written in Roth’s novel *Zuckerman Unbound*. The reference to Roth, then, not only calls up Prem, who had through previous intertextual references been linked to Roth in the informed readers’ experience of the text, but moreover is yet another text that abounds with transgressions of taboos and explicit treatments of sexual acts, thus complementing the mention of Bataille’s name in this scene.

<sup>255</sup> In French this kinship is in fact reflected in the language itself, as the common French term for orgasm is “petit mort” or “little death”.



Dawesar's text reflects what Bataille's study outlined in a more intricate manner, as the reading experience has the reader partake to some extent in the eroticism of the text through an emphasis on sensual experiences and the increasing erotic tension created through deferment in addition to the narration of sexual activities and transgressions of social taboos.

Interestingly enough, the slow unravelling of the individual sub-plots and the heightened anticipation also have an effect on the moral judgment in the reading experience. As the reader has come to care about Prem and as the transgressions are presented by him as the focalizer character, the reader is kept suspended in a balance between shock and enchantment, to use Felski's terms.<sup>256</sup> While "[e]nchantment is soaked through with an unusual intensity of perception and affect" (Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 70), shock is "a reaction to what is startling, painful, even horrifying" (ibid., 105). "Our reaction does not spring from any real or imagined threat to our safety; the affront is to our moral or aesthetic sensibilities rather than our physical well-being" (ibid. 112). However, reading Dawesar's novel, the shock at transgressions is subdued by keeping the reader enchanted. The mere facts ranging from incest, a 65-year-old man's sexual affiliations with teenagers, verbally abusive relationships and neurotic stalking, to sleeping with the wife of one's best friend may elicit moral judgment and reactions of shock, yet the mode of the narrative precludes the impact of shock in each instance and draws the reader into the web of sensuality. Moreover, the text employs a kind of double enchantment insofar as it is not only the reader who is enchanted by the reading experience, but the characters in the book are themselves continuously enchanted by the various sensual experiences throughout the narrative. Enchantment, as Felski sees it, is

characterized by a state of intense involvement, a sense of being entirely caught up in an aesthetic object . . . [It] is soaked through with an unusual intensity of perception and affect; . . . perceptions are heightened, details stand out with a hallucinatory sharpness . . . The effect can be uniquely exhilarating . . . but also unnerving, in sapping a sense of autonomy and self-control. . . . Possessing some of the viscerality of shock, enchantment has none of its agitating and confrontational character; it offers rapturous self-forgetting rather than self-shattering. (ibid. 54 f.)

Both Maya and Prem are repeatedly struck by the impact of such experiences and are thoroughly enchanted, taken out of their factual surroundings, to be absorbed by the art, music or even at one point the food they are consuming. While all of these experiences function to enhance the reader's sense of enchantment and in creating the erotic undercurrent of the book, they also portray enchantment itself. One of many instances would be Prem and Maya's visit to the Musée d'Orsay: "When Prem left the room with the Latours, he found Maya staring at a painting in the next room.

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<sup>256</sup> Felski, in her study also notices an "erotic undertow of aesthetic enchantment" (Felski, *Uses of Literature* 53) in her discussion of *Madame Bovary*.

Her lips were parted, and she stood in a kind of half turn, as if the painting had cast a spell on her” (*TSIP*, 95), or as Maya sees a statue of a couple embracing in the Bois de Bologne:

Her eyes came to rest on the statue of a couple that sent a shiver through her legs. Four legs, four thighs. Legs with an immense muscular energy that electrified her own legs and transmitted the energy all the way across the rippling water to where she was standing. (*TSIP*, 208)

Shock on the other hand is conspicuously absent on the plot level, especially considering the string of transgressions that make up the frame narrative and memories. In her study, Felski mentions, with respect to contemporary literature and criticism, that “[w]e are currently in the midst of what can only be called a glamorizing of transgression” (*ibid.*, 110), as the more transgressive a subject the more interest it seems to garner from the critics. This could on a metatextual level even apply to Dawesar’s text insofar as the depicted character is a Nobel Laureate, and each of his novels revisits one of the transgressive love stories of his past. In fact, Prem takes himself out of the common cycle of moral judgements from the very beginning, as he emphasizes that already in his socialization, he lacked the clear distinctions between different utterances of admiration, and that his childhood focus on his sister had skewed his moral compass. Of course, he knew of the distinction of social roles and their limitations, but he had also experienced the pleasure of their transgression from his earliest childhood on.

Meher, the sole recipient of his adolescent longing, sibling love, devotion, and in some of their moments together, the teacher, the adult, the protective older sister. Distinctions as other people learned them, between admiration and lust, platonic love and filial, teacher and student, older and younger, friend and sister, the absolute and the partial, had not existed for Prem. The universe he shared with Meher was organic, a living, breathing, entity that could be divided into these categories no less or more than a little puppy could be divided into its heart, brain, tongue, and tail. (*TSIP*, 24)

Even his subsequent relationship with Vedika, the wife of his friend, is not only a transgression of this social code of friendship, but in addition yet again shows traces of incestuous adoration, as he initially refers to her in the customary Indian manner of calling her *bhabhi*, meaning sister-in-law, thus turning her into family, though strictly speaking not by blood relation.

What most prominently marks Prem’s taboo-breaking relationships and in a way enables the reader to cast aside the shock, is the fact that he shows no remorse or even acknowledgement of the taboo. He is keenly aware that he is acting against social standards yet refuses to adopt such standards for his own perception.

He had to take his time after Vedika to move on to love affairs less *mystérieuses* but more *puissantes*. Prem divorced himself from his guilt. When he pursued the best friends of his ex-lovers, his Indian publisher’s wife, or the barely legal French *filles* he did so with the absolute conviction of a man who believes in the uses of sex for everyday life, in its necessity and in its amorality. (*TSIP*, 88).

This attitude is again in line with Bataille’s argument regarding the transgression of taboos: “When a negative emotion has the upper hand we must obey the taboo. When a positive emotion is in the ascendant we violate it. Such a violation will not deny or suppress the contrary emotion, but justify

it and arouse it” (Bataille, 64). That is to say, “[t]he taboo is there to be violated” (ibid.). By having Prem as the main focalizer character relate the individual transgressive episodes, the reader is invited to adopt or share Prem’s point of view, understand his motivation and emotions and thus eventually submit to an attitude that validates the violation of the taboo without resulting in actual shock in the reading experience.

Ironically, while the emphasis on enchantment and character focalization seemingly invite the reader to partake in the developments and emotions, the text at the same time repeatedly and with increasing emphasis discusses the impossibility of truly sharing any experience. Sensory impressions dominate the characters activities, whether that be listening to concerts, looking at art, or sharing meals, whereby the focus lies on their sharing in these experiences, trying to achieve unity. When Maya early on expresses the wish to cook for Prem towards the beginning of the book, she makes her point by arguing:

I think that cooking for someone is no different from listening to music or looking at art with someone. There is a moment when you are able to transcend the usual boundaries that are imposed by the fact that we are all separate human beings with separate bodies. I want to return a bit of the pleasure I’ve had from reading your books. (TSIP, 71)

Yet, from the very beginning the text is shaped by an oscillation between the desire for congruence and the impossibility of it. Early on, as Maya and Prem attend a concert, the reader experiences something of an almost meeting, in so far as the rhythm and focus on musicality had reminded Prem of his writing process of his novel ‘Raga’, which triggers a flashback. When talking to Maya after the concert she exclaims: “I loved it! It reminded me of *Raga*. I felt I was inside the book and there at the same time.” The music transposed them both into another piece of art, into the same book, yet on different sides of it. Maya was reminded of the novel as such, while Prem had been pondering about his very different experience of writing the book, trying to express volume and sound with words on the page.

The text does not only expose this dominant theme in the juxtaposition of character’s simultaneous yet never fully shared experiences, highlighting the differences in impact due to differences in age, background, socialization, or past experiences, but even addressed the topic explicitly in several instances. Prem for one, is keenly aware of the limitations of sharing, yet in his inability to ever form a lasting meaningful love relationship in his life, still yearns for that kind of union with another being. “He wasn’t greedy – age had made him realistic. All he wanted was some period of time, however short, where his own state and that of someone else’s matched. Exactly. It had never happened outside of sex, and even in intercourse rarely” (TSIP, 97). His friend Pascal then lectured him on the idealistic naivety of his desire. “You’re inventing a concept

that doesn't even exist. Consciousness is a function of the individual self, not the community, not even a community of two. The Marxist analysis of consciousness is useless for the appreciation of art and eros" (ibid.).

Moreover, experience can also not be repeated. No matter how marvelous any event, sight, or taste could have been, recreating it or revisiting a site can never result in the same experience. Circumstances and surroundings would be different, but more importantly, as each of Prem's visits to an art museum with Maya highlights, each piece that had been viewed before, will automatically also evoke that memory of previous visits and overlap the experiences in his mind. It cannot be relived for the very fact that it had already happened and had left an impact.

The most impactful episode in the novel that exemplifies the dilemma of separateness through shared activities is a visit to a *fromager*. This scene, as many other sensual experiences, again oscillates between the four major themes of the novel, art, food, eroticism, and death, yet compared to previous episodes with a heightened awareness and urgency. After an introduction by the *fromager*, both opt for the same plate of a variety of Corsican cheeses "which promised a progression of sensations from the very mild to the very strong" (*TSIP*, 222). The *fromager* informs them that "[a]t some point you will reach a state where words are no longer needed or sufficient. You will be in pure experience. That is the goal. A moment of gastronomic orgasm." (*TSIP*, 223).

Prem watch her. He had not brought her here hoping to share the same digestive process but rather to look at her face and the expressions that flickered over it. He had brought her to the Maitre Fromager to watch her in a moment of profound enjoyment or possibly ecstasy that he had previously not seen. When he removed his eyes from Maya and put a slice of the same cheese in his mouth, Prem forgot her for an instant. He felt the fluid spread of the white substance on his tongue. When he returned to his surroundings, she was staring at him intently.

"You weren't here. I could see."

"No, I wasn't."

"We could never be on the same page so precisely with a book"

Prem reached for his three o'clock cheese. Maya picked at her antipasti.

"Hmm," Prem sighed. (*TSIP*, 223 f.)

Even though both had an intense gustatory experience, it is not identical. In addition, although they have the same meal, they alter the context of the taste in the sequence of bites they chose and thus they alter and prepare their palate differently for the next taste. Prem's 'Hmm' here is further ambivalent as it can be both, the appreciation of the next bite or a murmured agreement to Maya's statement. Prem then links food to intimacy, inquiring

"Since food is such an intimate matter for you, can I ask why you wanted to cook for me? Why do you want to share this kind of intimacy with me? After all, we're not lovers." . . .

"Intimacy isn't merely about romantic love. I feel close to you, and I wanted to implicate myself with you in some way." (*TSIP*, 224)

Maya continues that she values their relationship and wants to hold on to his friendships forever, to which Prem counters that there was no such thing, and that he was to die soon. Maya admits she had thought about his death, first as an author, and now that she has come to know him as a part of her life and how everything in Paris is connected with him.

“I associate even the colors of Degas’ and van Gogh’s palettes with you. I’m sorry, I’ve never spoken to anyone about his or her death. It feels like a transgression”

It was a transgression. It was like splitting open his flesh and pushing her finger in. It was like knowing that the piece of cheese in his mouth was stimulating parts of his epithelium as they had hers. It was like taking away something that was his and making it her own. Is this what women felt when men fucked them? Is this what he had done to all the women he had penetrated?

“I have not written for far too long,” Prem said.

“Why did you think of that?” Maya asked.

“To live always meant to write, but now I feel more alive than I have since adolescence, and I’m not writing at all.”

Listening to Maya speak about his death had released a certain kind of desire inside him that went hand in hand with violence. The violence of pushing past an acceptable boundary. The erotic and romantic equivalent of writing. Writing was a constant violation. (*TSIP*, 225).

Much like Bataille’s argument this passage moves from a sensual experience to the erotic, explicitly linking it to violence, first in the act of penetration, in pushing into flesh, but also taking something of the other, to then highlight how art, like eroticism, was transgressive and in being so, violent in pushing boundaries, which brings the passage back to the issue of death.

Sex, art, and death are, in fact, an inseparable triptych of transgression the book and in particular this episode revolves around. From the topic of writing and discussing Prem the author, the text returns to the present again within just a few lines and the eroticism of their meal. They both taste the strongest of the cheeses, “The jewel in the crown. The climax” (*TSIP*, 226), and then reach for the jam to sweeten their palates, at which Maya exclaims “See, we are each of us exactly the same. Our oral sensations compel us to reach for jam after that last cheese. This is my final proof of the possibility of true shared experience. It’s rooted in absolute but common subjectivity” (*TSIP*, 226). Which returns Prem to memories of past intimacy and back to the topic of his own death.

“*L’égalité!*” Prem said aloud, bitterly: as if the taste of a *chèvre crèmeux* could be the same in the mouth of someone with one foot in the grave as in the mouth of a woman still waiting for a lifetime of fame and seduction. (*TSIP*, 227)<sup>257</sup>

From this thought about death the text again returns to the topic of sex, with Maya admitted that she had also thought about intercourse with him, which he tells her was even less appropriate than

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<sup>257</sup> The wording here also takes up a pun Prem used at the very first meeting between them, when he described himself as having “one foot in the grave and another perpetually in my mouth” (*TSIP*, 54).

thinking of his death. “Well, both thoughts were equally transgressive when they came to me, if you would like to know,’ Maya said” (*TSIP*, 227).

While the first half of the novel is dominated by art, with the characters visiting museums and concerts, the second half increasingly shifts towards the topic of death. Maya’s neighbor tells her of her love for a gay choreographer who died, Pascal’s partner Irene is dying of cancer, and increasingly the text includes foreshadowing of or contemplations about Prem’s eventual death. All these topics, art, sex and death, are colored by the constant undercurrent of the text, the question of transience. The text repeatedly discusses issues the lasting relevance of art through time, and the split persona of artist/writer and living person, and how Prem’s work will outlive him or how music or sculptures created decades or centuries ago continue to impact. Yet the sentiment dominating any such discussion, closely interwoven with the inability to truly share in an experience, is the fact that all experience is just momentarily, transient, and never truly to be revisited.

The very insistence on experiences not being really shareable, also heightens the notion of isolation.

With age, the large holes he drilled into himself with his fiction came to be about things even more intimate than sex and love, they involved his own fears and the universe that could not be shared with others. (*TSIP*, 88)

This becomes particularly striking in depictions of the most intimate moments that suggest ultimate closeness between people, like the visit to the *fromager* above or the final consumption of their passion between Prem and Maya after their return to the U.S. Any notion of true proximity and unity is always distorted by the emphasis on individual, different, isolated ways of experiencing them. Maya and Prem first share their passion in writing, Prem gives her a notebook filled with descriptions of his erotic desire for her, which she reads on her flight back from Paris, distanced from him. Joining him at his home, she then reciprocates the gesture by giving him a letter of the same content, which he reads in isolation before she finally joins him. Then, as the fusion between the two lovers is finally completed and they decide to be together, the most extreme form of distance through death occurs. Moreover, the reader is informed of this death and is witness to Prem’s funeral prior to reading about the culmination of their passion, which in the reading experience thus already marks this union with separation and transience rather than a romantic hue of a happy ending.

As stressed above, this narrative mode of deferment throughout the novel is not in opposition to the foregrounding of transience in the text, it is rather an element of it. In its suggestiveness and promise of coming events it already also implies their passing. The text refuses conceptualizations of life through binaries. In the central theme of transience and the dominating

question of the subjectivity and thus ultimately the ‘unshareability’ of experience the text emphasizes particularities, different perspectives and the relationality between subject positions that never fully meet, yet constantly overlap. Deferment is the text’s structural implementation of this theme. The non-transcendable individuality of the subjects not only foregrounds difference in sameness, but through that also carries the notion of transience, as the text exemplifies that no single perception could consequently ever hold a ‘true’ or ‘real’ view of any experience. Both, time and perspective constantly alter what any subject takes as his or her reality. Moreover, through a foregrounding as well as repeated discussion of the impossibility of shared experience alongside the theme of transience, Dawesar emphasizes difference in the question of communality, without a focus on identity. That is to say, in its foregrounding of experience as the constant and yet unique and untranslatable aspect of every individual life, the very notion of collective identity is implicitly disavowed.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> This is additionally emphasized by having the text exclusively populated by characters belonging to a globalized cosmopolitan elite. Although occasional cultural markers may find mention in the text, these are largely disregarded as irrelevant for identity definitions. Shared qualities, like a love for the arts or the common profession as a writer, are focused on as much as differences in individual temperament and needs. These relevant identity markers that highlight sameness or difference, are hardly ever elevated to a level that would make them also relevant for the construction of a collective body.

## 7 Family Configurations and the Impossibility of Care

The family frequently forms the central unit around which plots in ethnic and diaspora fictions revolve. Family not only forms the core for an experience of community, but moreover, is the site where traditions are preserved, and culture and heritage get performed. In contrast, recent fiction increasingly calls this trope into question and/or reimagines the underlying assumptions of the concept. This is hardly surprising, as contemporary social developments have seen considerable changes in what once formed the stable entity at the base of social structures. British sociologist Anthony Giddens took a closer look at changing social patterns and forms of social cohesion in his chapter on family in his small volume *Runaway World*. He does not only look at the nuclear or larger traditional family units, but also at relationships and social networks as such, that is to say at the contacts we keep on a fairly regular and immediate basis.

There are three main areas in which emotional communication, and therefore intimacy, are replacing the old ties that used to bind together people's personal lives – in sexual and love relationships, parent-child relationships and also in friendship. (Giddens 2000, 79).

Giddens' brief historical outline of intimate relationships then focuses on notions of family in the more traditional sense, as this concept most radically changed over the centuries. More importantly, it is currently resurrected in its traditional form as a desirable epitome of stability and security. We can, thus, observe a dual development: on the one hand, we experience an increasingly fluid conceptualization of family that goes beyond blood bonds to include various configurations of patchwork families, same gender parents, or family units constituted by friendship or joint living situations; on the other hand, this destabilization of traditional social structures triggered a resurrection of that original model as a defensive development, offering a supposedly stable and safe alternative to new and vague constellations and the general experience of instability and change. Both, in still very traditional societies as well as in the West, such an appeal to 'protect the family' is becoming increasingly shrill in the face of globalization changes. "The family is a site for the struggles between tradition and modernity, but also a metaphor for them" (Giddens 2000, 71).

Yet, as Giddens outlines, the idea of 'family' that is advocated here for protection is actually a fairly new one, emerging only in the mid-twentieth century. The prior original idea of family – no matter how it was constituted in different societies – sees family first and foremost as an economic unit, based on fixed roles for every member. Consequently, inequality between the genders, and in general unequal distributions of rights were a given while children usually lacked rights altogether. The economic union rested on the central generational relationships.



In contrast, the ‘traditional family’ evoked in contemporary discourses is that of the 1950s in Western countries, a time of transition where the male adult household member was the breadwinner, the female managed the household and children, and divorce rates were low. This image is both idealized and ironized today, as for example the high popularity of the TV-show *Mad Men*, set in just such an environment, indicates. In addition, as Bahira-Sherif Trask in her study on *Globalization and Families* notes with reference to studies by the historian Stephanie Coontz, this idea of especially a US-American nuclear family was largely a nostalgic idea from the outset, as the post-WW II reality for many families, especially African-Americans, immigrants, or those from lower income segments in general could never afford such a concept of an idealized family life to begin with.<sup>259</sup>

Even though the traditional conceptions of families are changing, if not dissolving, around the globe, that does by no means signify that the notion of family loses relevance; its structure and content may be changing, but not its function. Trask states, “[e]mpirical evidence from around the globe indicates that families continue to be a primary resource for acquiring social and economic capital” (Trask 196), and she emphasizes repeatedly that decision making processes, conflicts, and notions of belonging continue to be located first and foremost within the family unit.

[F]amilies continue to reformulate and redefine themselves and their activities in innovative, and, at times, controversial ways. It is within families that the social processes and transformations associated with globalization are realized and acted upon. . . . [T]he significance of family arrangements for so many individuals around the globe, indicate that the idiom and lived experience of family within a globalized world, continues to be strong, adaptable, and of primary significance for individuals. Most people still choose to maintain close relationships by living in small bonded units, bound by ties of affection and / or economics. These groups may dissolve at times or be reconceptualized depending on context and inclination and yet, individuals continue to pursue some form of close attachment to others. (Trask 198)

The idea of family is currently changing from a patriarchal family towards more fluid, inclusive, and function oriented ‘socioscapes.’ These new formations, as Giddens argues, put the couple in the center of the family unit, where the traditional model had centered on generations and generational relationships. “In the traditional family, the married couple was only one part, and often not the main part, of the family system. . . . Today the couple, married or unmarried, is at the core of what the family is” (ibid. 77). While marriage did not use to be about intimacy but about economic, social or religious reasons, for the couple intimacy is the foundation. Today the question of belonging is about being in an intimate rather than an economic relationship. This also resulted in a “separation of sexuality from reproduction” which “is in principle complete” (Giddens 2000, 75). Sexuality is no longer predominately linked to marriage (or extra-marital activities), and goes decidedly beyond heterosexual relations. At the same time, the role of

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<sup>259</sup> Cf. Trask 28.

children, too, has changed drastically. Today we are concerned about children's rights. They are no longer seen primarily as economic assets or additional workforce – on the contrary, rearing children means a significant financial burden.

Giddens focus, then, is on the concept of intimate relationships that are at the basis of the individual as a social being – sexual and love relationships, parent-child relations and friendships. Such social relationships are based on “processes of active trust – opening oneself up to the other. Disclosure is the basic condition of intimacy. The pure relationship is implicitly democratic” (ibid. 79). That means it depends on communication and open dialogue, on trust, and equal rights, and it has to be devoid of coercion or violence – characteristics that also distinguish a democracy from authoritarian systems of governance. This conception then results in Giddens' idea of ‘emotional democracy,’ by which he means the acknowledgment and acceptance of rights and obligations in the relationship.<sup>260</sup> A democracy of emotions would also “draw no distinctions of principle between heterosexual and same-sex relationships” (ibid. 82). Consequently, Giddens ends by cautioning against the traditional – and to him outdated – models of family as they very much run against the notion of ‘emotional democracy’ which advocates equality, for example in the education of women, and the dissolution of (hetero)normative frames of defining ‘family.’ Given that the individual continues to be constituted as a family-member of some sort in our core characteristic as social beings, these units of belonging need to provide the basis for happiness, safety, and the development of a social conscience.

Bahira-Sherif Trask in a similar way points out that “[c]onceptualizations about the form, function, and utility of families change over time and result out of a unique interplay of historical, political, economic, and social forces” (Trask 24), which makes it difficult to use the concept as analytical entity. There is no agreement among social scientists and policy makers as to what constitutes a ‘family’ or who belonged or who didn't belong and on what grounds. With the conceptual shift from blood-ties and institutionalized bonds towards behavior and function oriented approaches, focusing on social reality rather than legal status, ‘family’ now includes a variety of forms of mere cohabitation, same-sex partnerships (even or especially where same-sex marriage or institutionalized forms of union are prohibited), foster parenting, etc.<sup>261</sup> In this context, Trask also acknowledges the role of the nation-state in the socio-economic and socio-political realities of families, and the changing role of the nation as intermediary between the global and the local or intimate social.

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<sup>260</sup> Giddens first used the term in his 1994 study *Beyond Left And Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, to describe a democratic order based on dialogue, where “active trust is mobilized and sustained through discussion and the interchange of views, rather than by arbitrary power of one sort or another” (Giddens, 1994, p. 16).

<sup>261</sup> Cf. Trask chapter 2.

Her interest is with the ideological implications of rights and perceptions that inform and shape families. She cautions against assuming that societies around the globe will mirror the Western developments in family formations. She repeatedly emphasizes that the social, and thus the individual and families, are not just shaped and influenced by processes of globalization, but are actors and agents in these at the same time. The multifaceted phenomenon these interrelations constitute is too complex to be comprehensively portrayed. A keen awareness of this complexity, however, needs to shape our investigations of the subject, even though investigations are only possible for specific cases and instances and do not allow for generalizations or large-scale assumptions, exactly because of their complexity.

Trask in her last chapter on “Social Change, New Paradigms and Implications for Families” focuses largely on the changes in the social due to mobility and media as the dominant processes of globalization, and thus on how Anderson’s term of the ‘imagined community’ has recently gained new force, dissociating it from the idea of the nation-state to refer to the very idea of communitarian social constructs as “centered around specific, constructed identities, rather than geographical location” (Trask 184). She adds a focus on the different impact of a global work force on various regions and that the fact that economic realities may force women and even children to work outside the home has nothing to do with individual advancement or independence and agency, but on the contrary may have significant negative impact on the family in questions, on care-work and protection and preservation of the family environment.<sup>262</sup>

While the idea of what constitutes a family may currently undergo crucial changes and revisions, a notion of family continues to be at the core of the individual’s idea of belonging and identity as a social being. ‘Families’ form the smallest unit of coexistence and shape the individual’s idea of him/herself from the earliest stages on. At the same time, this social nucleus also continues to be the core site of friction, where discontent, power relations, and at times even violent eruptions play out and need to be negotiated and managed. The idea(l) of the family may be one of emotional democracy and care for each other, the reality often shows the limitations of these. The following chapter will analyze two radically different texts which both deal with these limitations in one form or another. Saleema Nawaz’s short story collection *Mother Superior* approaches the question of caretaking from various angles in a multitude of family constellations only to end at a similar conclusion: life is precarious and to really take care of an other is eventually an impossible feat. Abha Dawesar’s novel *Family Values* in contrast takes the family unit as a parable of the faultiness of society and the hypocrisy of evoking family values and ties. In doing so, each of the texts at the same time demands to read beyond frames of ethnicity or a symptomatic

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<sup>262</sup> Cf. Trask 185.

reading. Nawaz's stories largely disregard questions of race and ethnicity altogether, or question and criticize notions of identity built on the arbitrariness of such classifications. Dawesar's novel, in contrast, may be clearly set in India's capital, yet the overpowering defamiliarization that characterizes the text distances it from a cultural context turning it into a bleak everyman allegory.

## 7.1 Impossible Care

If diasporic literature is marked by the family serving as the representative microcosm in which transcultural and intergenerational conflicts were played out, recent fiction seems to rather focus on the particular, the unique and complex circumstances of one or several character/s in an intimate family(-like) setting and their struggles within those circumstances. The ideal function of the family unit remains the same: to provide stability, safety and care. But recent fiction, like the texts selected for the present case study, rather explores the specific intimacy and limitations of such constellations, painting a compelling and at its best a haunting image of particular family units, which often are of a non-traditional composition, and is careful not to invite a representative reading.

By looking at the cracks in relationships, Saleema Nawaz's short stories collected in *Mother Superior*<sup>263</sup> describe, in a poetic, and often amusing language the limitations of care for others who are close to us. *Mother Superior* portrays a mélange of possible family configurations, single mothers, families constituted through friendship and cohabitation rather than blood ties, multi-ethnic families, children from various relationships, adopted children, as well as dysfunctional relationships or families. Although these stories of characters bruised by life at times hinge on the melodramatic, Nawaz demonstrates narrative competence in the clearness of voice and a frequent juxtaposition of the banality and often cruelty of life with poetic imagery. The underlying theme of all the stories collected in *Mother Superior* is the desire or need to take care of one another, and yet, ultimately, a failure or impossibility of such an endeavor.

The first and title story "Mother Superior" ironizes the connotations of this heading both in its catholic nunnery implications as well as in a literal sense. The story already starts out with a variety of images ridiculing Christian religious institutions and rituals.

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<sup>263</sup> Canadian author Saleema Nawaz graduated from the University of Manitoba, where her novella "The White Dress" won the inaugural Robert Kroetsch Award for best creative thesis. She published her debut collection in 2008 with Freehand Books Calgary. Her stories have, for example, been published in journals including *The New Quarterly*, *Prairie Fire*, or *PRISM international*. The story "My Three Girls" also won the 2008 Writers' Trust of Canada / McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize. Nawaz is of Indian descent on her father's side, but grew up with her Caucasian Canadian mother in Ottawa. She now lives in Montreal.

Joan won't get an abortion. She says she is a slut but a slut for Jesus. She doesn't go to church but chugs cases of Baby Duck and calls it communion wine. . . . Joan used to think that I would go to hell for being a lesbian, but now she thinks I'll make it to purgatory because I'm practically a nun anyway. (MS 1)

Short comments like these stab at the hypocrisy of religious morality that claims to preach love and understanding and yet is all too ready to condemn those considered 'sinners' according to the standards of the church. Joan, while looking down on her friend's homosexuality, too would be considered a sinner and cast from the sanctuary, as she is pregnant from a brief relationship with a man who is no longer in the picture nor knows about her carrying his child. Joan also does by no means meet the title's standards in a literal sense, on the contrary, her approach to mothering has only her own needs, but not the child's welfare in mind.

Joan may possess a lingering sense of religiosity that may prevent her from getting an abortion, but her behavior throughout her pregnancy definitely does not display much of a mothering disposition. On the contrary, she seems to consciously want to harm the fetus. She displays a shockingly careless and naïve approach to this pregnancy. Her selfish motive for having this child, it seems, is to be able to claim someone as her own, a motive the story then further enforces as it shows that belonging is a temporary thing. Joan, for example, claims that her drinking would not really be harmful for the embryo, "[a]t worst, she says, it might make it slow. The kind of kid who could never leave you. A little less likely to see the evil in the world is how she finally puts it" (MS 1). In addition, she exposes the unborn child to loud music, to "blow its fucking ears out," because then "she'll teach it sign language and their house will be silent and peaceful as a church. There will be only coughing and the drawing of breaths. The almost inaudible noises of waiting and growing" (MS 4).

The homodiegetic narrator, who herself is clearly not enamored with children, as is obvious in the use of imagery like "the tiny thief without a face living as a parasite off her blood" (MS 3), cares deeply for Joan, yet sees no point in intercepting her behavior. "The saints hold their tongues, and so do I, thinking about the instincts of animals, the laws of nature that force us all to make our own mistakes" (MS 3). She pampers her friend, giving her a bath and washing her hair, yet her care-giving is triggered exclusively by her own sexual attraction to Joan.

The story revolves around Joan and her fragile state as both, a woman with child, and as a woman at the center of a love rivalry, because she has two people compete in the role of caretaker. First, there is her roommate who is trying to provide comforts for her and the unborn baby and to coax her towards a healthier lifestyle. Secondly, there is Larry, who has a sexual fondness for pregnant women. He met Joan at a video store and followed her home. In their rivalry, the narrator returns to the catholic imagery "wishing for this to really be a convent after all, with Larry outside at the door, begging for sanctuary" (MS 5).

The short narrative follows a chronological, yet distinctly anecdotal structure. Short seemingly unrelated paragraphs give glimpses into the trios' life throughout Joan's pregnancy. In doing so, this series of anecdotes reveals the dark side of the overabundance of love and attention for the woman and the baby, that is to say, the ulterior and in each case utterly selfish motives of each of the three characters. This is most obvious in Larry. He does not try to hide that his attraction is to Joan's condition more than to her person or personality. Yet he showers her with attention, making her feel loved and beautiful. But, when her water breaks and the three of them rush to the hospital, Larry bids her farewell in the taxi.

Although, on the surface this unconventional triangle of love and care seems to fulfill the needs of all those involved, the narrative depicts a highly dysfunctional form of caretaking that is solely borne out of selfish interests of each of the involved parties. This deeper motivation then suffuses the story with a sense of precarity, as the form of care given is unreliable and not formed around the needs of those cared for. Although the three of them cohabitate in a family-setting, with a child on the way to further reinforce that constellation, their bond is marked by temporariness instead of stability and continuity, which are commonly considered features of the traditional notion of family.<sup>264</sup> This lack of stability and continuity, then, is also mirrored and further reinforced on the formal level in the story's anecdotal structure and a general sense of disconnect created by the staccato tone the frequent shortness of the sentences sets.

In all the stories in this collection, Nawaz's narrative style creates a certain intimacy through her voices. The majority of the stories, like "Mother Superior", employ a homodiegetic narrative perspective and present tense narratives; both strategies that in the reading experience create the impression of intimacy and immediacy.

These techniques are most strikingly employed in the story "The Beater," a narrative of a highly fragmented, anecdotal structure, where elements told in present tense are interspersed with analepsis of early childhood memories. Where "Mother Superior" in the depiction of a naïve mother to be, a jealous lesbian roommate and a fetishist intruder, evoked an almost playful tone despite an underlying precariousness, "The Beater" from the very first sentence creates a sense of dread that continues to be built upon throughout the story. "One of your earliest memories is of your mother hurrying you down the street, telling you not to look at your house." (*MS* 104). A

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<sup>264</sup> A lack of continuity or stability is also characteristic of the role of the unborn baby; first insofar as Joan's pregnancy is in and off itself a temporary state, secondly, because there is no actual plan for the child's future beyond being birth. The narrator at the outset even states: "This makes me think that our house is like a home for unwed mothers . . . and when the baby is ready to come out someone will take it away forever. Then it will be just the two of us" (*MS* 1f.).

sense of dread that is reinforced in the next paragraph as it poignantly depicts the child's experience of that moment: "You stumble to keep up, legs trembling. You're three, and fear is contagious" (ibid.). The fragmented double narrative of past and present not only tells of the paranoia that dominated her childhood, but in the present tense narrative also depicts how this upbringing and the troubled relationship with her mother still paralyze the protagonist in her adult life.

What makes this such a powerful narrative is clearly the form of implied address. Although we are presented with the memories and history of the focalizer character, whose mother fled from an abusive husband and household, leaving the children she had with that man behind, moving and living in the permanent fear that he would find her, the second person pronoun seemingly addresses the reader, telling us what we see and how we feel. At first glance, this form of voice creates intimacy with the reader. The oppressive paranoia of the text is heightened by the particularity of its voice, transferring some of the claustrophobic suffocating fear onto the reader. On a deeper level, however, the second pronoun actually functions as a psychological distancing of the narrator from the events. The "you", though continuously implicating the reader through its grammatical interpellation, is actually reference to the homodiegetic narrator. It creates a space that separates the narrator from the action. She is verbalizing episodes from her past and present; in a way, telling them to herself, as if to make sense of events and her role in them, where the second person pronoun offers a structure to lay blame without taking responsibility.

Blame is on one level addressed at the mother for abandoning the 'lost children' as the narrator calls them. She does not so much address this outspokenly but in a juxtaposition of herself feeling horrified about it, with her mother's way of brushing it aside as if those children had no relevance for her. The individual short episodes that make up the story repeatedly and with increasing intensity depict the protagonist's futile quest to find out more about her half-siblings. At the same time, her mother refuses to address this particular part of her past other than to justify her escape. Moreover, while the daughter is obsessed with this past that is not even hers, she depicts her mother as being obsessed with the most mundane irrelevant things, like bus schedules she has in a binder and annotates, or the price of green grapes.

At the same time, she blames her childhood and upbringing for her inability to stand up for herself or others in her adult life. When new neighbors - a couple with a baby - move in next door, she is being taken advantage of yet feels unable to insist on getting all the kitchenware or money back they borrowed. More crucially, she increasingly realizes that the woman and her baby, too, suffer abuse. She hears fights through the wall dividing their apartments, the woman looks increasingly frail and tired and at one point shows a black eye. Even though the protagonist

explicitly states that she feels she is being lied to, she does not demand what is her due, nor report the abuse or get involved in the situation. On the one hand, because she feels inadequate even to master her own life, on the other hand, because her mother's cautiousness and paranoia have instilled in her a social distance not only out of fear but also out of a mistrust in empathy.

Finally, and most crucially, there is an underlying self-directed blame on the very general level of a lack of self-confidence, of feeling inadequate in each of these relationships. She puts this in a nutshell at her first encounter with Michelle, the new neighbor: "There are many people in the world who are capable of feeling disappointment just by looking at you, and it seems she is one of them" (*MS* 108). The focalizer character is locked in a paralyzing state of emotional inaction, which is emphasized once again in the final part. Both the neighbors, who moved out again, and her mother who wrote her a letter to tell her how the mother had recently braved a hurricane,<sup>265</sup> had moved on. The narrator however is immobile/immobilized. This is already suggested in how she relates to receiving the news about either woman. "You put the letter in your purse, too, next to the envelope from Michelle, and you carry them around in there for a month before you can bring yourself to touch or look at them again" (*MS* 121). She is paralyzed by the complex messages these two carry individually and between them. The story, then, ends with her returning to her apartment after meeting her landlord who cleaned the other place for potential new tenants. Boiling tea,

your thoughts drift to your mother, your father, the beater and the lost children. Everyone you have ever looked for or tried to escape. And when you hear a knock at the door, you are frozen as you go to answer, palm clinging to the doorknob, caught somewhere between longing and dread. (*MS* 122)

These last lines summarize the narrator's emotional condition. Longing and dread, looking for someone and trying to escape are not opposites here, but frighteningly close to each other, as the story highlighted especially in her relationship to her mother. The paradox of existence is to be "frozen as you go," afraid, unwilling, unable or prohibited from action, while summoned to act at the same time. The simultaneous reader-address inherent in the personal pronoun and the emotional distance this narrative voice creates for the focalizer character embody this paradox stylistically.

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<sup>265</sup> The text makes it a point to mention that the letter was written on a Universal Studies notepad older than she was. Such details are, of course, not devoid of irony, as the paper links the mother to a time before her birth that is, to the time when she abandoned her first family. The text does not suggest that she took the paper with her, but left the children behind, yet the temporal link opens an option for critique here, given the daughter found her mother's action incomprehensible. This hint of criticism is then enforced by the content of the letter, as the mother claims that standing in the raging hurricane was the bravest thing she had ever done. Again, there is no explicit link, but given the focus of the story, which tells of the narrator's obsession with her mother's past and her lost siblings, suggests a criticizing juxtaposition of bravery here between the storm she dared to face and the life she escaped from.



Stylistically, all of the stories in Nawaz' collection are characterized by a fragmented, anecdotal structure, yet this technique serves very different purposes in the individual narratives. In the first story, "Mother Superior," it helps to set the almost amusing tone, by stringing together little episodes and incidents that occurred during the pregnancy. At the same time, it emphasizes the selfishness of the individual characters as it structurally highlights the fact that everyone is only interested in the elements of a narrative that pertain to them and not the entire story.

In "The Beater," the fragmented narrative mirrors the focalizer character's difficulties of wrapping her mind around her mother's actions and her difficulty in taking charge of her life. She is adrift and insecure and her recollection of chronologically or causally unrelated past events reflects this state of mind. It is a paralysis that she is unable to escape; every thought, story or event returns her to the fear and incomprehension that dominated her upbringing.

"Scar Tissue" is the story of a young mother, whose daughter almost died in a fire accident while left unsupervised for a brief moment, and who now has a terrible scar all over her back. Here fragmentation results not just in a string of anecdotes but is employed as a method to convey the mother's trauma. The present of the story depicts the family's getting ready to move to a bigger house they were able to afford from the settlement they received from the manufacturer of the nightgown that had gone up in flames and scarred the little girl. The story then slowly and cautiously circles through a string of analepsis around the incident the mother is unable to let go and yet also unable to revisit. It is this disjuncture and fragmentation, both temporally and causally that makes the reader share in her anxiety. We only get to know the reasons for Patti's anxiety piece by piece, as the story circles closer and closer to the traumatic incident from various directions, yet every time seems unable to fully approach it. The structural disjuncture of the narrative is carried into both content and imagery as Patti's emotions and the events of her life are portrayed in juxtapositions both in images and language. This kind of poetics the text is suffused with, the small metaphors and ways of phrasing, word choices taken up again and again, altered into variations, contrasted in different context, turn the story into a beautifully compelling yet terrifying experience. Through reuse, seemingly innocent harmless images suddenly turn violent and haunting. The most striking one of these is in the scene depicting what had actually happened to Clara. The little girl had received a new nightgown her grandmother had picked up at a yard sale.

The nightgown was a little big, but Clara adored it. Dwess, she called it. She cried every time Patty peeled it off her to get it in the wash.

It went up in a flash, melting right into the skin. (*MS* 63)

The metaphorical use of ‘peeling’ in the first instance creates an adorable image of a stubborn little girl, only to be reevoked a sentence later with the merger of skin and gown through flames, so that the synthetic fabric had to literally be peeled from her. The child’s initial crying out of a disapproval turns into actual painful moaning every time her skin – into which the dress had melted – is touched to clean her and apply ointments. The text does not have to explicitly mention all of this in detail, on the contrary, the storytelling is all the more powerful for the things that are not explicitly spelled out, yet unmistakably created in the readers imagination through the repetition of imagery in different contexts. The tentative circular approach of the fragmented narrative and haunting re-evocations of imagery help the reader approach the mother’s being locked into trauma and an unnamable fear that belonging and life are just transitory and fleeting.

The precariousness of life, as well as its discontinuity and lack of teleology are, in a similar way, at the center of “My Three Girls.” The very short dense story constantly oscillates between births and deaths, memory and fear of the future, and changing family constellations that are not predictable. Once again, these themes on the content level are underscored by the fragmented structure.

The homodiegetic narrator tells of her mother losing her third baby girl to a birth defect, later her husband to a stroke, and then her second, by then adult daughter to breast cancer. At the same time, the story also tells of the narrator giving birth to a healthy baby girl, and of her cancer-ridden sister suspending her treatment to get pregnant and also have a child. All these parts make up their family life and create memories, yet they are not teleological, not causally related. Their relation is simply that they happen to the same people over time. The disjuncture in the plot development incorporates the reader into the story construction. The reader’s imagination draws the connections between the individual episodes, the grief and joy, and fills the temporal gaps, constructing a chronology of the events.

With regard to the larger theme of Nawaz’s collection, the story illustrates the ultimate failure of care-taking in the face of death. No amount of love and care would have been able to protect any of the people from dying. This is symbolically taken up in a revisiting and rearrangement of the story title. It first refers to the photograph that is described in the first line of the story “There is a photograph of me and Kathleen in the rec room with Maggie, our dead baby sister,” (*MS*, 11),<sup>266</sup> which the mother puts into a photo album with the image capture “My Three

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<sup>266</sup> Memento Mori photography was a common practice when photography first became widespread throughout Europe and especially America, see for example Dan Meinwald’s essay “Memento Mori: Death and Photography in Nineteenth Century America” (<http://vv.arts.ucla.edu/terminals/meinwald/meinwald1.html>). Cf. also the discussion of photography in chapter 6.1.1 above and Roland Barthes’ claim in *Camera Lucida*, “[w]hether or not

Girls.” The dead baby sister is replaced in the narrator’s adult life with the first baby girl to be born, while the second baby girl takes the place of her own mother dying of cancer, and in the end, the role of mother and caretaker is reversed from the mother to the eldest daughter who not only takes care of the two babies, but, in the last image of the story also observes her mother as being lost and in need of care: “at night, when I get up to check on the babies, each sleeping in a crib in the nursery, I sometimes see my mother walking from room to room, her face sagging in grief, looking like a lost little girl” (*MS* 25f.). The story comes full circle with someone observing three girls in need of care, but with grief already lurking in the picture.

In “Sandy”, the fragmented narrative style serves yet another very different purpose. Here it creates a juxtaposition of observed versus imagined events. A group of young people sharing an apartment is dealing with the presence of drunk intruder. The narrative of this event is interspersed with short imagined episodes about the intruders’ life from the homodiegetic narrator’s perspective. Insofar, the story unmasks the individuals’ readiness but also need to categorize along stereotype-narratives. “Sandy” is a story about the ‘othering gaze’ – both on the content but also the discourse level, as the reader only finds out towards the end that the intercepted narratives *about* this uninvited visitor where actually all invented stories.

“Sandy” depicts the most unconventional ‘family’ in this collection. The people sharing a space and caring for each other share no blood-relations. The community is a group of anarchists living in a decrepit house in Montreal, though some of them are of affluent and well-educated, bourgeois backgrounds. It relates the incident of an obese drunk prostitute who stumbles in on them, wishing to sleep off her inebriation. She had met one of the flat mates, Rory, the night before and had been told to come by in case she needed help. The prostitute is neither capable, due to her condition, nor appears interested in interaction or communication. Although she is, naturally, the center of attention or the center around which the story revolves, this narrative is less about the intruder than about the group’s reactions to and actions in this situation, especially those of Allie, the focalizer character of the parts told as homodiegetic narrative. What makes this story interesting is less this event of a drunken prostitute’s arrival, rest, and departure after likely no more than a few hours, but the seven small stories about ‘Sandy’ that interrupt this main narrative at various points. These seven stories are told in heterodiegetic voice, and tell about ‘Sandy’s’ childhood on a reserve where she met an anthropologist who was the first to exploit her sexuality, about her becoming an escort calling herself ‘Sandy’, about her obesity, her manual dexterity, her

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the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. . . . there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die” (Barthes 96, emphasis in the original).

possibly plotting small crimes with her pimp, and about how she maybe once insulted Allie's mother, before the story closes in a depiction of 'Sandy's' attitude towards existence. These incidents about the prostitute's life are fraught with stereotypes about sex workers, like socially disadvantaged origin, exploitation, alcoholism and drugs, involvement in petty crimes, misbehavior towards respected members of society, a certain street-smartness and continued existence in a lower-class social environment. The appeal of this short story lies not in the plots of these interjected short narratives either, but rather in the overall structure and form. The constant switching between the main narrative strand and anecdotes about 'Sandy' executed through the juxtaposition of a homodiegetic voice in the main narrative and heterodiegetic presentation in the interjected stories. The contrast between the two strands is enforced through different tense and time. The main narrative is set in present tense. It follows a chronological order with only very few and minor analepsis, so that story time and narrative time seem identical. In contrast, the interjected episodes are hardly linked with each other, largely lack chronological organization,<sup>267</sup> are told by a heterodiegetic voice in past tense and are full of summaries and ellipses, thus covering large time spans or providing mere descriptions or general statements.

The story itself begins with an utterance in direct speech by a yet unidentified female character "'I was born to do this,' she says" (*MS* 123). The statement immediately catches our attention in its straightforward explicitness, which through the use of a pronoun *is*, however, a meaningless statement in need of further explanation. The juxtaposition of the narrative in the present and the stories about 'Sandy' beginning shortly thereafter seem to provide just that, a narrative about her presence and her identity and occupation.

The opening statement is followed by a description of the visitor by the narrator, as well as the narrator's own reaction to this intruder's appearance showing a kind of tug-of-war between revulsion and fascination, between critical self-reflexivity and exoticization:

Her eyes were moist and half-opened, as though the birth in question has only recently come to pass and she was brought forth out there on the street, already grown to a full three hundred pounds, her hair slicked down to her skull with blood on her way out into the world. (*MS* 123)

The initial part of this description on the one hand portrays vulnerability and, in the idea of a fully-grown birth act, has something mystical to it, yet is repulsive in the portrayal of bodily details. This oscillation between revulsion and fascination is further emphasized as the narrator brings a blanket to cover her and describes the body as a "shivering bulk, beneath bare shoulders and thighs swollen with goosebumps like huge pages of flesh covered in a cold Braille. A story to be felt out beneath her red halter top and the leather miniskirt ringing her hips like a blown tire" (*MS* 123).

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<sup>267</sup> On both points, the first two interjected narratives form an exception as these are more closely linked on the content level and thus also have a chronological connection.

The obesity and current appearance of the prostitute is perceived as appalling given the choice of imagery – ‘shivering bulk,’ ‘swollen thighs,’ a ‘miniskirt ringing her hips like a blown tire’ – and yet compelling in the simile of the ‘goosebumps as a cold Braille.’ This image is not only already manifesting a desire to unravel concealed stories about this stranger, but the metaphor of Braille also implies a need to touch.

These first lines of the story heavily invoke the notion of the abject, as investigated by Julia Kristeva in her study *Power of Horror*.<sup>268</sup> Based on her background of (especially Lacanian) psychoanalysis, Kristeva begins her investigation with the question of the subject and the object, and locates the first experience of abjection in the child’s separation from its mother. Abjection is thus an element of identity formation, as it signifies the elements that are expelled from the imagination of the self because they cannot be accommodated. This already implies that what is expelled is not fully different to the subject, and cannot be fully externalized. As Kristeva put it, “I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (Kristeva 1982, 3, emphasis in the original). The abject is perceived as a threat, as it “draws me to a place where meaning collapses” (ibid. 2), it “draws attention to the fragility of the law” (ibid. 4) and thus of social structures as well as our self-perception. As Elizabeth Gross puts it in her essay on “The Body of Signification,”

Kristeva is fascinated by the ways in which ‘proper’ sociality and subjectivity are based on the expulsion or exclusion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly elements of its corporeal existence that must be separated from its ‘clean and proper’ self. The ability to take up a symbolic position as a social and speaking subject entail the disavowal of its modes of corporeality, especially those representing what is considered unacceptable, unclean or anti-social. The subject must disavow part of itself in order to gain a stable self, and this form of refusal marks whatever identity it acquires as provisional, and open to breakdown and instability. (Gross 86).

Nawaz’s story then takes this process of the individual to the level of the social. The group of friends is confronted with the intrusion of the abject – even referencing the original abject of birth. The intruder stimulates both revulsion and fascination and curiosity in the focalizer character, while structurally – at least on one level – the story actually reverses the process of abjection. The abject is not expelled, on the contrary it includes itself into the body of people present. The narrator’s response is – as they seem unable to expel the ‘unclean’ and ‘anti-social’ – to create it as ‘clean and proper’ as the self, that is to say to construct an identity narrative that creates a stable self that apologetically manages to include the current expression of the abject that ‘Sandy’ confronts them with. At the same time however, this victimization narrative – psychologically – repeats the process of abjection. The creation of a narrative different from what is represented

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<sup>268</sup> Originally published in French as *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* in 1980, translated into English in 1982 for Columbia University Press.

signifies the exclusion of the intruder, the inability of the self to incorporate the ‘disorderly element.’

Moreover, the focalizer character’s narrative construction exposes her immersion in prevailing cultural stereotypes. At the same time, what is abject, too, is only culturally constructed, as Kristeva continues to point out. While every society finds elements abject, they do not regard the same things to be disgusting. “Abjection is the body’s acknowledgment that the boundaries and limits imposed on it are really social projections – effects of desire, not nature” (ibid. 90). This motivates Kristeva’s closer look at the sacred, taboos and religions on the one hand, and art and literature on the other, as these are one realm of the social intimately concerned with dealing with the abject.<sup>269</sup> The abject both fascinates and repels. The social constructedness and enforcement is realized and institutionalized in taboos and norms, and is an inevitable part of the individual as a psychological mechanism.

Apart from the original abject in the female maternal body, Kristeva in addition focused on two other common forms: abjection in relation to food, and in relation to bodily fluids and waste. Although Kristeva mentions the gag-reflex that the skin on milk arouses in many of us as a simple example, her interest is more in the cultural expression of such abjections that are then expressed in taboos. While the content of these differs between cultures, almost every culture has some social taboos related to food consumption. This is obvious in religious communities, but can also be found in most secular societies. The most common example in this regard would be cannibalism.

The abject as reflected by taboos is not primarily about interdiction, even though that is an effect of taboos. As Sigmund Freud already emphasized in his influential collection of four essays published as *Totem and Taboo*, the very notion of taboo is somewhat contradictory. “[I]t means, on the one hand, ‘sacred’, ‘consecrated’, and on the other ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’” (Freud 18). Consequently, restrictions resulting from taboos

are distinct from religious or moral prohibitions. They are not based upon any divine ordinance, but may be said to impose themselves on their own account. They differ from moral prohibitions in that they fall into no system that declares quite generally that certain abstinences must be observed and gives reasons for that necessity. (ibid.)

While Freud’s study focuses on tribal communities, linking his own field of psychoanalysis with anthropology, his outline of taboos and the inherent ambivalence has always had a wider significance. Kristeva, too, uses the Freudian analysis of taboo as a starting point of her investigation, and her tripartite conception of the abject links to Freudian taboos of sexuality (incest) and murder (of the father), and totemism’s subsequent focus on food and sexuality

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<sup>269</sup> One of Kristeva’s examples to most obviously exemplify this is the Indian caste system (cf. Kristeva 1982, 79ff.).

prohibitions, while murder as such is linked to corporality and corpse, and thus the issue of bodily waste.

The disgust and revulsion the abject effects is maybe strongest in Kristeva's third category, bodily waste, in which the psychological link is also most obvious, as waste is that which is 'ejected' which was part of the body and thus in a way the corporeality of the self. It provokes our horror through the emphasis on our materiality and thus implicitly our transience. Kristeva points out that the corpse is the most horrifying variant of this category of the abject and thus, unsurprisingly, the one to which most rituals and taboos are attached.

While there are also many instances of abjection and taboo related to sexuality in general, Kristeva puts the maternal body in the center of attention, as it is the original abjection, the separation that is also necessary for the constitution of the self. Kristeva's study, then, is not focused on the abject as such, but on how to approach, incorporate that which, by definition, precludes incorporation. She investigates the sacred with its rituals and taboos, and the arts as modes of purification of the abject, transposing it into the symbolic. With the decline of sacred traditions in the West, literature and other arts seem to take its place as a primary realm to deal with abjection. "Writing then implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacements of verbal play" (Kristeva 1982, 16). In Nawaz's story this is doubly present. On the one hand, Nawaz general, highly poetic careful use of language stands in sharp contrast to the often-repulsing depictions, thus conjoining the pleasure of literature with an experience of the abject through language. On the other hand, in "Sandy" we also see the mechanism itself at work, as Allie, literally confronted with an abject is unable to incorporate her, though the woman had undeniable included herself in their immediate space. Through the construction of narratives, Allie thus approaches her, purifies the body, while her disheveled appearance, her hair streaked with blood, and her drunken stupor that results in her lying there almost unconscious, recall various forms of bodily waste. In addition, these interspersed episodes turn the abject – which is dehumanized in the chronological narrative strand, perceived only as a bulk, an intruding disgusting object, immobile – into a subject.

The repulsive yet strangely compelling first impression of the visitor also triggers the narrator's self-reflexivity, as she cautions herself against assumptions based on appearance only. She consequently follows up on the intruder's initial statement with an inquiry as to what it was, she was born to do. Because, she states,

I don't want to jump to any conclusions, don't even want to know which ones I'd come to, for I can sense the shape of them already, and they look too familiar, too easy to be useful. I've read that compassion is different from mere pity, and I believe that to be true, but I'm not sure how it feels to inhabit it, to experience the flush of the feeling and know that its source and its end are untainted, free of complacency or smugness. (*MS* 123f.)

And even after the prostitute reaffirms that she had referred to her obvious profession as a sex worker in her initial statement, explaining that her mother had been ‘a hooker’ too, the narrator self-consciously strives to avoid a clichéd reaction: “I don’t want to tell her I’m sorry in case she isn’t sorry, though it’s hard to imagine why she wouldn’t be” (*MS* 124). On the one hand, the narrator seems at times to be acutely aware of an inclination towards stereotypization she attempts to resist. On the other hand, this reflexivity is, of course, highly ironic, as the seven stories about Sandy that are interjected into this narrative are fraught with stereotypical tropes and, as the reader realizes towards the end, are the first-person narrator’s fantasies about this visitor and not stories from her actual life. Insofar, the reader too is made complicit in this act of stereotypization, as we ‘buy into’ these narratives, accept them as stories about Sandy, only to have this ready assumption subverted and thrown back into our face, confronting us that despite all appearance, we are left with no knowledge about the intruder.

The fantasies originate in a need to explain and make sense of the intruder. Such a need is repeatedly inferred in the imagery of this initial part with its references to storytelling: from the “huge pages of flesh in a cold Braille. A story to be felt out,” via conclusions not to be jumped to, or that she cannot *imagine* why the prostitute would not be sorry, to a final powerful image that closes this first brief part of the narrative as the visitor falls asleep. Although she has, by drifting off to sleep taken herself out of an active role in a construction of a story about herself, her mere presence, “her strange arrival [is] inviting speculation like a pebble courts an oyster” (*MS* 125). These images serves as the opening or trigger for the first of the interjected narratives about ‘Sandy.’<sup>270</sup> The woman’s intrusion disturbs the inner organism of the house and they all rally around her. She agitates the narrator’s imagination.

The reader is at this point not yet aware of the fictionality of these life-episodes. However, that does not change the violence inherent in this act of inventing a history or justification narrative as these not only stereotype the intruder, but moreover, discount her own account of herself. Upon her arrival, the prostitute had clearly stated her explanation for her lifestyle. However, her version is dismissed. It seems insufficient. The story begins with her direct speech statement: “I was born to do this” (*MS* 123). Following Allie’s brief inquiry “Born to do what?” (*MS* 123), she responds in a slurred manner “My mother . . . [s]he was a hooker, too” (*MS* 124) before drifting off towards sleep. There is a sort of a plot already, an action and the cause for the action are laid out. The

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<sup>270</sup> This image of the pebble in the oyster is carried on also in the question of naming. The narrator assumed that her name was “Sandy” due to a rhinestone necklace she wore, linking to the imagery of a pebble intruding also on a semantic level. Yet the first imagined narrative then questions the issue of naming and has her as Alexandra, Allie or Al, until she meets and anthropologist who calls her Sandy to link her to the landscape.



narrator's disregard for the prostitute's perspective constitutes and triggers the general themes of the story.

The division of the two narrative strands is explicit and unmistakable. There is a pronounced shift from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic narrator, and as mentioned, the narrative tense shifts. Most obvious to the reader, however, is the change in typesetting, as the fictive stories about the intruder are set in italics, visually highlighting their difference to the rest of the narrative. The narrative mode of the main narrative implies immediacy but also a lack of reflexive distance to the events. In addition, the limited perspective of the narrative voice can only result in an unreliable presentation. In contrast, the at times seemingly omniscient narratives set in past tense and their causal link to the present, (falsely) suggest authority and reliability, deliberately misleading the reader.

This authority is eventually subverted as the reader increasingly realizes that the stories are only the first-person narrator's fantasies about their visitor. On closer observation, one can identify a multitude of indicators that could already have called the validity of these stories into question or that could have alerted the reader to their fictitiousness. The fact that as a reader we are initially ready to accept these stereotype-packed back-stories as plausible, amplifies a general desire or need for narratives to fill gaps or offer explanations that complement the main narrative. Such indicators would include, the homodiegetic narrators repeated mention of a desire for stories; the use of italics for the interjected stories, which, as a literary convention, can also signify internal reflections; and that each of the stories is introduced by a brief statement, almost all of which are conditional clauses. Such clauses in their grammatical form already trigger or demand additional explanations, and suggest alternative stories as means of explanation, yet also shed doubt on the versions that follow. For example, clauses like "Sandy's size may be deceptive" (*MS* 130), "Sandy might be a stickler for clean clothes" (*MS* 132), or "[m]aybe Sandy and her pimp planned the whole thing" (*MS* 135), all invite two simultaneous routes of considerations: 'how / why?' and 'is that so?'

These introductory phrases are also an indicator that both parts of the narrative originate from the same perspective insofar as they function as mnemonic links between the two strands of the narrative. These entries into the stories that turn out to be fantasies, show that each of them is triggered by something in the present of the main narrative, in the way that memories are triggered by events of the present resulting in recollections of the past in narrative form. Because the mechanism is the same as that of actual memories, and the stories narrated reconstruct 'Sandy's' past – and that too in a rather authorial voice – the reader is initially inclined to take them as valid representations, overlooking that, as the main plot is presented from a homodiegetic narrator other

than the main character of these ‘recollections’ or ‘reconstructions of the past,’ this memory-mechanism cannot possibly activate actual memories, but could necessarily only produce fantasies. This would be even more obvious to a careful observer, as the subject in question had fallen asleep and was therefore, in the present tense narrative, not in a condition to call up memories.

The first of these stories brings up the question of naming, before claiming a first nation’s history and telling a tale of growing up on the reserve. The focalizer character had just concluded that the prostitute’s name must be ‘Sandy’, because “[a] large rhinestone charm on a chain stretched tight around her neck spell[ed] *Sandy*” (*MS* 125). This assumption is immediately called into question by the introductory conditional clause that triggers the first of the heterodiegetic narratives: “It could be that Sandy is not really named Sandy” (*MS* 125). A doubt the subsequent story immediately confirmed, introducing the narrative with: “On the reserve, her name was Alexandra Laughingbrook, but everybody called her Allie, or sometimes Al” (*MS* 125). At this point yet unbeknown to the reader, the narrator has now aligned this story with herself, or inscribed herself into this narrative: as we will learn only several episodes later, the homodiegetic narrator’s name, too, was Allie.

The matter of naming, however, goes further, as the protagonist of the interspersed story becomes a study object for an anthropologist visiting the reserve who changes her name by calling her ‘Sandy’, which, of course, is fraught with political significance in his intrusion and renaming of the First Nations child.<sup>271</sup> In naming lies power, as postcolonial discourse has repeatedly emphasized. By renaming the child, the anthropologist exerts power over her, redefines her identity, and turns her into something that is his. Much in the vein of postcolonial discourses of re-appropriation, the girl, in an ironic twist, later adopts the name in order to reinvent herself as a prostitute.<sup>272</sup>

The question of names and naming then resurfaces several episodes later with yet another turn. When a social worker knocks on their door to look for the prostitute, offering to take her off their hands, the group learns that her name, in fact, was not ‘Sandy’ at all, but ‘Ceci’. This factor is symbolic in two ways. First, it blatantly highlights and confirms that the episodes about ‘Sandy’s’ “past” are unrelated to the actual visitor. On a broader level, this signifies the group’s

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<sup>271</sup> The topic of First Nations and Canada’s historical mismanagement of native cultures, especially with regard to children is more explicitly taken up in the final novella included in the collection “The White Dress,” which deals with a First Nations child taken from a reserve to be adopted by white parents. However, that novella focuses less on the error of taking the child out of her family and cultural environment, and more on the fact that the child suffered from being ostracized due to her visible difference. Her suffering was not due to being taken away, but from being ‘othered’.

<sup>272</sup> Particularly in story twists as this one it is imperative to recall whose perspective and imagination these stories present, and in the process to evaluate our own reading practice.

general disregard for the actual person they are confronted with. Throughout their interaction, each one of them is just concerned with how this intruder relates to them – guilt, inconvenience, social conventions, disgust – but not with the person as such, or her request to just be able to sleep in peace for a while. No one had even bothered to learn her name. This lack of engagement with the actual person and the narrator’s interest in her only as an idea or fantasy is then made explicit insofar as the narrator continues to interject the story with narratives about ‘Sandy.’ That is to say, the name of the imagined persona in the last two episodes that follow after the social worker’s visit does not change to ‘Ceci’, nor do the stories cease. Rather, the exoticization continues, but also becomes more personal. The previous episodes about ‘Sandy’s’ past all had a mostly omniscient and authoritative heterodiegetic narrative voice. Now, in the last but one episode, the homodiegetic narrator from the present tense narrative strand injects herself into her fantasy as she tells the story of how her mom had once been confronted by a prostitute at a bus top, and throughout the episode refers to her as *my mother*.

The prostitute’s real name is also symbolic in itself, as Ceci in French means ‘this’.<sup>273</sup> Her actual name, “Ceci”, then is an embodiment of the way she is treated, not only in her profession in general, but more obviously throughout the encounter with the group of people living in the house. She had been objectified from the beginning: in the initial description as a ‘shivering bulk’ followed by imagery from the mechanical realm like ‘blown tire’ (*MS* 123), or hands that “clench and unclench in time with her breathing,” as well as her ‘noisy breathing’ itself, that sounds like “the wheezing top register of an accordion” (*MS* 124), or her “eye sliding shut” (*MS* 124). This objectification, not only exists on the plot level in complex and multiple ways, it is also carried into the formal level of the story through such imagery.

The final episode of Sandy, ambiguously introduced by “Sandy might not remember this” (*MS* 141), then summarized the pervading theme of the story, the hypocrisy inherent in this encounter and in the concept of caretaking in general. The household ‘Sandy’ stumbles into is a non-traditional cohabitation of anarchists, leftists with a bourgeois background, supporting the household with odd jobs as well as anti-capitalist activities like dumpster diving. While their lifestyle would suggest that they are themselves very much anti-establishment, leftwing, and emphatic towards outcasts of society, those alleged values are put to a test when confronted with an actual social ‘other’. The prostitute did not just stumble upon the group by chance. She had been somewhat invited the night before, when a drunk Rory (one of the girls living in the apartment) met her and told her she could come to their place if she ever needed anything, because

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<sup>273</sup> It is safe to assume that this is a conscious choice by the author, who lives in French Canada, even if it may be lost on monolingual English readers.

that had seemed like the right thing to do at the time. However, confronted with the discomfort, if not disapproval of her peers when taken up on that offer, Rory first gets defensive, claiming she was too drunk, and then nervously tells ‘Sandy’ that it was not her fault; a statement that presupposes fault in the first place. The group’s general unease with the presence of this overweight, unkempt and likely drunk individual then depicts a moral attitude that conflicts with the political creed and philosophy they aim to portray. Moreover, in an ironic twist, the reader slowly gets to learn about the living conditions in the apartment. While the narrator describes the intruder as abject, their own place would certainly meet that criterion just as well, from broken mugs to a disgustingly dirty bathroom.

The group’s hypocrisy is most palpable, however, in the intruder’s reaction to them. Her confirming of prevailing stereotypes like drugs and social background as the reason of her going into this line of business (after having been told that it was not her fault), is delivered with a cough that “might be meant for a laugh” and “the impression of a wink” (MS 130), thus immediately calling her actual statement into question. Her statements could be ironic, as she is simply too familiar with the kind of reception she receives. This behavior of simply meeting people’s expectations in order to be left alone is present throughout her limited interactions with the group, whether she confirms their assumptions or greatly exaggerates when thanking them profoundly for just letting her be, especially as the group, in fact, does not just let her sit there and relax as she would like to. They keep trying to provide additional care by inquiring about her past or offering her tea. On the surface, these actions may appear to be caring gestures, but on closer observations these attempts at care-giving are only self-serving steps, born out of helplessness and well-meaning, yet misdirected insofar as no member of the group actually pays attention to the intruders repeatedly voiced desire to just rest a little. Seeing as the caretaking endeavor was founded on hypocrisy, it cannot but fail.

The final episode of the story then pulls together the precariousness of the encounter and the various levels of ambiguity that suffuse the narrative. It is rich in irony, social commentary and self-reflexivity, however, it has to be stressed once more that all of these are filtered through Allie, the first person homodiegetic narrator, which the reader at this point is keenly aware of. Ceci had left the stage by literally leaving their house again. Yet ‘Sandy’ still existed in her mind, as the encounter had not yet resulted in a satisfactory conclusion. The narrative ends with a last, and moralizing episode about Sandy and how she sometimes uses her situation to give others “*a little perspective*” (MS 142). Allie deals with her ‘defeat’ and the intruder’s ‘betrayal’ of not being

what she had imagined her to be in the stories about Sandy.<sup>274</sup> In this final episode, the use of present tense, in contrast to the prior narration in the present of the story, does not have the effect of immediacy. Here it is rather employed to convey authority, as it is employed to add a certain universalism to the final passage.

While Allie is apparently unable to let go of the imaginary persona without getting some closure, the passage at the same time addresses her attitude and that of the group in phrases like “[s]he wavers between deploring that nobody cares and scoffing at the naïveté of the people who try to help” (MS 142). In the final lines, she seems to apprehend that ‘life’, as “she is amazed at the way a woman can move through space and time and it is just called a life. As though it were nothing more remarkable than that” (MS 142). The narrator acknowledges that there was much more to this life than just that, and yet, she is in no position to recognize it as anything else. The final passage thus is also an ultimate expression of her helplessness in caring for this other, not only because she lacks real empathy, but also because the intruder herself foreclosed any interaction with the group. The narrator can only speculate why ‘Sandy’ choose that role and is at the same time obviously unable to set aside her own bourgeois perspective.

“Sandy” follows two closely linked themes: the first is the violence inherent in interpellation and categorizations, the second is the apparent need for narrative and coherence. The second one is the driving force of the story itself. There would hardly be a narrative, if the first-person narrator did not attempt to inflate what she sees and gets to know about their visitor, combined with her rather limited knowledge of or stereotypical assumptions about sex workers. The violence inherent in this practice of assumptions and interpellation is a result of the need for narrative cohesion when apprehending a life. Due to her state, the prostitute is unable, and also unwilling, to provide a detailed narrative about herself. The narrator, thus, makes assumptions from which she then invents narratives from which again she reaches certain conclusions; each of which is triggered by her perception of the visitor rather than by that person herself.

The interlinked themes owe their potency to the different narrative modes, not only with regard to narrative voice but also the tenses used in the various parts of the narrative. The use of present tense<sup>275</sup> for the frame narrative of this story is not only effective in creating a sense of

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<sup>274</sup> When Ceci got up to leave, the narrator states that her “stories slide off her, fall down her broad back onto the floor, like the blanket now heaping at her feet as she struggles up, muttering curses and incomprehensible phrases.” (MS 141). As a result, the narrator feels betrayed.

<sup>275</sup> ‘Present tense’ as a literary device is, necessarily, different from the pure grammatical function of this tense, as there need be a temporal gap between the events evolving and a narrator’s address to an implied reader. Rendering a narrative in the present instead of the past has certain consequences, most importantly it gives a certain vividness (cf. Kazunari Miyahara who takes the concept of ‘vividness’ from Otto Jespersen) and immediacy to the narrative, however, it also often means that the events are yet unreflected and causalities can thus not be drawn by the narrator, especially as this technique is usually employed with homodiegetic narrative voices. However, the opposite may also be true, as Damsteeg pointed out, namely that the present tense is “a form of internal focalization which

immediacy or heightening the readers' suspense to what might happen next. The obviously limited and supposedly unreliably first-person voice of the story parts set in the present of the narrative also amplify the supposed authority of the omniscient voice (with only few shifts in focalization to a character's perspective) of the interlinked narratives about 'Sandy's' past. In addition, there are, within the story, slight shifts in significance of using the present simple, as it is also used to indicate general statements. This is most significant in the last narrative of that kind: "Like anyone, she fights the pull between facelessness and notoriety, between meaningfulness and death" (*MS* 142). Employing the present in this way in the invented episodes heightens the universality of the statement by adding the notion of proclaiming general facts.

"Sandy" emphasizes that for meaningful interaction, we need to have an idea about the other, and in the lack of actual facts, we draw assumptions from observations and fill the gaps by 'knowledge' through categorizations. The story depicts the mechanism of this act through the readers' complicity in the process. The brief encounter may eventually be inconsequential for either party, yet the text's structure and development have it suffused with ethical ambiguity that necessarily have the reader question their positions, especially as the final part on the one hand spells these out explicitly, while the very fact that the narrator continues to imagine these episodes about the version of "Sandy" she invented highlights the epistemical violence of our attitude altogether.

Saleema Nawaz's short story collection centers on the most intimate form of human co-existence, the immediacy of cohabitation in family frames. Yet not one of the nine stories in *Mother Superior* presents a traditional family-constellation of a central couple and its offspring; this format is broken up or substituted by alternative compositions of family. Taken together, the stories in *Mother Superior* sketch a variety of contemporary family set-ups, brought about by tragedies, choice, or simple changes in life. From patchwork families, single parents, adopted children, caretaking siblings to mere cohabitation among friends, all these relationships and forms of social cohesion stress that 'family' no longer necessarily signifies blood ties, but rather foregrounds the original notion of the concept Giddens mentioned – interdependence and support, though not necessarily as an economic unit.

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expresses that a character is vaguely aware of performing one or more specific phenomenal or mental actions, which are the object of focalization by that character" (Damsteegt 63).

For more detailed narratological investigations on the use of present tense cf. for example Casparis, Christian Paul, *Tense without Time: The Present Tense in Narration* (Zürich: Francke Verlag Bern, 1975), Damsteegt, Theo, "The Present Tense and Internal Focalization of Awareness," *Poetics Today* 26.1 (2005): 39–78, and Miyahara, Kazunari, "Why Now, Why Then?: Present-Tense Narration in Contemporary British and Commonwealth Novels," *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 39:2 (Summer 2009) 241–268.

The stories in this collection all tell of deeply bruised characters and relationships, yet this bruising is not due to the break-up of the traditional frameworks. As “The Beater” shows, a deeply patriarchal (and abusive) family pattern can actually be the cause of injuries sustained and bequeathed. These stories highlight the complexity of the individual and the uniqueness of individual living situations. These characters and plots foreclose a systematic reading or simplistic cause and effect or generalizing, representative interpretations. They each struggle with their own anxieties in co-existence as much as with their particular need to care for others and the limits of care-taking.

## 7.2 The Ironic Grotesque Satire of *Family Values*

Caretaking may also, initially seem to be a theme of Abha Dawesar’s novel *Family Values*, as the reader first encounters a boy in his cramped living quarters in his family’s “hospital ward home”. However, where Nawaz’s stories create a poetic intimacy that draws the reader in, this text keeps the reader at bay through consistent defamiliarization and an emphasis on the sordidness of society. The boy, who will be the main focalizer character, is not referred to by any proper name. This may, at first, not seem all that odd and a reader would initially rarely dwell on this aspect, as the first pages of the novel are captivating in their detailed description of the abject that makes up the boy’s home. He is surrounded by sickness because his parents, both doctors, run a clinic for the poor out of the front room of their home.

On page two, then, we encounter a ‘devil woman’, their landlord who lives upstairs from the doctors, and who would throw buckets of water from the balcony onto the sick patients in an attempt to deter them from filing into her house. “The devil woman is appropriately called Mrs. Cowdung” (*FV* 2). Her name may elicit a smile with readers, but may still not yet fully alert them to the peculiar narrative style of this text. This peculiarity would begin to manifest itself on the next page, as the boy recollects a news story about child abductions and a murder case.

That episode introduces all main stylistic tools that shape the essence of this narrative: a high level of defamiliarization<sup>276</sup> through the absence of proper names as well as in sentence structure and vocabulary; an overabundance of the abject in the text’s imagery; the protagonist’s obsession with the body and bodily functions; and an increasingly claustrophobic sentiment that is carried from the actual living conditions of the protagonist into the larger social that is so entangled in corruption, crime and the abuse of power, that any effort to change it seems futile.

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<sup>276</sup> As Victor Shklovsky emphasized in his influential essay “Art as Technique,” defamiliarization is a precondition for art to be perceived as art. That is to say, defamiliarization serves to attract attention to the process of perception by slowing it down and in the course, it disallows automation.

The text also expertly transfers the maladies of the boy's world onto the discourse level, thus heightening the impact on the reader. For example, the above-mentioned paragraph of the boy's memory of a murder starts out with "Of the fragility and frailty of existence the boy knows enough. This knowledge is in his blood and in the air he breathes" (*FV* 3). The inversion of the first sentence, placing "of fragility and frailty" at the beginning of the sentence emphasizes the sentiment thereby expressed, which is further heightened by the alliteration of the two terms. "Existence", then, is not specified any further by any article or pronoun, which gives it a universal dimension, and renders the two features 'fragility and frailty' general truths.

The style of the narrative does not relate the boy's feelings but is exclusively focused on observation and reporting. The text thereby denies characters emotionality and forces the reader into the position of an observer and outsider.

As the continuation of the passage in question, about the gruesome kidnapping and murder, shows, the reader is rather being distanced from the text than drawn in, because the reader's attention is drawn to the discourse level rather than the terrible events narrated.

The two assailants with the rhyming names Pale and Fail had forced themselves upon the girl and killed the brother when he had tried to stop them. After Pail-Fail had their way with the girl they killed her too. The two murders, murdered, and murderers had made national news and the guilty eventually caught. Pale with piebald skin and Fail who had failed high school and taken to crime were hung to death. (*FV* 3f.)

In the insistent alliteration and repetitive phrasing, the crime itself becomes both emphasized and stylized, and thus obliterated as discourse takes prominence.<sup>277</sup> Moreover, we slowly begin to grasp the novel's characteristic narrative style of rigorous observation.

Taking this approach to the extreme, the novel is devoid of any proper names in the conventional sense. Every single character's name is at the same time a description. This conspicuous form of address or interpellation constantly enforces the distance between reader and text. From the outset, the reader is bewildered by the absence of proper names, both, for characters and places. Everyone and everything is always referred to by a characteristic or function. First, there is the nuclear family, which consists of 'Father' and 'Mother' – though either is sometimes also referred to as 'the doctor' – and 'the boy'. All properties replacing 'proper names' are in relation to the boy's situation or perception. Aside from Mother and Father, his immediate surroundings consist of his 'hospital ward home', comprised of 'the multi-purpose room' in which the family lives, the two consulting chambers of his father and his mother as well as 'the wheezing chamber' in which patients await their turns and which is separated from the boy's existence in

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<sup>277</sup> Already here at the outset of the text there is an emphasis on 'making the news' as a marker of relevance and true horror. The role of the news and media in this novel, and their function in forming the social will be discussed in more detail below.



the multi-purpose room by ‘the plywood partition’ that reaches only almost all the way to the top. The boy’s life at home is thus constrained in every sense. There is no direct connection to the world outside either by window or door, so the boy is unable to gain an immediate, unmediated perspective on it. Instead he listens in on the consultations and gossip between patients and doctor. The boy has to remain very quiet in order not to disturb the patients or rather, not be perceived by them at all. As a result of his own silence, the boy intently focuses on everything that is going on in the hospital ward home. This results in a highly claustrophobic living situation where safety equals confinedness.

The rest of the character cast is similarly only referred to by features. Strikingly, these frequently characterize them as deviating from a ‘proper’ norm. The central cast making up the boy’s larger family consists of grandfather, Psoriasis, Poop, Paget’s Disease, Duffer, Sugar Mills, Flunky Junky, the Six Fingers (the greedy branch of the family), Pariah, and the Self-Sacrificing-Sister. Additional characters are the milkwoman, the Cowdungs, the Arms Dealer and Shampoo Girl.

What is the effect of replacing proper names with references to perception, on what levels does it operate and what are possible effects in the reading experience or possible suggestions for reflection? First and foremost, the descriptive interpellation to a certain extent forecloses reader identification;<sup>278</sup> the reader is not given full access to the world inside the text, but kept at an observer’s distance, even if several of the references carry an interpretative quality.

Secondly, this form of address is a refusal to be specific. No character could be mistaken for another, yet their differences are generic. Finally, this form of address does not even offer identification by the characters themselves, but stays exclusively in the field of perception, and thus remains only interpellation.<sup>279</sup> Even though the references used emphasize the boy’s perspective, they also have a wider significance or validity. They create the tone of the text. There are two minor instances in the text when signifiers are called into question, indicating that indeed these are just the names the boy and focalizer attributed to the people around him, replacing proper names. The first is the boy telling a story of his family at school referring to his uncle Poop and the teacher interrupts him and insists he find out the uncle’s real name by the next day (cf. *FV* 36). The second instance is in a fight with the landlady who yells at the boy for calling her Mrs. Cowdung (cf. *FV* 83). This scene is also one of the rare moments when the boy, agitated and afraid

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<sup>278</sup> Reader identification is understood in the sense Rita Felski uses the term as recognition, cf. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, also discussed in chapter 1 above.

<sup>279</sup> On the political and ethical implications of interpellation see also my brief discussion of this concept and Althusser’s argument in chapter 3.

as the grown woman attacks him, calls his parents Mommy and Daddy instead of referring to them as Mother and Father. These brief episodes then seem to suggest that the signifiers used in the text are not so much names but simply expressions of the focalizer character's perception of the people and places around him. However, neither of these instances, nor the fact that signification lies solely with the boy,<sup>280</sup> change the overall reading experience. The permanent repetition of these signifiers sets and constantly reinforces the tone of the text and the level of defamiliarization created thereby.

Thirdly, the characters are not referred to by just any attribute, but often by one stressing their physical or social abnormality, thus adding to the novel's overall anti-aesthetic emphasis of the abject. The text offers a tentative motive for this peculiarity, as it stresses this as common practice in the boy's immediate environment: "Usually when his parents talk about cases they don't use names, identifying patients rather by their afflictions" (*FV* 33). For the boy, the distance this form of identification creates also suggests certainty and safety, because knowing the affliction means knowing how to properly react; a fact discussed with more emphasis when he himself is hospitalized for a yet unknown cause.

The boy feels a sense of comfort and security when his parents are able to name people's diseases and call them by their afflictions. Occasionally when nothing about a patient's condition is known and they talk about the person directly it makes the boy uncomfortable. Not because he knows their name but because a name is always vaguer than a condition. The boy shared his father's need for precision in all things. (*FV* 166)

Especially this last part about the vagueness of proper names may initially result in bemused bewilderment on the part of the reader, as a proper name is commonly considered to be the most definite form of identification of an individual in social context. And yet, what this passage highlights is the very arbitrariness inherent in proper names. Proper names take the Saussurean theory to the extreme, as there is not even any agreed convention of linking a certain signifier with a certain signified. There is no predetermined relation between signifier and signified. Names are the ultimate arbitrary of language, and thus hold no information about the person in question. The boy's constant need for assurance, for certainty in this complex world beyond his grasp thus reaches out for signifiers and forms of address that hold more information about the addressee. In extension of this line of thought, the interpellation by characteristics – at least for some of the characters – also suggests directives or gives warnings on modes of interaction with them. This is

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<sup>280</sup> The episodes establishing that the signifiers are not general markers in the depicted social but solely stemming from a little boys perspective, also echo the argument that the act of interpellation discloses more about the addresser than the thus addressed. Insofar, the signifiers are a continuous manifestation of the boy's obsession with the abject, with disease and medical terminology. Even while being strangled by Mrs. Cowdung, his mind finds refuge in that sort of discourse: "He could use his small size to his advantage and give Mrs. Cowdung a solid kick in her pelvic zone but her uterus might spontaneously start bleeding and then she might need a Dilation and Curettage" (*FV* 83f.).

not a very strong trait in the characterization, but at least subtly present in some of the names, like Cowdung, Poop, SSS, Flunkie-Junkie, or the Arms Dealer.

Fourthly, the general descriptive narrative mode signifies the child's lack of comprehension of the world around him.<sup>281</sup> The non-specific terms used for characterization, the staged anonymity of it all, increases the sense of claustrophobia of the text. The defamiliarization through the absence of proper names is at the same time a strategy to depersonalize the narrative. In addition, the constant iteration of these signifiers emphasizes a general sense of repetitiveness. In relation to the content level, this repetition parallels the unshakably corrupt state of society. On the discourse level, it stresses the descriptiveness of the narrative. However, as far as the act of addressing is concerned, the initial peculiarity eventually wears off and the reader increasingly accepts the descriptions or interpellations as stand-ins for proper reference.<sup>282</sup>

Finally, this form of address has a dehierarchizing effect as far as literary conventions are concerned. A traditional story usually distinguishes the importance of characters, among other things, through a proper name. Central characters are named, whereas marginal figures may be referred to by their function only; a method we are especially familiar with from the listing of *dramatis personae* preceding the text of any play. Insofar, the reader may not suspect 'the boy's' centrality at the outset of the text due to the lack of being named. Furthermore, throughout the text, the introduction of new characters does not give any indication to the importance of their role, a function exclusively relegated to the quantity of their plot participation, not to the quality of their signifier.

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<sup>281</sup> A child of the boy's age of about 8-years would be familiar with the names of the members of his family or the usually endearing signifiers used among family members, if proper names are omitted. Even more to the point, children have a fairly full capacity of dealing with proper names in their psychological development at the late toddler to preschool age, which is a stage the boy has long surpassed. For studies on child development and proper names cf. the work of D. G. Hall, most recently his essay "Early proper name learning: Implications for a theory of lexical development," in *Mind and Language*, 24 (2009) 404-432 (for more see his extensive list of publications at <http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~ghlab/hall-pers/Hall/Publications.html>); Cristina M. Sorrentino's report on "Children and Adults Represent Proper Names as Referring to Unique Individuals," in *Developmental Science* 4:4 (2001), 399-407; or Tim Valentine, Tim Brennen and Serge Brédart (eds.), *The Cognitive Psychology of Proper Names: On the Importance of Being Earnest*, New York: Routledge, 1996, especially chapter 4.

<sup>282</sup> The form of address could be interpreted as a form of the 'everyman' allegories prominent in literature almost from its beginning. However, the text is decidedly not an allegorical story, quite on the contrary, Dawes sets the narrative in a specificity not meant for generic identification, even though the general theme of 'the dangers of loving one's own' is meant to transcend the locality and temporality the plot is set in, just not in an allegorical way.

The text is suffused with reproof, predominantly about issues like corruption,<sup>283</sup> bribery,<sup>284</sup> inequality, overpopulation,<sup>285</sup> dowry misdeeds,<sup>286</sup> forced arranged marriages, or the general inequalities among the genders.<sup>287</sup> What the addressed issues foreground is that the larger social body is still a realm of survival of the fittest, where fitness is constituted by power and not by ethics or care for others. Society is thoroughly rotten, from the nuclear family to the larger social. True empathy for the less fortunate is largely absent. At the root of the rotten state, as the novel diagnoses repeatedly through various ways, lies the love for one's own, that is to say privileging some above others for no other reason than a sense of belonging. As the boy's mother put it

Human nature is greedy to begin with and when people get something they don't deserve they want it all the time. If each man in the world unfairly protects his own child then there can never be any justice. It is the love of one's own that is at the root of all corruption. (*FV* 176)

The boy is able to observe this in his very own family, especially with regard to his two older cousins, one of whom is a drug addict and the other a hoodlum for the ruling party and trying to get grandfather's house.

The boy's family is structured around his grandfather, the old patriarch, whose death is eagerly awaited by several of his children, in particular the Six Fingers, to inherit his property. Grandfather has a first son from an earlier marriage, Psoriasis, who followed his career into the social services, remained unmarried, and, as his signifier stresses, suffers from a skin condition. Then there is his son Sugar Mills, whose son Flunkie Junkie is a drug addict, an affliction Sugar Mills' wife secretly finances and supports. The next family are the Six Fingers who moved into grandfather's apartment, forcing Psoriasis out. The Six Fingers first took over grandfather's apartment and then, as soon as their son was born, also forced him from his bedroom. Cousin grew up to be an entitled teenager due to the limitless support and cuddling from his mother. Next in the family line is Paget's Disease who married Duffer, the somewhat slow but pleasant neighbor's daughter, after she had gotten pregnant in her youth from a friend of Sugar Mills. Paget agreed to save her honor and marry her, as he would not have wanted to biologically father children due to his genetic condition, and this way could still enjoy having a family. Finally, there are

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<sup>283</sup> "The Party, the mafia, and the police are all one!" (*FV* 161).

<sup>284</sup> "The Cowdungs have paid off either the DCP or his superior . . . The police are sympathetic towards the doctor, who is clearly in the right here, and want to give him a chance of counter-bribing them. The doctor's wife should realize she is lucky. Usually this option is not available to the counter party" (*FV* 117).

<sup>285</sup> "The school, like the city and the country, is overpopulated" (*FV* 87).

<sup>286</sup> "It isn't uncommon even these days for a young girl to be physically harmed or to be killed because her family fails to meet the fiscal demands imposed by the boy's family" (*FV* 91f.).

<sup>287</sup> "In order not to be a burden on the in-laws she will have to have a boy. She doesn't exist in her own right as a person . . . Having a son is the only way to change that. Once her son becomes a person in his own right she will be the mother of someone who is a person in his own right" (*FV* 157).

grandfather's two daughters, SSS, the self-sacrificing-sister who had been forced into an arranged marriage and was miserable for how she was treated in her husband's home, and Pariah, who had married for love and outside their caste.

Over the course of the novel, the family meets repeatedly to find a suitable groom for Paget's now grown daughter and to arrange her marriage. In these frequent interactions between the family members, the reader gets to know the individual family members, their pasts and their individual stories of moral, social, and physical decay. The narrative about the family reaches its climax during the wedding, held in a nearby town. Cousin, the son of the Six-Fingers had joined local gang members who start riots for the Party. At the wedding, Cousin tries to force his grandfather to sign a check as a donation to the Party to bribe a career for him. When the old man refuses, Cousin shoves him and he falls and dies of a wound to his head. The boy is the only one to witness not only what happened, but also that Mrs. Six-Fingers stopped her husband from preventing or halting the fall.

The individual incidents within the family are juxtaposed with stories of corruption, greed and scandals in the larger society. First there is the case of children going missing in the slum. These children, it turns out, were abducted by a killer with a penchant for cannibalism, who would dispose of left-over remains in the slum's sewer system. These were the same slums where the doctors had their practice, and the kidnappings were one of the reasons the boy was not allowed outside.

Then there is the increasing fame and eventual downfall of the Arms Dealer, a criminal who was well connected in business and politics, and enjoyed much media attention. He is eventually betrayed by his own son, who then takes over the business. In his own youth, the Arms Dealer was a friend of Sugar Mills, and the biological father of Duffer's daughter. As he feels the nook around his neck tighten, he approaches the family and offers to pay for the upcoming wedding, if his daughter, who was ignorant of his role, would pray for him.

The third plot line concerned with the larger social deals with organ theft. The milkwoman's sister became a victim and was brought to the doctor's after her incision got infected. She had gone into a hospital for the poor to have a cataract surgery and came out with a missing kidney. The doctors managed to get the media and law enforcement on the case and have the clinic shut down. However, the bleak ending of the novel reveals that nothing really ever changed: grandfather had been killed by his own grandson out of greed, while Cousin's parents looked on, new corruption scandals plague the nation, there is an outbreak of polio in the slum because the administration had not taken care of vaccinations, and the organ-stealing clinic has been reopened.

The powerlessness of the individual in the face of the seemingly never-ending cycle of greed and corruption that suffuses all levels of the social from the intimate family environment to government is not predominately carried on the plot level. Stories about such incidents seem to be piling up, but the general mood and sense of depression are set by the narrative tone and style rather than plot developments. Dawesar's insistence on observation and the purely reporting controlled prose enforce a distance between text and reader. To add to the distance between action and voice or focalization and content, overly formal and often Latinate language and an abundance of medical terminology is used, as well as stylized sentence structures like frequent inversions. The boy's perspective insofar breaks with reader expectations, as the language is decidedly above the level of an 8-year-old, and it lends a sort of clinical 'sterility' to the text.<sup>288</sup>

The observant mode is enforced through an exactness of expression and description. The precise, non-excessive information-oriented language of the text furthermore functions as a stylistic mirroring of the boy's claustrophobic living conditions and serves to heighten this sense of claustrophobia as the novel progresses. This is most explicit in the description of the hospital-ward-home itself.

He feels safe in this room which has the dining table, the dressing table, the large bed, the fridge, the small pantry closet, the cupboard, and the cooking range with its red gas cylinder that is replenished each month. As he grows bigger he might knock into these pieces of furniture and these appliances like his father does but for the boy's small limbs and thin physique the room is sufficient for the moment.  
(*FV* 5)

The use of the definite article not only stresses that there was only one exemplar of each of these items in the room, it also emphasized their belonging to the boy's world, almost personifying them. Apart from some religious paraphernalia, the multi-purpose-room apparently holds no decorative items or ornamentation. The room, like the lives of the nuclear family, is governed by rational functionality as every inch in the confined living quarters is used to its utmost efficiency. The parents move around the room with just such efficiency out of necessity, as the room does not allow for excess of any kind.

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<sup>288</sup> This is particularly obvious in references to sexuality in which the boy is still inexperienced. The vocabulary he has and in which he feels comfortable talking about it is exclusively medical, as he looks up various parts of the reproductive female organs in the dictionary when he hears them mentioned between his mother and her patients. When Cousin talks about sexuality and desire, the boy is lost to incomprehension. The taboos of sexuality linger in the metaphorical language Cousin uses by talking about his and the boy's 'worm,' how 'hitting puberty' was marked by 'the worm turning into a stick', and how the visual or sexual quality of a woman could be determined by the 'stick-test.' All of these images result in too vague an idea of the boy's own body and future developments and experiences, and result in confusion and anxiety rather than the curiosity inspired by the medical terminology. This anxiety is yet another expression of the boys need for precision, as metaphorical language use decidedly lacks the precision he feels secure in.

The narrative distance created through the language of the text is especially obvious in instances where the acts described are highly emotional and actually banal, as in the following report on the boy starting to cry: “[a]t this thought, the boy’s eyes and nose secrete and drip anew” (FV 119). Furthermore, the phrase turns the individual body parts into actors, linguistically taking the agency from the boy and consequently delinking it almost from the emotional state of the child. This impression is amplified by the immediate context. The reason for the boy’s distress is that an inconsiderate act of his had resulted in his parents arguing. Witnessing their fight, the boy’s imagination goes into overdrive, thinking of divorce. That is to say, a typical and very emotional child behavior pattern is rendered through medical and purely descriptive terminology, foreclosing an emotive recognition between reader and focalizer character.

Furthermore, the high level of defamiliarizing language renders it distinctly different from typical child language. The register and language used are not only beyond an average eight-year-old’s capacity in vocabulary, but also in sentence structure and complexity. This factor further distances the discourse from the focalizer character. At the same time, however, the language of the novel also serves to characterize him, in so far as he is frequently described as far ahead of his classmates in terms of maturity, even though he occasionally falls behind his school-work due to his frequent bouts of illness. As his parents are almost his sole social contacts of any relevance, he participates in their world more than a child’s world. His extended and specialized vocabulary includes not only the field of medicine but – through their needful visits to a lawyer – increasingly also jurisprudence. He is, at the same time, shown to be very aware of the quality of others’ speech acts. Overhearing the patients in the wheezing chamber, many of them from the poor areas around his home, he comments: “[s]ome people speak well, using correct forms of speech and grammar. The boy likes listening to them. They are pleasant.” (FV 30).

The exclusive rendering of dialogue in the novel as free direct speech is yet another instrument of distancing. These instances are hardly ever marked by introductory clauses. Consequently, the reader has to infer not only the change in narrative form but also the speaker and most important the shift between speakers. For the reading process, this means that it is never immediately obvious when a speech act begins. The frequent instances of dialogue rendered in the text thus have the effect of small ruptures, halting the reading process, drawing attention to the discourse level.

Such instances of direct speech are the only resource of insight into other characters, as the focalization is exclusively through the boy. However, while child focalization may frequently

be used as a tool for dramatic irony, as in the above discussed novel *Blue Boy*,<sup>289</sup> the narrative mode here serves an additional purpose, aside from a focalizer character who does not necessarily have full comprehension of the events around him.<sup>290</sup> The boy's role in the family, as the youngest offspring, and in society in general, marks him largely as a non-participant thus further enforcing the narrative's tone of distance and observation.

As a result of the constricted confinements of his daily existence, the boy is overly sensitive, especially to sound, and he is easily excitable. This sensitivity, not surprisingly, causes and increases his anxiety. "His imagination is overactive and he is prone to distraction" (*FV* 86). The confusion resulting from the larger world impinging on the confinements of his existence through the increasing collapse of the public into the private is expressed in an increasing spiral of fear vs. a need to know, which marks the text from the very first sentence, setting the tone for the entire text: "Surrounded by illness and death the boy looks up every disease-ridden word he hears" (*FV* 1). The illusion that knowledge equaled security quickly comes to haunt the boy, as the novel progresses. For example, when a kid from school gets kidnapped the very abundance of different accounts is stressful, as he "wants authentic information" (*FV* 144). Back at home and left alone during the evening clinic hours he sketches masked men with guns and then only "a diagram of a gun. He must learn what the parts are called" (*FV* 145). Once again he is governed by a craving for knowledge, even though it may be an irrational kind of knowledge, in order to battle his fear.

Although the text artfully conveys the boy's anxiety and creates a constricting, claustrophobic environment in which the ethically upstanding are rendered powerless, emotionality is removed from the text through narrative style.<sup>291</sup> *Family Values* is decidedly not a

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<sup>289</sup> Cf. for example Leona W. Fisher's essay "Focalizing the Unfamiliar," in which she looks predominantly at fictional *ethnic* autobiographical children's literature, and mentions several features that result from child-character focalization, in general. As most dominant or important feature of such focalization she diagnoses a "naivete in the focalizing consciousness," and an "ironic gap between the narrating adult language and the focalizing child" (Fisher, L. 159).

<sup>290</sup> The fact that the boy is depicted as rather mature for his age with above average knowledge and understanding serves to heighten the sense of dramatic irony. Due to the controlled prose, the exalted language use, and the distant observant style of the narrative, the reader at times may forget the limitedness of the focalizer. As a result, instances of dramatic irony can have a more forceful impact.

<sup>291</sup> In *Uses of Literature*, discussed in chapter 2, Rita Felski had determined four modes of reader engagement, recognition, knowledge, enchantment and shock (cf. Felski 2008, p. 4). The latter two, enchantment and shock are both forms of engagement on the emotional level, both of which Dawesar's *Family Values* carefully avoids and disables. Enchantment is largely hindered by the overbearing observational style that records meticulously in short, reporting sentences, and by the dominant imagery relating to the abject. With this dominance of abject imagery in addition to horrific plot elements like child kidnappings, cannibalism, and organ theft, one would assume, that shock would be a constant companion in the reading experience. However, the shock value of the gruesome details resides on the story level and does not reach the level of discourse, which stays non-involved, distanced and



compassionate text vying for the reader's sympathy<sup>292</sup> or identification with any of the characters.<sup>293</sup> In this novel no character would invite identification – the boy is weak, the mother lacks emotionality, the father is increasingly irrational, and the rest are corrupt and / or not rounded enough to make identification even an option. The reader is kept at a distance, forced into the position of an observer and thus at best an evaluator of social behaviors and structures presented.<sup>294</sup> This distance is fueled by an ironic and satirical tone which turns the element of social critique in the text into commentary rather than a report, even though the reduced, precise, reporting language might suggest otherwise. In *Family Values* ironic, grotesque and satirical mode constantly overlap, constitute each other, and in combination with the reporting narrative style effect social criticism to emerge without turning the novel into a didactic sermon.

Irony, satire and grotesque are all characterized by discrepancy, resulting in disruption in the text–reader relationship as they subvert and add meaning through context, presentation and combination. All three modes are marked by an affinity to humor and the comic, yet employing it in distinct ways: irony in the subtle contradiction of meanings, satire in its ridiculing subversive critique, and the grotesque in the bizarreness of its distortions. Irony and satire are effective on the level of intellect, while the grotesque affects the reader's emotions. Although such distinctions are relevant on the theoretical level, these modes frequently overlap in a text, as is the case with Dawesar's *Family Values*.

Irony as part of the social satire suffuses the text, beginning with the cynical irony of the title that emerges with increasing force as the text progresses, because each and every member of the family is or at some point has been involved or connected to corrupt or criminal action or was at least condoning it for the good of their own. Other forms of irony range from humorous commentary to a somewhat involuntary irony on the part of the focalizer character.<sup>295</sup> Comic irony

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descriptive. Consequently, both these categories, enchantment and shock, are largely omitted from Dawesar's latest novel. This is especially striking as her previous work, *That Summer in Paris*, was highly poetic and enchanting, as well as possibly shocking in some of the taboos it rejected. The careful lack of both these variants of emotional engagement in this text then further enhances and emphasizes the distance between reader and text, which, as such, draws attention to the discourse level.

<sup>292</sup> Ethnic literature engaged in identity discourses and negotiations of cultural differences, in contrast, generally aim at involving the reader emotionally and suggesting identification with a central character in the reading process.

<sup>293</sup> 'Identification' is understood in the sense Rita Felski outlined in *Uses of Literature* as 'recognition' discussed above in chapter 2.

<sup>294</sup> Alicia Ontano in her study on the child perspective in the Asian American Bildungsroman though emphasizes, that a detached reporting style may also result from the fact that the child focalizer is necessarily "limited by age-related, emotive, and cognitive factors" (Ontano 21). While this is indisputable, and even in this novel occasionally explicit, for example in the boy's incomprehension of matters relating to sexuality, the child focalizer in this novel is not per se the reason for the detached style, and especially not for the peculiarities of this style.

<sup>295</sup> Given that the main focalizer character is a young boy, there is of course also the factor of dramatic irony, when the boy does not grasp the full consequences or importance of events or the connection between actions due to his age. This is most apparent in the realm of sexuality, but also occurs in many other contexts, as he is exclusively participating in an adult world.

is, for example, an element of almost any characterization in the text, as for example when the father's unsuccessful stock investments are depicted, emphasizing the thorough rational approach he takes, which is yet devoid of any informed knowledge for financial judgments. The father buys stocks of a new five star hotel in the area, "reasoning that families like his will naturally gravitate to the posh environs of the hotel" and so after considering the restaurant and health club it offers "[t]he doctor buys a chunk of stock from his broker not realizing that the annual membership fee [of the health club] is equivalent to ninety-five per cent of the monthly salary of the nuclear household of which the doctor is technically, legally, morally, and otherwise head of" (*FV* 96f.). The one page description of the decision-making process is suffused with irony – like the little stab in the injection of 'naturally' quoted here – culminating in the last statement that ridicules this role as patriarch, as the episode has factually declared him incompetent. It hardly comes as a surprise to the reader that the stocks would immediately lose their value, after the father had invested in them.

In addition, involuntary humorous commentary often emerges from the sincerity with which the boy – out of a need for certainty that seemingly suggests safety – observes and reflects on his surroundings. His keen form of argumentation creates humor and irony quite unintentionally:

Father had liked the idea of a round dining table because it did not have keen edges. A square or rectangular table . . . was bound to have crude rough corners. And one had already seen what had happened to the famous actor while he was shooting a violent scene on a film set without a double. He had been thrown against a sharp badly made table with rough edges and damaged his visceral organs. He had been hospitalized for uncontrolled internal haemorrhage and recovered only after the whole country had prayed for him. Without the goodwill of millions of people and the power of their faith it was impossible to recover from the injury caused by a jagged table edge to the stomach, liver, and spleen. Best to have a round table. (*FV* 15)<sup>296</sup>

The boy's presentation of the accident links it causally more to the form of the object than the activity engaged in, that is the filming of an action scene. Moreover, despite his own medical knowledge, the boy gives credit to media hysterics over a Bollywood star and subsequent prayer for the recovery. By these logics it was imperative that the family got a round table, as they did not have the popularity necessary for recovering from furniture with jagged edges.

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<sup>296</sup> The accident mentioned here refers to the accident on the sets of the now classic movie *Coolie* in 1982, as famous Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan, during a stunt scene suffered a splenic rupture from the corner of a table that punctured his abdomen. He was, as the novel here depicts, hospitalized for month and the public all over the country prayed for his health. Eventually even the ending of the movie was rewritten, as Bachchan's character would originally have been killed in the end, yet after the near death of the actor that was considered in bad taste and changed accordingly. (Cf. for example "36 years of Coolie accident: 5 facts about the devastating incident that almost ended Amitabh Bachchan's life" by Shibaji Roychoudhury at <<https://www.timesnownews.com/entertainment/news/bollywood-news/article/36-years-of-coolie-accident-5-facts-about-the-devastating-incident-that-almost-ended-amitabh-bachchan-s-life/263164>>.

The irony of the text is closely connected with the social satire in the narrative that ridicules and comments on the dismal status of the society depicted. For example, the boy's mother aptly diagnoses the root cause of the state of the social at the end of the novel:

The have-nots have always provided for the haves so that they can have more which is precisely why the haves have and the have-nots don't have. Despite the eight haves and the two nots the boy knows exactly what Mother means. (*FV* 288)

Incessant repetition, alliterations and the humorous element in the final remark add ironic distortion on the discourse level to the ethically distorted society on the plot level. Another similar example would be an incident at school as a teacher refuses to excuse the boy from sports. "The physical education teacher who is male and escapes domestic duties, most unfortunately, does not have the same beliefs as the class teacher" (*FV* 87). The 'most unfortunately' is ambivalent here, of course, as it not only comments on the boy's immediate fate of not getting his way, but also on the division of duties between genders. It is as much satire as selfish complaint.

The effect of irony and satire so far outlined differ hardly from other texts scrutinizing traditional Indian family life through such stylistic means. However, in *Family Values* the text's obsession with the abject, especially scatology, the deformation of address and the general claustrophobic effect of both the living conditions on the plot level, and the (anti-) aesthetic experience in the detached precise reporting language of the discourse level add to its cynical ironic satire, giving it a distinctly grotesque quality.

The grotesque is a central quality of this novel as it is a main vehicle through which the text's social critique is constituted. It lies predominately in the juxtaposition of voice and narrative mode, the sterile reporting quality with the subject matters and imagery that focus not only on the dark side of society but show an obsession with the abject, feces and decay.

Philip Thomson in his concise introduction on the grotesque<sup>297</sup> lists disharmony, the conjunction of the comic and the terrifying, extravagance and exaggeration, as well as abnormality as defining characteristics,<sup>298</sup> and notes that "the grotesque has a strong affinity with the *physically abnormal*" (Thomson 9, emphasis in the original). In Dawesar's novel a focus on the physically abnormal is most consistently obvious in the identifiers used instead of names. The comic element of the continued repetition of this form of address by characterization rather than proper names in combination with the features selected, sets the tone for the grotesque, especially in signifiers like Psoriasis, Paget's Disease, Six Fingers or Cowdung.

However, on the subject of the 'abnormal' Thomson also cautions against having the 'abnormal' dominate our idea of the grotesque, because we are faced with an 'ambivalent

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<sup>297</sup> Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, The Critical Idiom, 24 (London: Methuen & Co Ltd. 1972).

<sup>298</sup> Cf. Thomson, esp. chapter 3, 20-28.

abnormal' that is rather an effect of or instrument in "*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*" (Thomson 27, emphasis in the original). The grotesque depends on effect and response, and thus we have to understand

the grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation. (Thomson 11)

Following this argument, it is hardly surprising that this genre can be found in literatures about social changes, be it minority literatures, or literature dealing with the social in the era of globalization.<sup>299</sup> But, as implied here, the grotesque also, in its emphasis on discrepancies and 'the problematical nature of existence,' is a narrative mode that especially lends itself to social criticism. In turning the despicable laughable it draws even more attention to its topic than a realist text might be able to do. The comic moment of the grotesque simultaneously heightens the impact of the abject and diminishes its threat, it both shocks and releases the tension.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham in his study *On the Grotesque* (1982) also remarks that the grotesque is a popular mode in times of crisis,<sup>300</sup> as it conflates the despicable and possibly scary with the comic or absurd and thus provides a form of limited comic relief even in the face of threat. The grotesque takes taboos, often from the realm of sexuality, and what is abject in a society as resource; it works with extremes to provoke, by combining the 'high' with the 'low' and creating a comic effect that at the same time stifles the laughter it encourages.

Harpham also emphasizes that the grotesque is fairly impossible to define, because it is so elusive. "[I]t is relatively easy to recognize the grotesque 'in' a work of art, but quite difficult to apprehend the grotesque directly" (Harpham xvi).<sup>301</sup> The main reason for this elusiveness is, of course, that the grotesque depends on reception, it does not exist in and of itself, but only in the effect it creates and this effect is culture-dependent and may differ with every individual. The general culture-dependency means that it hinges on what is regarded as gross, abject, ugly and disturbing in any given environment, as the grotesque tends to utilize such disconcerting elements to combine or juxtapose them with what may even be considered poetic, aesthetic and beautiful.

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<sup>299</sup> Another example of the grotesque in contemporary South Asian North American fiction would be Anosh Irani's texts, especially his Bombay plays *The Matka King* and *Bombay Black* (collected in Anosh Irani, *The Bombay Plays*, Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2007) and his first novel *The Cripple and His Talisman* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2004).

<sup>300</sup> Cf. Harpham xxi.

<sup>301</sup> A different approach to explaining the grotesque would be John R. Clark's study *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and its Tradition* (1991). Clark takes a systematic approach to the topic, starting off with the tradition dark humor had always enjoyed in literature, to then look at methods of how to create the satiric and grotesque impression through texts before investigating recurring subjects. Even though *Family Values*, too, creates the grotesque effect largely by some of the means Clark sketches, predominately through its disturbing of normative literary conventions in language and style, and focuses on one of the subjects he mentions, namely scatology, his descriptive taxonomy provides little insight to Dawesar's evocation of the grotesque.

The grotesque does not exist in the form or features of a work of art and literature so much as it is an element or effect of them, inhabiting them as a “species of confusion” (ibid. xv).

No definition of the grotesque can depend solely upon formal properties, for the elements of understanding and perception, and the factors of prejudice, assumptions, and expectations play such a crucial role in creating the *sense* of the grotesque. It is our interpretation of the form that matters, the degree to which we perceive the principle of unity that binds together the antagonistic parts. (ibid. 14)

Similarly, a list of grotesque elements and effects in *Family Values* would serve as examples at best but cannot explain the effect these have on the reading experience overall. Like irony and satire, the grotesque is located on the discourse level. If the plot level, the characters of the story, were aware of a grotesqueness, it would not have remotely the same impact on the reader but be a *description of* a grotesque experience rather than such an experience itself. That is not to say that such stories don't also exist. But a grotesque is determined by the effect on the audience, and thus must create a discrepancy in content and presentation, create dissonance in the combination of the abject with the comic and disrupt through its presentation. This disruption will – in literature at least – mostly be in the very fact that the presentation does *not* pay attention to the content and thus treat the horrendous as an aesthetic or at least as not extreme.

Given this dependence on reception, on creating an impact with a given audience, *what* is considered grotesque or what may be utilized to create the effect has naturally changed over time. Harpham points out that as much that was considered taboo has become a staple item of photography and art over the course of the twentieth century, the idea of the grotesque has also significantly changed. “[W]hereas the grotesque had once seemed the very opposite of the real, recent commentators have seemed unable or unwilling to extricate the two from each other, and have even encouraged an identification between them” (ibid. xix). The grotesque is no longer an invention of disturbing mythical and supernatural figures as found in Renaissance art, but has become the ‘all too real.’ As the discoveries throughout modernity have de-mystified the world, awareness of the horrors of reality replaced those of the mystical or imagined.

The grotesque of Dawesar's novel is a prime example, in its depiction of a grim corrupt social through a child's perception, which not only results in dramatic irony in the protagonist's lack of understanding, but also a satiric grotesque in the juxtaposition of his innocence with the corruption in the world around him. It is created in the text's conflation of the shockingly horrendous with the detached narrative style. The grotesque momentum of the *Family Values* lies predominately in the narrative voice. That is to say, it is situated in the obsession with the abject in the boy's world on the plot level, as well as in the text's imagery, that stands in sharp discrepancy to the sterile language and mode of the narrative. This discrepancy filled with irony

and satire then results in the comic relief of the grotesque. As the author put it in an interview when asked about the novel:

There is a rigorous anti-aesthetic that informs every page of the book. It is the only kind of style that makes sense for the book. In all my work, style and content have been very closely wrapped together because I don't separate form and content. The humour in the book too is very measured. It would have been possible and even easy to write this same story with a splash of colour that made it all entertaining and palatable and let the reader and the writer glibly sidestep any inconvenient questions that arose about the nature of our complicity in this system. (Kandasamy)

As Dawesar herself put it in this interview, while here previous work was highly sensual, this one was visceral. She wanted to show “[w]hat was broken in our world” (Kandasamy). The focus on disease of the literal body is in constant juxtaposition with the disease of the allegorical body of the social in family and community. While the real diseases, like the ones befalling the boy, are cured by medicine, that is to say the sciences, the same form of reason has no effect on the larger illness, or at least proves to only withstand but not cure it, as shown in the doctors’ repeated confrontations with bribery and corruption. In the end, even the ethically conscious nuclear family of the doctors falls prey to the system when their own are concerned. They take the route of bribery to have the doctor released from prison, and support the larger family in the decision to accept money from the Arms Dealer for the wedding of Paget’s daughter.

### 7.2.1 The Object of “Belonging”

The grotesque, as just outlined, frequently resorts to imagery from the realm of the abject. In Dawesar’s novel the abject is, in fact, a permanent reading companion as it suffuses the signifiers that replace proper names and it dominates the text’s imagery. Moreover, the abject is the instrument through which the text’s social criticism is constituted.

The appeal of this novel, then, largely lies in the mode of its presentation that juxtaposes a detached almost clinical story telling with the abject. Decay, illness, death, and most of all bodily waste are the determining imagery of the novel, yet the defamiliarization and distance of the discourse frequently forecloses the emotional impact of revulsion or shock the content may suggest. The sterility of medical terminology and an exactness of expression at the simultaneous absence of emotionality effectively highlight the filth and corruption of the content and imagery used precisely *by* disallowing for its shocking or repugnant impact. The text does not aim at the reader’s empathy but at reflection and analysis. Social criticism is expressed through the centrality of sickness and scatology throughout the novel resulting in a radical anti-aesthetics that distances the reader rather than drawing him/her into the text.

The kind of abject the novel relies on would mainly fall into the second category Julia Kristeva<sup>302</sup> had defined in her study *Powers of Horror*: bodily waste. Kristeva in her study stressed that while decay and bodily waste do not *signify* death, their impact is actually more harsh. “Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (Kristeva 1982, 3, emphasis in the original). Death, as an occurrence, can be confronted. The constant expulsion of waste, however, is a permanent reminder of the corpse we are going to be. It marks the threshold of the body and what it discards, yet what is discarded is or had recently been inside and part of that body. The ‘I’ who expels is implicitly also expelled.

As Kristeva’s thorough study of religion and the sacred in this context emphasizes, the abject has always been an object of concern for religions and social structures as it is the opposite of the sacred, the pure and clean. It is a threat and thus has to be held in place by taboos. Taboos, cleaning rituals, as well as morality and sanitary laws are social responses to the abject, and in so far part of the construction of the abject. “Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (Kristeva 1982, 71).

In Dawesar’s novel, however, this threat from outside is society itself. Society is the abject that holds a constant fascination for the boy while it appalls and scares him. Given his utterly confined living conditions, society is external, if barely. It is what the parents seem to try to protect him and themselves from. Not even the members of his father’s family are allowed to enter the multipurpose room. When they visit they stay in the wheezing chamber and once, when his

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<sup>302</sup> Kristeva’s analysis of the abject is briefly discussed in chapter 7.1 above. The three forms or areas of abjection Kristeva differentiates are food, bodily waste and the visibly sexual difference of the female or rather the maternal body, as the original experience of abjection lies in the child’s separation from the mother. Even though *Family Values* is excessively employing bodily waste for its imagery and frequently referring to toilets, sewers and severed body parts, it holds instances reminiscent of Kristeva’s other categories as well. First, the novel starts out with a litany of medical terminology regarding the female reproductive organs: “period, hysterectomy, uterine wall, fallopian tubes, vagina” (*FV* 1). Second, the boy – in general a picky eater – is especially repulsed by the smell and taste of milk: “The boy finds the stench of milk intolerable. . . . The milkwoman smells of gallons of milk, suspiciously of hot milk. He prefers the pallid puke of the little girl or the yellow stools of her brother to the odour of milk though these latter smells he has only imagined” (*FV* 7). Coincidentally, milk and especially the skin building on milk when it gets warmed, is also the example of food abjection Kristeva uses: “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk . . . I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it” (Kristeva 1982, 2f., emphasis in the original). Kristeva thus not only locates the abject in the original separation, but then continues the notion of separation – a necessity in identity formation processes – also for defining the abject in food. The cream separating from the milk and hardening into skin creates the repulsion in the child to refuse the nourishment from the parents, revolting against them. In the case of the boy in Dawesar’s novel already the smell of milk causes this effect. The symbolism of the choice of food however is the same – the first form of nourishment of the human, what initially keeps the child connected to the mother through breast feeding, turns into an abject.

grandfather requests to use the bathroom, he is forced to use a bedpan in the doctor's office rather than be allowed inside. However, the appalling social still enters through the media and his parent's conversations, both of which revolve around crime, death, and disease.

The omnipresence of the abject in the form of bodily waste not only has metaphorical significance in its representation of the social, but it also holds a fascination in its actual form. The focalizer character is obsessed with other people's sicknesses, as the very first pages of the novel explicitly emphasize.

Surrounded by illness and death the boy looks up every disease-ridden word he hears . . . He is growing up with disease. Not just with malaria and childhood diseases like chicken pox that strike him but with everyone else's diseases: kidney stones, arrhythmia, leukaemia, meningitis, depression, uterine bleeding, and eczema. He is surrounded by the stench of mucosa and the music of laryngitis. . . Hours of childhood spent contemplating the colour of the world's piss. Another person's piss, another person's shit, another person's dirty green phlegm, another person's red rash and his son's yellow stools and his daughter's pallid puke. (*FV* 1)

The boy is also repeatedly depicted as showing a keen interest in his own feces.<sup>303</sup> However, this fascination with what is generally considered abject in the way Kristeva analyzed, and which thus is simultaneously disgusting and fascinating the subject, achieves a slightly different significance in Dawesar's text. The boy is not repulsed by these actual presences of bodily waste. His obsession is of a more medical nature, because to gain knowledge about the body means to be able to determine and thus cure what is wrong. Turning the abject into an object of investigation promises control over it.

The boy's interest in the mechanisms of the body and especially what the body expels reoccurs frequently. Be it in a fever-fantasy that imagines a spot on the wall as a pissing elephant (*FV* 27), or during a fight with the landlords, when his father retreats into the multi-purpose room, upon which the boy concludes that it must be in order to use the bathroom. "The boy's ears strain to hear the sound of pee hitting the porcelain bowl. Father makes a much more impressive noise than he does since Father is taller and grown-up. To his surprise the boy hears the small cupboard open and close behind the partition," (*FV* 82) as the father had merely gone to get the camera - a much more obvious thing to do, under the circumstances.

The boy's preoccupation with bathroom activities already dominates the first pages of the book in the description of the family's living quarters. Given that only a thin plywood partition that does not reach the ceiling separates the multi-purpose room from the wheezing chamber, "[h]e shits knowing the people outside can hear him shit including the girl with the pallid puke, if she pays attention. He shits and then there's the gurgling sound of the flush and they hear it and know

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<sup>303</sup> This interest is not one of the Freudian sense of the anal stage of child psychology development which, in any case, would be over by toddler age, but rather of a medical nature similar to what he overhears in doctor-patient consultations from his parents' chambers.



his shit is complete” (*FV* 2). Ironically, he is almost killed in a bathroom accident later on in the text, right after his mother had just suffered an attack from his cousin Flunkie Junkie. Both forms of harm juxtaposed here are, not coincidentally, also related to waste, one metaphorically as the waste of society, and one literally as the flush tank almost falls on the boy (*FV* 62).

His obsessive interest in excreta is not relegated to himself or his family, but forms a dominant focus in his observation of the world. While waiting in the car as his mother visits a temple, he watches a boy playing in the street. The child suddenly squats down, lifts his sweater and defecates. The boy watches in amazement, comparing the result to his own output (*FV* 181). This scene again emphasizes that his interest is more of a medical fascination than a fascination with the abject as there is no suggestion of disgust. In addition, he has a feeling of communion with this child who exhibits the same behavior pattern the text had repeatedly stated regarding the boy.

Although imagery of what is generally considered abject abounds in the novel, especially in terms of bodily waste, the abject – in the meaning of simultaneous fascination and revulsion – that suffuses the text is actually to be found on the level of what is or has become accepted social behavior. The literal abject omnipresent in the text, is presented with a clinical interest and detachedness, rendering it almost sterile in the course of this detachment. In contrast, the events depicting the decrepit state of certain elements of society, the prevalent practice of bribery and corruption in service of all-encompassing greed throughout all levels and units of society from the family to the nation are what appalls, frightens and fascinates the boy. These two levels of the abject are metaphorical conjoined in the signifiers referring to family members and the landlord. These signify literally abject qualities that symbolize their social roles. Poop, the mentally challenged uncle, is the expelled element of the family, an outsider who still belongs, who constantly reminds them of the exclusion through his permanent presence. Psoriasis suffers from a skin disease that disrupts the border between inside and outside as the skin peels and flakes off. A condition that also affects the grandfather and Pariah, another one excluded from the social based on her going against the family’s will in pursuit of her happiness. Then there is Paget’s Disease, and finally the Six Fingers. All marked in their names by visibly appalling conditions of ‘abnormality,’ while in the case of the Cowdungs the name is merely a derogatory statement to illustrate their character and behavior.

The abject as a metaphor is also frequently employed to describe the macro and micro levels of this society in general:

The city’s entrails are lying exposed because many miles of its belly have been cut to lay foundations for bridges and expand roads. The city is growing and so is the nation. The Party is dedicated to this growth. It says the nation will grow till it is greater than any other, it is growing at a rate that is faster

than that of most countries. On their return home the boy goes to the small sink next to the red gas cylinder and blows his nose filling a small blue mug with water from the bucket. The water pressure has not been high enough in the past two days to reach the specially installed tank in the bathroom so the water has to be used sparingly. Thick black twin-snots, each the size of a peanut, come out of his nostrils. (FV 191)

Here again the abject oscillates between the metaphorical and literal, first as imagery to subvert the Party's idea of growth by depicting it as vulnerable and horrifying, and then once again focusing on the body expelling its waste. This juxtaposition of the macro and micro levels of society again shows the interconnectedness and how the aspirations of the Party negatively affect the individual, in this case in the form of polluted air clogging up the boy's nostrils.

This form of conflation of the literal abject and horrifying social practices and conditions also characterizes the three story-lines that deal with larger events in the boy's life. The first of these is linked to the boy's intense dislike of milk and the smell of milk. The milkwoman, a patient of his mother who visits frequently and usually pinches the boy's cheek or otherwise comes too close for his comfort, is also a source of gossip, or knowledge for the boy. On two occasions she is the bearer of shocking news. She is the one to inform the family about a series of child-kidnappings in the nearby slums that turn out to have resulted in cannibalism and cutting the bodies to pieces before discarding the parts in the sewers running alongside the slum, while the police was bribed with money and sexual favors. The abject here are neither the body parts nor the sewers, but the actions of the cannibal and the acquiescence on the part of the police for their own personal gain. The second story involves a different form of bodily waste, human organs. The milkwoman's sister had become a victim of the organ theft scheme at the nursing home, and is brought to the doctors to help her. In both cases body parts and corpses play a central role, yet do not constitute the abject. The third subplot concerning the Arms Dealer and the upper ranks of the corrupt society also includes a corpse in the form of murdered Shampoo Girl, though again, the abhorrent and shocking element is not in the cadaver, but the conduct of people. In this case hundreds of witnesses to the murder who refuse to testify against the son of a powerful politician. Furthermore, every time the family has to venture out for either law-suits against the landlords or to establish their larger clinic, they run into walls of corruption and demands for bribery.

The boy is deeply affected by the condition of the social around him. He is growing up in a household of high ethical standards and has a hunger for knowledge as a source for certainty. His parents are running a clinic from their home for the adjacent slum instead of practicing in a hospital in a higher paid job, or even go into lucrative areas of business, like plastic surgery. Growing up in an environment focused on healing and helping those in need, acts like cannibalism, organ theft, murder, but even just bribery for the construction of a better clinic for the poor are incomprehensible and result in high anxiety for the boy. The ailments of society turn

into literal sickness for the boy. His fragility, fever-induced hallucinations, and various bouts of sickness seem psychosomatic, resulting from the anxiety he experiences.

Furthermore, his family is not above greed and corruption either. In fact, the only ethically steadfast constellation in this narrative is the boy's nuclear family with the mother at its center. She is also the one who diagnoses that the root of the rotten state of affairs was the danger inherent in 'loving one's own.' For the boy, the idea of belonging then becomes increasingly something to be feared, as sickness is inheritable, which means negative conditions can result simply from belonging. For example, the eldest brother, grandfather and one of the sisters suffer from psoriasis.

The boy worries that he will inherit this tendency. From all that he has gathered about the jeweller's son and his asthma it seems that you can easily get a disease your grandfather or uncle or aunt has. Father often says that blood is thicker than water. Each day the boy learns one more way in which this is true. (*FV* 88)

The family is ailing much like the nation. There are the physical conditions that serve as signifiers for many of them, but more important is the social suffering. This affects especially the two daughters of grandfather, SSS the self-sacrificing sister, who accepted the arranged marriage that was forced onto her and is leading a miserable life, and Pariah who married for love, but outside the family's faith and is treated like an outcast. As the novel unfolds, the boy and focalizer character gets to know more and more of the dark family secrets.

To add to this already significant build-up of anxiety, the entire family is under pressure to find a suitable groom for his favorite cousin. The subsequent interactions with family members, not all of whom have high ethical standards, are the occasions through which he gets to know more about each of them. Realizing, how several members of his own family are not above greed and scheming for their own benefit, and knowing that many conditions are hereditary, the boy is increasingly concerned that he too may become greedy (*FV* 214).

At the same time, the uncertainty itself causes him anxiety, as he is keenly aware of the parallels between the despicable conduct the members of his larger family and the world in general seem to be driven by: "The plotting and scheming on a national scale are much like the intrigues against Grandfather" (*FV* 67). The ultimate example is the adolescent cousin who states that "[w]hen it comes to money, no one is anyone's father or grandfather" (*FV* 49).

Ironically, this position initially seems to deny the novel's title. Yet, seen in the context of the text, which perverts the notion of 'family values' in multiple ways, the cousin's comment is not only in line with the values at least of the majority in the family, but also brings up the issue of the literal value of a family in monetary terms - a question that reappears throughout the text, be it in the discussion of the dichotomy of the haves and the have-nots in society, or in the context of arranging a suitable marriage.

But, the notion of a “Family Value” that the novel criticizes above all is the metaphorical idea of value in belonging over value gained through merit/ The depicted greed and power are not merely selfish individual forces or sentiments as expressed by Cousin, but always coupled with the subject’s social interrelationships and notions of belonging. The resulting social hierarchies cannot but be unjust, created as they are on the basis of emotional judgments rather than rational ones. Of course, social cohesion and functioning would not be possible without shared bonds and communality of one sort or another, nor would that be desirable.<sup>304</sup> Dawesar’s text – beginning with the cynical irony of its title – simply calls for a critical attitude towards privileges granted based on supposedly ‘shared values’ and belonging. This central critique dominates the discourse level and reading experience as it is constantly reinforced in the juxtapositions of detestable acts on the content level and ironic little remarks as commentary constituting the narrative style. The futility of ethical living, then, is underscored by the fact that despite such reinforcement of this issue in the reading experience, the content shows that under the right kind of circumstances even the most morally steadfast characters, like the mother, will cave and give in to greed and corruption in order to benefit their own, as in the case of accepting dirty money from the Arms Dealer to facilitate Paget’s daughter’s marriage.

The text highlights the fragility of ethical standpoints. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ may seem easy enough distinctions as long as they are fairly distant or abstract concepts. But the boy learns that as soon as ‘one’s own’ are concerned, ethics start to blur. The misguided mothers’ love in the case of both his older cousins not only ruins their lives but repeatedly puts members of the family in danger. Within the family, both cases are eventually frowned upon, as in both cases it is clear to all but the mother-son duos that ‘loving one’s own’ beyond reason had a negative effect. However, in the case of Paget’s illegitimate daughter’s marriage, the case is less clear-cut. When the family meets to decide on the issue the complexity of ethics vs. privileging one’s needs comes to the fore.

The doctor’s wife puts an end to these speculations which, in her opinion, are somewhat removed from the real issues at hand. From one point of view it is morally despicable and wrong to accept this man’s dirty money – earned, no doubt, from bleeding the nation – for a sacred ceremony involving their niece. From another different perspective, he is indeed the girl’s father and both from a religious and moral

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<sup>304</sup> That the novel does not advertise an alternative utopian merit based social organization is clear from the fact that the one relationship in the novel – the bond between mother and boy – that operates along these lines is not glorified nor optimal in its results. The mother is determined not to pamper the boy or grant privileges simply based on their relationship. As a result, their relationship is not only fairly reserved, lacking warmth, but it is likely also a reason for the boy’s lack in self-confidence. Whereas the two older cousins in the family were spoiled and are over-confident, the boy is constantly striving and yet failing to achieve his self-set goals. His focus is on being worthy of his parents’ love. He is afraid of disappointing them, eager to please and to not disturb their work. He lives under a lot of self-generated stress which leads to heightened anxiety and more often than not yet another bout of sickness. The absurdity of the situation climaxes when the young boy is told by an astrologer that he would be a healthy and successful man in his life, but he would not become a doctor like his parents. While the source of this statement is a form of cultural superstition, it is taken at truth-value. Not only does the father fully buy into the soothsayers’ projection, but the boy, who is devastated for having thus betrayed his parents, feels “a metaphysical affinity for his excreta. . . . because despite having the brains for it he isn’t going to become a doctor” (cf. *FV* 150).

standpoint it is his obligation to settle her. Since he has shirked his duty in the normal course of events, fate has merely conspired to force him to do right by her. Instead of trying to pin down the vagaries of the unforeseen the doctor's wife suggests they weigh these two points of view and reach a decision . . . the doctor looks proudly at his wife who has delivered two options, the one she truly feels, and the other, which many of them truly feel, in equal terms. (*FV* 253f.)

The mother – against her own principles – offers the family a mode of accepting the money without feeling guilty about it through the evocation of tradition. Furthermore, she appeals to the ultimate argument of ‘fate’, taking the discussion outside the realm of reason and using the fear-instilling suspicion to allow for the choice that – though unethical – relieves the family of a grand financial burden. The ultimate decision is the surrogate father's responsibility who is himself an upright character. However, in his love for his daughter, he opts for her happiness, stressing that integrity had its limits. Throughout his life as a civil servant he had always fought corruption but, he said, “I concede that the system is stronger than me. It has won” (*FV* 255). This final revelation of a certain helplessness and willingness to let go of ideals when an issue hits close to home almost physically strikes the boy:

The room goes quiet. It feels empty and lifeless to the boy and he gets nervous. . . . The arrival of the take-out delivery restores the buzz of small talk and the boy counts the heads to assure himself that no one is dead, that the emptiness was only a feeling. (*FV* 255)

What righteousness thus seems to come down to is hypocrisy – another frequently evoked and addressed aspect in the text – and one that in its omnipresence, alongside money and power, emerges as a true ‘family value’ in the depicted society.

The recurring theme of the novel, then, is the ethical decline of society and the complicity of the individual in the process. In the last chapter in *Runaway World*, Anthony Giddens stressed that democracies are growing the world over, yet, even though democracy is on the rise, the belief in the system is on a sharp decline. Giddens talks of the “paradox of democracy” and asks the question: “Why are citizens in democratic countries apparently becoming disillusioned with democratic government, at the same time as it is spreading round the rest of the world?” (Giddens 2000, 90). This development reflects the shifting of powers to decentralized actors and market dynamics, but also emphasizes the lack of belief in the commitment for a more general ethics of the political system. As a result, Giddens advocates for the democratization of democracies, by which he means measurements like a devolution of power, anti-corruption measurements, greater transparency, more collaborations, increased transnationalization, internationalization, but also cooperations below the national level, all of which depend “upon the fostering of a strong civic culture” (ibid. 95). Dawesar's novel in its portrayal of a thoroughly dysfunctional society seems to mirror Giddens' analysis of the status quo of democracies but does not share his optimistic potential for improvement.

If they don't evade taxes they must also cough up a part of their income for the betterment of the have-nots who are not defined by what they do not have but by whom they know for the poor have always been poor but in their name a lot of others have become rich. This, after all, is a just country with laws in favour of the wretched and if you know the ropes you can siphon off whatever is intended for them. (FV 10)

As this passage clearly signifies through the colloquial wording “cough up” or the cynical remark “after all”, *Family Values* is not a report but a commentary on society – one without much hope for progress or improvement. The disenchantment with democracy is palpable throughout the text in numerous comments,<sup>305</sup> often presented in humorous ways; and even in instances where on the surface progress is hailed, the ironic tone and an overall ambivalent presentation rather result in a conglomerate of mockery and criticism:

She is the citizen of a country that prides itself on its facility with numbers, its millions of scientifically minded doctors and engineers, and its rising power in the global economy thanks to the caliber of its schools of professional learning. Of course it is overpopulated and riddled with illiteracy, poverty, and ill health as the editorial in today's paper so rightly points out. But they live in a time of change and hope. (FV 172)

The ‘of course’ here is at the same time an ironic remark as well as it emphasizes an acquiescence with the problems in the country. Moreover, any momentary impressions of potential progress built in the plot development is corroded by the final pages when the doctor's family learns that the organ-stealing nursing home will stay in operation, as will the corrupt police force. Society, though constantly changing, is not progressing ethically.

### 7.2.2 A distorted cultural heritage of betrayal

With the specific Indian setting and context of the story<sup>306</sup> and the abundance of all sorts of betrayals throughout the plot, the repeated references to the Indian epic *Mahabharata* in the text are almost self-evident. This ancient epic is full of philosophical questions of loyalty and duty – and thus by implication kinship and belonging – vs. doing what is right by legal and ethical standards. The core of the epic deals with the war between related family clans – the Kauravas and the Pandavas – over inheriting the throne of Hastinapura, culminating in the battle at Kurukshetra during which, the legend has it, Lord Krishna came to one of the Pandava brothers,

<sup>305</sup> “It is common knowledge that the founder of the family had evacuated his grandson Dirty Toe Nail and had had his name changed when the lad was implicated in an accident on the highway. Dirty Toe Nail's father had gone on to become the next ruler and then Dirty Toe Nail's older brother had been elected as the head of state. Nothing happens without elections, even the boy knows this much. For, after all, they live in a democracy. All men are therefore equal though not everyone wears equally big wigs” (FV 244). The cynical commentary introduced by the phrase ‘after all,’ and ‘even the boy’ knowing of the corrupt state of affairs and the nepotism and hypocrisy that govern society, in a nutshell represents the contemporary disenchantment with politics and political systems.

<sup>306</sup> The novel is decidedly set in India and in Indian culture. References to the city make it easily identifiable as New Delhi, references to Indian culture include arranged marriages, dowry issues, and instances involving Bollywood actors, like the murder of Shampoo Girl or an accident of Amitabh Bachchan on a movie set involving a jagged table.

Arjuna, and gave him a sermon of confidence, now known as the Bhagavad Gita, a central book of Hinduism.

This scene of a motivational speech and role model on the battlefield is ironically evoked in *Family Values*, when Cousin is seen on TV partaking in a riot organized by the Party, looting and setting fires. The doctor tries to persuade Cousin's parents and grandfather to change their way of raising the teenager and to impose some rules and restrictions. However, his critique falls on deaf ears. Despite being regularly disrespected by Cousin, grandfather even leans towards pride for the adolescent's involvement as he is rioting for the same political side that grandfather supports. "Grandfather has begun to imagine that he is halfway in status between the god who revealed himself and the loyal disciple on the battlefield. In his reverie the grandson is willing to do anything on the command of his grandfather" (*FV* 235). The last statement will turn particularly ironic, as it is the adolescent who will command his grandfather to write a check for said Party. Met with the grandfather's unwillingness to heed his request, he will then end up killing the old man. Insofar he will prove the doctor's warning to come true when he had told grandfather: "Father! I want to show you that your grandson had no idea what he's doing. . . . We all know that the Party pays people to riot on the street and we know how easily these incidents turn into something fatal. . . . There is no limit to the human appetite for evil if it is not restrained" (*FV* 235).

While the notion of fighting among family members pervades the text throughout, explicit references to the *Mahabharata* only become pronounced as the family proceeds to the Planned City in celebration of Paget's daughter's wedding and of the grandfather's ninetieth birthday. As they traverse the plains outside the capital city, the boy is reminded that this was the location where the great battle of Kurukshetra allegedly took place.

Over lunch grandfather calls on his grandsons again. You both, tell everyone the story of the battle of Good and Evil. Not about to indulge the old man, Cousin remains sullenly silent. The boy is forced to speak. Once upon a time there was a blind king who had a hundred sons. . . . As the grown-ups fiddle through their wallets, Grandfather puts his arm over the boy's shoulder and walks out of the restaurant. I wanted you to retell the story because you youngsters need to take note that we are living in terrible times. We are living in the times of the sons and just as it was during the epic, the sons are evil while the father is good. The boy looks at his mother who had discussed the stories of the great epic with him. He picks up his courage and replies. The old king was not good, he was merely blind. (*FV* 271)

The boy's astute observation is an overall fitting characterization of his grandfather who clearly always played favorites among his children and was blind to the misdeeds of those he favored.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> "The brothers know that their father's sentiments are not to be trusted. He habitually plays favorites and is inconsistent. Just like the nation which metes out unequal justice for equal citizens, their father too discriminates between his issues" (*FV* 218).

As mentioned in this passage, the Kurukshetra War also marks the beginning of Kali Yuga, the Hindu age of darkness, the last of the four stages of the world, in which man is headed towards annihilation, and virtue, morality and righteous action are on the decline. Dawesar's text as a whole illustrates this development. On a rare occasion of the boy interacting with his older cousin Flunky Junky towards the end of the novel, this diagnosis of the current state of affairs is spelled out, as the boy draws parallels between the mythological and current condition: "We live in a time of compromises and corruption, he informs his older cousin. You sound like my mother who says the Dark Ages are here. My mother says that too, it's because fathers wrongly protect their sons" (*FV* 293). The parallels between brothers fighting out of greed and the hypocrisy embedded in the novel's title are hard to miss.

Hypocrisy emerges also in the form of another cultural stock item, especially with regard to Indian culture: (religious) superstitions. While the issue of religious conflicts between Muslims and Hindus is barely touched upon,<sup>308</sup> Hindu mythology is repeatedly evoked, not only in allusions to the classical epic. For example, the boy imagines three figures from mythology on the wall during a bout of malaria fever. When he evaluates these for contemporary usability though, religion is exposed for its hypocrisy.

The first is a profile of a sage of yore from the comic books. He has long hair tied in a knot on the top of his head and a beard. This is the kind of seer who stands in penance for a century on one foot, another hundred years on the other foot, and lives without eating or drinking. . . . The boy doesn't want to be like him. God has not done anything so kind for the boy that he should want to devote himself like this to God. In any case what is the point of living a thousand years if so much of it has to be spent on one foot or in a hospital ward home? (*FV* 25)

The boy thus equates his constrained living condition to the immobility of standing on one foot thus also implying that his family's way of life was like serving an unjust penance. The second figure then is that of the first Buddha who gave up a kingdom, a wife and wealth for wisdom.

He became so wise that he realized that religion itself was futile. The boy knows the truth of this story because Grandfather and his children are all devout; . . . This kind of religiosity could not have much value in the eyes of God even if God had done nothing much to deserve it. (*FV* 25)

The boy goes on to debate the prince's decision. If he were in that position, he would be less inclined to give up a wife and wealth for wisdom. Though, he continues to comment, he also realizes that the former would not guarantee happiness, as grandfather, having had both, is happier after his wife died. Either way, the boy decides that grandfather's life was not to be aspired to, seeing as at least five people prayed for his death.

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<sup>308</sup> It is only mentioned when the milkwoman, a Muslim, gives the boy a religious charm to protect him and mother remarks that he may only wear it a short while because it was inappropriate for him to be seen with it and his father would dislike that too.



The third figure then reminds him of the elephant god Ganesha and triggers a feeling of jealousy as well as neglect, as “[a] modern rendition of this elephant god, in simple lines, on a flat piece of metal, sits on his mother’s desk. Mother spends more time looking at the elephant god than at the boy who is still burning with fever and feeling progressively sicker” (*FV* 26). He does not equate the mother’s action with prayer for his health, but rather suggests that religiosity takes away the focus from what would matter.

While the boy finds fault in all three of these expressions of religious devotion when relating them to his own condition, the text’s sarcasm regarding the culture of religiosity is even more clearly palpable when it comes to superstitions and predictions. After the family has been unsuccessful in trying to find a match for Paget’s daughter for months, they eventually turn to traditional modes of approaching such obstacles:

It is thought fit to consult an astrologer . . . a specialized one who is gifted with the art of fortune telling. Is there a blockage in the girl’s horoscope? Is it better to wait a few months before looking for an alliance? Is it necessary to propitiate this or that god? Certainly the girl can go once a week to the temple and pour milk over the phallus that symbolizes the fertility god. And of course, if there is the slightest chance this will help, she can also go on Friday mornings to another temple and offer a garland of marigolds to the goddess of power. And yes, she can rub ash on her forehead, chant four times before her morning bath, feed the first morsel on her plate to a bird, avoid tomatoes on Monday, eat only green vegetables on Wednesday, and do anything else that it is best to do. (*FV* 132)

The increasing irrationality of suggestions listed here, from mere religious devotion to pure superstition, not only ridicules the act, but also highlights the human need and desperation for control.

The astrologer knows it isn’t easy for people of science to accept that they are consulting a fortune teller. But everyone falls on hard times or needs hope for the future. The astrologer’s role in society is to help people believe that they are not completely at the mercy of arbitrary forces, oppressive states, the whim and fancy of small-time bureaucrats, high-handed police officials, vicious criminals, mean-spirited national examination graders and so on. The astrologer returns the power of the future to the people. Usually. (*FV* 136)

This return of power in the present case means that once the father had decided to consult an astrologer, he wholeheartedly embraces it – possibly even in order to not lose credibility. Because, to question the astrologer’s diagnosis and predictions would not only devalue his going there, but also again leave them without a ‘solution’ to their problem. Furthermore, non-rational and thus scientifically not verifiable belief-systems offer comfort in situations of crisis and confusion as they give answers and suggestions that cannot be negated. Such belief systems, however, as the text repeatedly suggests, make the subjects even more susceptible to exploitation, as well as to passivity and inaction in the face of adversities.

Regardless of the bleakness this text may exude, pessimistic tragedy is not Dawesar’s genre. While the plot level may carry a sense of capitulation in the face of the world’s deep-set

evils and corrupt ways, the commentary incorporated in the narrative voice, the form of address, the abundance of small instances of misinterpretation, certain juxtapositions, employing grotesque as well as satirical modes, and mostly the detached, almost clinical form of reporting ride on a note of irony and never cease to amuse the reader. As the review of the book's French edition in *Le Figaro* put it: "Le diagnostic est implacable. Alors, tous pourris ? Abha Dawesar préfère en rire."<sup>309</sup> Dawesar situates her criticism in the ambivalence created by the discrepancy of a comical yet detached mode of declaration with the bleak unpromising picture of society without suggesting a naïve utopia nor being too unabashedly didactic. Although, some of the plot lines and issues touched upon may seem to border either one, their narrative contexts and embeddedness in the story disallows such an impression or a simplistic reading.

Where Dawesar's first novels enchanted through their sensuality in content and form, the disenchantment of *Family Values* in its being visceral does not repulse but raises ethical awareness in social conduct. In its juxtaposition of the intimate with the larger society and by showing how the individual's position changes once we or those close to us are immediately affected, the text stresses our complicity in the system, and that there was no way to exist outside of it. At the same time, the ironic tone and grotesque satire avoid didacticism through their commentary quality.

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<sup>309</sup> Translation: "The diagnosis is relentless. So, is all rotten? Abha Dawesar prefers to laugh." Cf. Eliard, Astrid, "New délire." *Le Figaro*, 10.12. 2009 (online at <http://www.lefigaro.fr/livres/2009/12/10/03005-20091210ARTFIG00642-new-delire-.php>).

## 8 Fundamentally Dangerous Dialogues

Similar to Dawesar's narrative, irony is also the main vehicle in Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Hamid, too, dissects contemporary society portraying hypocrisy and greed, but also fear of the cultural other in his take on U.S. society and politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among other aspects, the text revolves around the question of Muslim terrorism, calling many readymade assumptions into question, without necessarily providing (easy) answers.

In his epilogue to the volume *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* "September 11, 2001 as Cultural Trauma," Neil J. Smelser pointed out that in the immediate aftermath of the events of 9/11, these events were readily accepted as a caesura in the historical chronology by the media and consequently the American public, dividing time into before and after 9/11. As a result, that date laid the foundation for a new myth of collective identity. However, Smelser continues, what actually happened to the collective U.S. American consciousness was that "flag-waving patriotism" (Smelser, September 11, 270) gained current, while themes that had occupied intellectuals in politics and culture – like minority group rights, diversity, multiculturalism, postmodernism and others that asserted in a variety of ways a *lack* of common values and national and cultural unity – receded into the background. The muting of political opposition in the wake of 9/11 made racism against certain minority groups suddenly increasingly acceptable, resulting in the political and social climate that would, as we can see today, eventually pave the way for the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, who ran a campaign on fear-mongering and the promise of a border wall and Muslim travel bans above all other issues.

The developments Smelser described and the effects of these developments that have shaped U.S. American politics and global engagements since are the result of the American public's acceptance of the terrorist attacks of September 11 *as* cultural trauma. As Jeffrey Alexander argues in his comprehensive essay in the same volume, "[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 1) – the imperative word in this analysis being *feel*. That is to say, as far as collective or cultural trauma is concerned, "[e]vents are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution" (ibid. 8).<sup>310</sup> For an event to be constructed into a collective trauma, a narrative and reiteration is required. The experience of cultural trauma, in essence, is the collective's subscribing to the narrative.

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<sup>310</sup> Individual trauma would be caused by an event that is sudden and so disruptive the individual is unable to incorporate the event into his/her psyche and self-perception. For the distinction between individual and collective trauma Alexander here also references Kai Erikson's seminal work *Everything in Its Path*, 1976.

'Experiencing trauma' can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised. This identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future, but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life. (ibid. 22)

The widespread rise of 'flag-waiving patriotism' signifies such a revision of collective identity and subscription to the events *as* cultural trauma. As Smelser in his essay on "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma" in the same volume outlined, there is a significant difference between mass coping and collective coping. His list of coping mechanisms to internal or external threats includes denial, reversal, projection, like blaming or scapegoating, and depersonalization. Mass coping can mean a great number of people reacting to a trauma in the same way with the same kinds of coping mechanism. However, a mass response does not at the same time signify a collective response. To reach the level of collective coping, the significance of an event has to be negotiated into collective memory. It's meaning for the collective has to be solidified through reiteration, imbued with symbolic significance, and thus elevated to the level of cultural memory or in the case of 9/11 cultural trauma.<sup>311</sup> Such an establishing of an event as cultural trauma consequently also necessitates the conflation of various possible strands of narratives and interpretations to one comprehensive narrative over the course of time. In the process, critical counter narratives have to be muted, and in the case of cultural traumas like 9/11 that is most effectively achieved by calling them un-American or unpatriotic. Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* revisits this construction of a cultural trauma, but instead of a revision of the trauma narrative or a challenge of this narrative from the opposing side, his text adds layer after layer to the story that this idea of America has been telling itself. The novel adds complexity where the trauma requires straightforwardness. It entertains and invites critical reflection, refuses simple closure and in the end leaves the reader unsure as to whose side we should be on.

From the outset, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* captivates the reader with its distinct narrative style – a dramatic monologue in the dominant frame narrative, interspersed with short memory narratives.<sup>312</sup> The text is a long avowal of the homodiegetic narrator Changez directed at an American he encountered in the Old Anarkali bazaar in Lahore, with whom he then spends the afternoon and evening over a variety of meals. What at the outset may seem as a chance encounter initiated by Changez, to politely help an obvious foreigner, and possibly to reminiscence a bit about his own past in the U.S., increasingly suggests a deeper underlying suspense plot. Changez'

<sup>311</sup> Cf. Smelser "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma", p. 41 – 50.

<sup>312</sup> Hamid had already experimented with this narrative method in passages in his debut novel *Moth Smoke* (2000), which employed a large variety of narrative modes.

reading of the American implies more and more that this might be a plotted meeting of antagonists – with both sides aware of the other’s identity and intentions, while pretending ignorance. The open ending of the text of both men standing in a dark alley, the American reaching into his jacket where a metal object seems to be glistening, while other figures are closing in, leaves this ambiguity unresolved. The suspense created and intensified through the distinctly one-sided representation exclusively through Changez is the driving force of the story.

This narrative perspective has multiple implications reflected in structure and plot development; implications which in their simultaneity and multiplicity of layers mirror and address the complexity of global coexistence and the risk inherent in collective identity assumptions and recognition. The novel’s content is inseparable from its form, an autodiegetic narrative of what – on the surface – seems to just be a dialogue. The novel begins with Changez’ meeting of the American in the bazaar. He sets out to tell him the story of his past few years spent in the U.S. Changez, a young, intelligent Pakistani attending Princeton University on a scholarship, falls in love with the most beautiful girl in his class. She is interested in him for his cultural otherness and also takes a bit of pity on the outsider. He wrongly interprets the friendship she extends as something deeper, based not least on his wishful thinking. However, a previous traumatic loss had left Erica in perpetual mourning and somewhat unstable; a malady resurging after 9/11, resulting in a new bout of depression with her retreat from society and eventually her vanishing, and likely suicide.

Professionally, the young exceptional Princeton graduate has a terrific career-start at Underwood Samson, a prestigious financial valuation firm. He excels in his training and first job assignments. He represents and relives the American ideal of a self-made man in a meritocracy. However, reentering the USA with his Pakistani passport after a job-assignment abroad post the 9/11-attacks initiates a growing awareness of a violent difference discourse that expressed itself among other things in the ‘war on terror’ waged against regions close to Changez’ family home in Pakistan. Being suddenly treated as a potential outsider if not even a threat, results in a simultaneous self-exclusion and difference discourse on his part. He becomes increasingly critical of his U.S. experiences and eventually fails in his job or rather refuses to continue to perform on ethical grounds. Both strands of his life narrative in the USA come to a disappointing end, resulting in Changez’ return to ‘his own’ country where he is educating young scholars not only in economics but also in critical thinking towards U.S.-American imperialism.

These two biographical storylines of his professional live and his romantic infatuation only constitute the content of memory narratives triggered by the more significant frame narrative, that is the above-mentioned conversation between Changez and the American in the bazaar in Lahore.

This conversation in the narrative present triggers these memory tales in which Changez deliberately selects, structures, juxtaposes and causally connects events from his past to serve a present purpose. I will revisit these individual memories in more detail below. First, however, this unique narrative situation that characterizes the text and shapes the reading experience invites more detailed considerations.

If taken at face value, this narrative situation is constituted by a *dramatic monologue*; that is to say by an alleged dialogical communication though related to the reader exclusively through the autodiegetic narrator's perspective. We do not encounter any direct utterance of the second conversational partner, nor any apprehension of body language, action or reaction of the American except mediated through Changez. As a stylistic strategy, dramatic monologue heightens the developing suspense plot, and emphasizes the bias in the presentation, which consequently draws the reader's attention towards questions of authority, authenticity and having a voice. On the plot level, however, the reader is meant to perceive the unfolding events as a *dialogue*, and more specifically, as a dialogue between strangers of different cultural backgrounds. The second person address characteristic of the dramatic monologue is not only essential to constantly imply the reader in the unfolding exchange, this situational setting as a dialogue is also crucial in establishing the political message of the text.

Broadly speaking, dialogue,<sup>313</sup> as a spoken interaction between two (or more) conversational partners, is characterized by an underlying intentionality and aim. It is a performative act in a particular context and environment, both of which contribute to structuring the interaction. A dialogue follows a particular logic on both sides of the conversation, in the structure of the utterances and arguments as well as in their reception and interpretation. The speech act itself, as any speech act, follows certain rules and has a certain register that informs about the relationship of the partners engaged in the dialogue. Finally, dialogue only ensues from an element of shared ground but at a lack of full agreement. For communication to ensue, the partners in the dialogue need to have a shared basis in either method or topic, yet there also needs to be a dissonance or divergence from the other's position to make an exchange meaningful and relevant as an exchange of ideas, information or opinions. A dialogue is, consequently, always evaluated for failure or success from both sides of the conversation, both of which are based on the participant's expectations and interpretation.

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<sup>313</sup> This study does not have a linguistic focus, nor room to discuss approaches to definitions of dialogue acts, or the general ambiguity of the term as such, given it has several distinct meanings from human interaction to literary device. I will therefore have to limit myself here to a very general list of features that are characteristic of dialogue for the analysis of the narrative mode in Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Looking at these key features of a dialogical exchange, one would assume that the danger of dialogue lies in the potential of misunderstanding each other, of the dialogical situation not resulting in communication. However, as Arjun Appadurai in his keynote lecture on “Beyond Multiculturalism?” in Berlin in 2009 argued, when we look at the contemporary global social, the real danger – especially in a dialogue with a cultural ‘other’ – may be in understanding, or rather in the assumption or perception of understanding.

In this keynote lecture at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Appadurai discussed the notion of conviviality and in that context focused on dialogue as a precondition for understanding or approaching the ‘other’. He started out with a diagnosis of the global social, arguing that – in the social realm – globalization has resulted in the paradoxical effect that we are simultaneously too close to and too far away from the other. That is to say, increased mobility reduced distance, yet a simultaneous heightened sense of precariousness gives rise to the general impression of too close a proximity to what seems different, as we are prone to regard difference as potentially threatening. In addition, we live through a time when traditional forms of social cohesion lose their relevance and set us adrift, rendering claims on others for support or belonging fragile.<sup>314</sup> Our increasingly global and intricate interdependencies, especially concerning ecology, wars and the economy, suggest that we ought to develop a sense of caring for (anonymous) others. As Appadurai put it, suffering around the globe can produce new communities of affect, which spread empathy, identification but also anger across large cultural and geographical distances. Yet, at the same time, we grow increasingly numb towards suffering in general once the initial media hype about any catastrophe wears off.

Caught in this dichotomy of simultaneous closeness and distance, fragility and agency, interdependence and difference, Appadurai puts the question of dialogue center stage, stressing that the problems of dialogue are the same regardless whether it occurs between close associates or across large (cultural) differences. They may differ in scale, but not in essence. Appadurai’s focus is on the inherent risk of all dialogue, which first and foremost involves the possibility of misunderstandings, especially across cultural differences as interpretations and assumptions drawn may differ. However, as he succinctly points out, if a dialogue results in a misunderstanding, both sides are aware of such a result. Communication did not really ensue, the dialogue failed, but the failure is apparent.

For any dialogue to develop and thus become a dialogue, two preconditions need to be met: The first, as mentioned above, is that there is some shared common ground yet not total

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<sup>314</sup> A factor also outlined in detail by Anthony Giddens in his chapter on “Family” in *Runaway World*, briefly discussed above in section 7.2.

concordance between the parties. Secondly, every dialogue is based on the general assumption that the conversation partners enter into the dialogue with a common willingness of understanding the other. This, of course, does not preclude misunderstandings, but, as Appadurai argues, significantly reduces the risk of it, as a misunderstanding should, ideally, invite additional communication due to this desire to understand. The greater risk of dialogue, then, is to be understood, or the assumption of understanding the other. This may sound paradoxical, as we have just established that understanding would be the very goal of dialogical interaction. But, as the deeper analysis of the multiple layers of communication will further demonstrate in the following, dialogue also always entails intentions and objectives that structure the communicative act. The risk Appadurai cautions against is caught in a double bind within in this realm; that is to say that there is a risk in being fully understood in our *real* motives, or possible underlying agendas. This poses a risk, because the other's seeing our deepest convictions, our motivation or our possible doubts and insecurities exposes us, and can weaken our position in the dialogical act. Dialogue, then, is not about empathy but about agendas.

An even greater risk lies in the mechanism of obscured meanings, that is to say in our assumptions of undisclosed agendas or value and belief systems that govern the direction of the dialogic exchange. As neither party can 'know' the other, we base interpretations and assumptions on categories similar to those of collective identity interpellations. In dialogue the violence inherent in these assumptions comes to the fore, as we assume value systems and hierarchies about the other and at the same time expect them to do the same about us. Any utterance henceforth will be mirrored and evaluated against such assumptions. The more we perceive the other to be 'culturally other' the deeper these supposed gaps are. Especially when fundamental convictions are at play or imagined to be at play, dialogue becomes fraught with risk. As Appadurai in his lecture stressed, this mechanism inherent in dialogue in general can under circumstances where two (assumed) crucially different belief systems meet actually foreclose dialogue as such, because it becomes impossible to even acknowledge whatever may be said, because every utterance or argument would only be perceived after having been sifted through the net of value positions. By focusing on (real or imagined) deeper significance, especially with clashing fundamental beliefs, communication becomes impossible, as the first precondition of a shared common ground and a will to communicate are obliterated.

The additional danger of fundamental belief systems, be they moral, religious or political, is that those are value systems and thus subject to a hierarchical interpretation, with every individual upholding their own convictions as superior to differing ones. Consequently, the open or covert agenda in such a dialogue would be the elimination of difference on the grounds of a



value system by persuading the other of the superiority of one's own values. Such a basis or desire to establish common ground and eliminate fundamental difference, however, implies that somebody's basic convictions would need to change, which usually means that one set of opinions in the dialogue becomes the measure throughout. Whatever may be said would be evaluated in light of this aspect, no matter what the content on the surface may be. Communication on these grounds is impossible, as the actual utterances are disregarded in favor of (assumed) value systems or understood only in the light of these.

Hamid's novel, which in its entirety can be regarded as one long dialogue on the plot level, exemplifies all of the risks of dialogue across cultural difference that Appadurai outlines, as the following closer analysis will show. Moreover, the tone of voice and frequent teasing of his conversational partner add a distinct note of humor and irony to the tale. This touch of comic relief runs parallel to the increased suspense plot that the various and intensifying risks inherent in the long dialogue increasingly reveal, culminating in a dark alley with the very real possibility of violence about to erupt.

In the dialogical situation of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, presumptions about the other and subsequent assumptions about value systems on both sides govern the interaction. At the same time, irony, juxtapositions and the deliberate non-participation on the part of the American create an ambiguity that continuously keeps the text open to a variety of possible interpretations.

The conversation is multi-layered in terms of presentation, forms of interaction, speaker intentions, as well as implications and (possible) consequences of the dialogue. Each layer subverts, complicates, reinforces and/or challenges the previously established one, as they operate on the content-level, in the text's structure and narrative mode, and on the discourse level in the engagement of the reader. At the core of any analysis of the dialogue is the obvious and unavoidable bias of the text resulting from the exclusive focalization through Changez, the autodiegetic narrator; a bias that at the same time serves as an authenticity claim. The focalizer character does not intend nor pretend to want to give an objective account of the events he is relating, but is aware of the bias of his tale and even expressly reinforces it. However, he also repeatedly claims to tell the truth and moreover to have intensely reflected on the events of this fairly recent past, suggesting a critical, if not objective approach. He vehemently opposes the American's challenging of his narrative towards the end and more importantly challenges him on these very grounds, that is to say on the grounds that the American only starts questioning him once his story becomes objectionable to the American's assumed value system. For example,

when Changez compares his privileged lifestyle and career to the Janissaries and victimizes himself as a mercenary of neoliberal imperialism:

But your expression, sir, tells me that you think something is amiss. Did this conversation really happen, you ask? For that matter, did this so-called Juan-Bautista even exist? I assure you, sir: you can trust me. I am not in the habit of inventing untruths! And moreover, even if I were, there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you. Come, come, I believe we have passed through too much together to begin to raise questions of this nature at so late a stage. (*RF* 151f.)

Changez' calling attention to the constructedness of all (hi-)stories actually reinstates a certain authority to his narrative, if not with regard to the particular event here, then at least on a general level.

In addition, Changez supports his narrative throughout by various authenticity claims, not or not only with regard to his own culture, but also concerning the USA. He already introduces himself to the American as a cultural informant in the very first sentence of the novel: "Excuse me, Sir, but may I be of assistance?" (*RF* 1), to shortly thereafter claim to have authentic insights into the foreigner's culture. "[M]y experience is substantial: I spent four and a half years in your country" (*RF* 3). He remarks that he felt as much at home in New York as in Lahore, and claims that the bustling city around them was "[I]like Manhattan? Yes, precisely! And that was one of the reasons why for me moving to New York felt – so unexpectedly – like coming home" (*RF* 32). In these similes Changez grants himself permission to speak about both cultures with authority, while translating across cultural differences.

The focalizer character's acknowledgement of the narrative bias, and his authenticity and by extension authority claim lull the reader into trusting him. Ironically, while Changez claims authenticity and cultural hybridity for himself, and presents himself as a critically reflecting judge of situations, he at the same time exclusively employs stereotypization in his address of his conversation partner (*RF* 1-3).

As pointed out above, for a dialogue to ensue several conditions need to be met; one of which is an idea of the other participant in the conversation. This idea shapes the direction of the whole dialogue, the register, the structure and the choice of wording, in order to achieve the goals that had initiated the conversation in the first place. However, if, as in this case, hardly anything but appearance is known about the other, one cannot help but draw assumptions. The frame narrative of Hamid's novel and especially the first few pages that establish a relationship between the conversation partners, not only make this explicit, but in doing so, these passages also emphasize the epistemic violence of address, if the form of address means to be approached *as* something, which automatically implies certain values and attitudes. From the very beginning,

Changez' dialogue partner is only addressed *as* an American,<sup>315</sup> and Changez justifies his approach by outlining the process of his deduction:

How did I know you were American? No, not by the color of your skin; we have a range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier. Nor was it your dress that gave you away; . . . True, your hair, short-cropped, and your expansive chest – the chest, I would say, of a man who bench-presses regularly . . . – are typical of a certain *type* of American; but then again, sportsmen and soldiers of all nationalities tend to look alike. Instead, it was your *bearing* that allowed me to identify you, and I do not mean that as an insult, for I see your face has hardened, but merely as an observation.  
(RF 1f.)

Even though he is correct in his assumption, the American still feels violated by them, by being interpellated *as* an American with the addresser making it fairly clear that these assumptions come with (a variety) of underlying judgments. He does not defy the interpellation in itself, but rather seems to be irritated by the fact that he was recognized *as* a type or category. An irritation Changez then fully utilizes in his initial detailed observation that is seemingly objective, and yet has a teasing undertone, as he plays back the variety of stereotypes in categorizations of visible traits. What is more, he stereotypes the American while at the same time emphasizing the variety and complexity of people in his part of the world that U.S. media and mainstream culture often tend to reduce to a single type of 'Muslim'. The insult then lies in the fact that not appearance but behavior identified the visitor as American, suggesting an arrogant, self-assured conqueror's demeanor. The violence is, thus, not located in being categorized per se, but in the addressee's interpretation of what – according to *his* preconceived notions of Pakistanis – this address implies in terms of value judgment.<sup>316</sup>

The question of frames of representation and acts of (mis-)recognition suffuses the narrative in multiple ways. The American may be the primary victim of such a practice in the frame narrative, although he clearly also has preconceived opinions about Pakistanis. But, Changez also outlines a variety of instances where he was the victim of mis-recognition and interpellation during his time in the U.S. and while travelling for his job at the valuation firm. These instances intensify in the course of the novel, which however, is hardly a surprising development given the changing atmosphere in post-9/11 New York and Changez' changing appearance, in terms of growing a beard and wearing ethnic clothing items.

When he witnessed the planes crash into the World Trade Center Towers on TV while on a valuation job in Manila, he can't help but smile at the symbolism of it – a reaction that has to be

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<sup>315</sup> In effect, 'the American' is the only form of address used to refer to him throughout the text.

<sup>316</sup> The whole opening scene is steeped in ambiguity if we take the later developing suspense plot into account, because the American's initial irritation might at least in part also stem from the fear of being detected in his mission. That is to say, that he is in fact recognized as a specific individual here to execute a specific task, and that he is not just being interpellated as a member of a collective.

read against his identity insecurity, his inferiority complex fueled by recent experiences: “I was the only non-American in our group, but I suspected my Pakistaniness was invisible, cloaked by my suit, by my expense account, and – most of all – by my companions” (RF 71). Yet the very fact that he continuously portrayed himself as reflecting on these issues is in itself testament to his cultural inferiority complex.<sup>317</sup> Up to 9/11 his feeling of being othered is mostly in his self-perception. He is not portrayed as frequently exposed to racism, though he frequently analyzes social encounters against such an interpretation. However, 9/11 suddenly changes how people react to him or his origin, and thus, retrospectively rectify also his previous assumptions, regardless of whether or not these may have been fact or imagined. His eventual change in appearance is a reaction to being interpellated as a terror suspect. After relating his immediate reaction to seeing the plane crashes, and his frustration and anger at constantly being mis-recognized as a possible threat to America, he turns his attention to his present dialogue partner, which showcases how the American, too, participates in the dialogue with his own range of preconceived categorizations.

Your tone is curt; I can see that I have offended you, *angered* you even. But I have not, I suspect, entirely *surprised* you. Do you deny it? No? And *that* is of not inconsiderable interest to me, for we have not met before, and yet you seem to know at least something about me. Perhaps you have drawn certain conclusions from my appearance, my lustrous beard; perhaps you have merely followed the arc of my tale with the uncanny skill of a skeet shooter. (RF 75f.)

The simile of the skeet shooter here a telling allusion not only to the suspense plot of the novel, but moreover in the particular context here, as the first half of the novel had already and very repetitively established the mechanisms of categorization and how these constituted acts of violence.<sup>318</sup>

At the same time, Changez – at least in the frame narrative – cannot but work with categorizations and stereotypization as the American refuses to actively participate in the conversation or to disclose information about himself. This set-up of the narrative poses all kinds

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<sup>317</sup> Throughout the text Changez shows a keen awareness of both, the employment of identity politics and its absurdity, cf. for example p. 38 as he lists the high diversity among his group of new hires at the valuation firm Underwood Samson, only to continue that “short of hair and dressed in battle fatigues, we would have been virtually indistinguishable” (RF 38). Once again his use of war or battle reference is not coincidental, but adds to the general and increasing feeling of threat in the text as well as to illustrate the group’s role as mercenaries for neoliberal imperialism, as Changez describes the job later in the text.

<sup>318</sup> Changez’ comments on identity politics here and elsewhere also have a teasing side and thus add some humor to the text. His narrative is never devoid of either irony or self-irony. Another example would be his referring to himself as “Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe” (RF 183) towards the end of the novel. The reference turns their situation on its head, as Marlow is, of course, the narrator in several of Joseph Conrad’s works, like the here referenced *Heart of Darkness*. Similar to Hamid’s text, the frame narrative of that novel too covers but a few hours of company in a closed space – a ship on the river Thames in London, and Marlow recounts certain episodes of his life. The other men on board, like the American here, have no share in the plot. Though, Changez’ reference here is more to the fact that Marlow, according to his tale, had ‘rescued’ Kurtz – who had become a brutal leader, fashioning himself into a demigod and going mad with jungle fever – from the natives to return him to ‘civilization’.

of questions about agency, voice, speech acts and dialogue in general. The American's lack of voice in the text does not signify a reversal of postcolonial discourses of not being given or not having a voice, but rather a form of agency on the American's part. He is the one who declines participation and this frequent and consistent decline to contribute indicates that even though speech acts are unequally distributed, the agency in the dialogue is less one-sided. The American chooses silence and observation rather than divulging information about himself or the motives for his being in Lahore, while Changez seemingly lays bare his life. He thus prompts if not even forces Changez to carry on with his narrative, if their encounter is to continue.<sup>319</sup>

In relation to the suspense plot this carries additional implication, as the American can possibly extract valuable information for his cause while leaving his opponent without clues. This situation leaves no other choice for Changez but to go by interpretations of observations, and thus use his own value system, categories and, of course, (stereo)types to 'read' his conversation partner. The violence of interpellation in this situation is consequently as much self-inflicted as imposed. In addition, the suggested suspense plot as such negates this original impression of two strangers meeting, as it implies that both partners know exactly who the other might be and what their agenda was. The increasingly threatening undertone of the narrative heightens our attention towards fear and angst discourses. This is not limited to the suggestion of enemies meeting, but also informs the entire reading experience. This is very much present from the beginning, long before the suspense plot permeates into our awareness. It also expressly heightens the threat and violence of categorizations as such and how these make one especially prone to assumptions rather than informed evaluations.

To return to Appadurai's various dangers in dialogue, the conversation in Hamid's novel not only is fraught with the violence of interpellation and stereotypization from both sides of the table against their respective cultural other, in addition, the hidden agenda of both partners increasingly comes to the fore. With regard to the American that hidden agenda is to find and silence Changez, who is deemed a danger and possibly terrorist.<sup>320</sup> More importantly, a closer analysis of Changez' dramatic monologue shows that it may not be intended to be a dialogue at all, despite appearances and his repeated invitation to the American to share his story as well. Changez' narrative is, in fact, nothing but a self-portrait that follows obvious (as well as possible

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<sup>319</sup> One could even see similarities to the narrative situation in *1001 Nights*, where Scheherazade uses storytelling as a mode of survival by telling her husband, king Shahryār tales and stories, but never finishes them that same night in order to buy herself another day to live; a comparison also drawn by Karen Olsson in her review of Hamid's novel "I Pledge Allegiance" published in *The New York Times*, April 22, 2007 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/books/review/Olsson.t.html>; accessed February 2018).

<sup>320</sup> Though again any such conclusion is reached through Changez' observations and assumptions.

covert) intentions justifying his actions at each stage portrayed, and fashioning himself into a victim.

He presents his family history as a victim of the economic decline of South-Asian aristocracy after partition. They still held the status, but no longer had the financial means. He portrays himself as focused and hardworking, managing a Princeton degree despite the hardship he had to overcome to be accepted as an equal among his peers. Furthermore, in his courtship of Erica he beats American rivals for her attention, only to be defeated by her memory of her first lover, a fight impossible to win, even though he tried to even impersonate him. Most importantly, he suggests that he would never have turned dismissive about the U.S., if the country and its global politics would not have forced him to do so. As the title suggests, if at all, the real issue was not whether he *was* a fundamentalist, but that was reluctantly *made* to be one.

The image or stereotype of America he resorts to – especially post 9/11 – is that of a spoiled and paranoid superpower with little regard for others.

I wondered how it was that America was able to wreak such havoc in the world – orchestrating an entire war in Afghanistan, say, and legitimizing through its actions the invasion of weaker states by more powerful ones, which India was now proposing to do to Pakistan – with so few apparent consequences at home. (RF 131)

The stereotype of the self-assured – if in his opinion illegitimate – global power becomes increasingly ridiculing as he continues to describe it by depicting it as lost in nostalgia, out of touch with reality, and overly paranoid. An image, as will be outlined below, that is mirrored by the romance plot between him and Erica. When he finally leaves the country he leaves his warm jacket behind at the airport, as he would no longer have any use for it. It is intended as a gesture of humanity, however “[l]ater, through the windows of the terminal, [he] saw that [he] had caused a security alert, and [he] shook [his] head in exasperation” (RF 168).

With regard to the dialogue in progress, the heterostereotypization of the American but also the conscious employment of autostereotypes, precludes an actual exchange. The ironic remarks are likely to amuse and thus endear the reader, inviting agreement with his attitudes, but hardly real critical reflection. Furthermore, the irony-suffused presentation of the story also has a decidedly self-congratulatory tone to it. Consequently, while the text seemingly re-examines Changez’ past and path, critically dissecting certain turns of events or possibly rushed decisions at the time, the focalizer character of the frame narrative in the present time of narration is completely self-assured. The evaluative approach to his past self is consequently not so much a reflection as a narrative of justification of the current persona. This groundwork for this justification narrative, and by extension his attempt at garnering reader sympathies had already been laid in the first pages, in one of the many acknowledgments of his bias in narrating his tale.

“[I]t may be that I am inclined to exaggerate these irritants in retrospect, knowing the course my relationship with your country would later take” (*RF* 21). In admitting this, Changez in fact adds to his credibility. By demonstrating his awareness of a bias, he highlights his self-reflectivity and thus suggests that any judgments he would make are based on critical thought and reflection. At the same time, this statement can serve as an excuse throughout the later parts of the novel, should anyone be inclined to accuse him of a lack of objectivity. Changez here, as in many other instances, covers his tracks by structuring or adding to the dialogue in a way that would make him less vulnerable as a narrator, and on the content level justify his becoming an anti-American agitator.

A second, and no less relevant hidden agenda of Changez’ narrative is to repeatedly ridicule his audience, both in the form of the American and in the form of the reader. The main source of this mockery is the autodiegetic narrator’s frequent employing of cultural stereotypes and feeding into fear mongering discourses about the other, only to then mock his audience for buying into such stereotypes and fall into these traps laid out by the narrator. While the general tone of the narrative may suggest a friendly openness, there is an underlying constant register of scoffing and criticizing the U.S. neoliberal imperialism, its politics and most of all what Changez sees as U.S. self-image and self-importance, which stands somewhat in contrast to the humble, very cultured, sensitive, perceptive and understanding person Changez makes himself out to be.

The text throughout is suffused with this line of criticism, which, however, is not really phrased as constructive critique, but rather turned into witty insults on the ignorance and lack of humor of the alleged global superpower. Changez initially goes about this task with some subtlety, relegating insults to the Americans in his past. The first such situation occurred during his graduation trip as the group talked about their dream careers. When he said, he wanted to become “the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability, the others appeared shocked, and I was forced to explain that I had been joking” (*RF* 29).<sup>321</sup>

The subsequent social criticism of neoliberal imperialism in the novel is increasingly blunt and foregrounded in the text. It is not a coincidence that the initials of his employer Underwood Samson are U.S. When Changez joins the company, his immediate superior Jim – the generic American self-made man from a poor working-class background – outlines the division of power in the world:

“Time only moves in one direction. Remember that. Things always change. . . .When I was in college . . . America was shifting from manufacturing to services, a huge shift, bigger than anything we’d ever seen. . . . The economy is an animal . . . [i]t evolves. First it needed muscle. Now all the blood it could

<sup>321</sup> This statement, then, is not without ambiguity regarding his present situation, it catches the audience’s attention, but it may also imply a directive to allow for irony and joking and to not take everything he will be saying at face value just because it matches preconceived expectations.

spare was rushing to its brain. That's where I wanted to be. In finance. In the coordination business. And that's where *you* are. You're blood brought from some part of the body that the species doesn't need anymore. The tailbone. Like me. . . . Most people don't recognize that, kid . . . [t]hey try to resist change. Power comes from *becoming* change." (RF 96f.)<sup>322</sup>

As this philosophy highlights, power comes from money, all else was the tailbone of humanity, elements no longer needed. Although used metaphorically here and in the context of the division of labor, especially the later developments and attitudes of the USA towards the rest of the world as depicted in the novel (first in the valuation business, later in the war on terror) increasingly also put Changez place of origin, together with most of Asia and eventually also South America, into that metaphorical irrelevant superfluity of humankind.

This critique becomes ever more straightforward the farther the night and narrative progresses.

It seemed to me then – and to be honest, sir, seems to me still – that America was engaged only in posturing. As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums. (RF 167f.)

The narrator then magnanimously concludes, “[s]uch an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own” (RF 168). This passage puts the reader into a double bind of ethics and address. The presentation invites us to side with the narrator, yet the address implicitly attacks the reader as well as the American. The incessant repetition of ‘you’ cannot entirely be relegated to the plot level.

Another source for this critique in the text – of the USA on the content level and of the reader's gullibility on the discourse level – are Changez' ironic subversions of expectations. This is most obvious in his constant reworking of the concept of fundamentalism. Stereotypes of islamic fundamentalism frame the reading experience from the outset due to the title and cover art of most editions, which incorporate some allusions to Islamic culture either in the moon and star symbol, or architectural elements depicted. The very first mentioning of ‘fundamentalism,’ then occurs in exactly this context of his Pakistani heritage. During his first meeting with Erica's parents at a dinner, her father remarked “Solid people, don't get me wrong. I like Pakistanis. But . . . fundamentalism. You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism” (RF 55). This encounter takes place before the 9/11 attacks. Changez acknowledges that Erika's father was about as well informed about Pakistan – on issues like politics and the economy – as one could

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<sup>322</sup> Jim's argument here echo's Immanuel Wallerstein's analysis of the end of the modern capitalist system, the exhaustion of capital accumulation through production and the subsequent turn to financial speculation (Cf. esp. Wallerstein 2005, 1269f.).



expect from an American. However, his attitude and manner of delivery displayed a “typically *American* undercurrent of condescension” (RF 55).

The narrative then ironically subverts this frame of ‘fundamentalism’ by relating it to the neoliberal value system that forms Changez’ professional life. While he increasingly questions the ethical value of their valuation business, and thus becomes reluctant to perform, he is reminded of the Underwood Samson guiding principle to “[f]ocus on the fundamentals” (RF 98) by his colleague. Even though this guiding principle would have been part of their training, it is, interestingly, first mentioned only after the narrative had reached the 9/11 attacks, and thus when a fundamentalism of a different kind had entered the text explicitly. The fundamentalism advocated by the title and throughout the story, may turn out to be that of American capitalism. The expected narrative of (religious) fundamentalism is contrasted with a literal idea of the fundamentals of finance and capital markets which means – as the motto demands – to take no other aspects, like human interests, into account.

That is not to say that the text does not also and emphatically suggest the growth of a religious fundamentalist tendency or activity in Changez’ current life. But towards the end, the story does *not* reveal itself to have been the tale of how – though with reluctance – a fundamentalist was made, and instead claims the formation of a critical, informed educator. This twist of the narrative – though it cannot be detached from the biased voice and the probably underlying plot – then implies an audience accusation, towards both the American and the reader. The narrator’s awareness of stereotypical reader expectations is obvious throughout the latter half of the novel. He consciously feeds them – for example in the story of the janissaries that would serve as his epiphany to change<sup>323</sup> – and at the same time challenges these by accusing his audience of reading him through such frames based on preconceived expectations.<sup>324</sup>

Audience expectations also shape the narrative voice in a structural way. Throughout the first parts of the text, the life narrative of a Muslim immigrant to the USA meets all the positive stereotypes of a cosmopolitan, highly intelligent, ambitious, hybrid college graduate embracing what the U.S. has to offer. The story, oscillating between a love plot and a tale of professional

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<sup>323</sup> The wording of his internal struggle explicitly summarizes such common notions of cultural dichotomy: “Of course I was struggling! Of course I felt torn! I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those . . . whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain” (RF 152).

<sup>324</sup> A straightforward example of such accusation is found in the very final pages, as the American becomes increasingly agitated during their walk to his hotel: “perhaps you are under the impression that we are being pursued. . . . It seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins” (RF183). The last remark is, of course, full of irony, given that the suspense plot the text is suffused with suggests just that, meaning that the American was an assassin and in Lahore on the mission to eliminate Changez based on the assumption that he was a terrorist.

success, paints an idyllic picture that would not elicit critique or opposition from either the audience on the plot level, nor the reader. The parts from the depiction of Changez' experience of 9/11 onwards then provoke fairly strong reactions and disagreement, however, still very much within existing stereotypes and thus expectations. The frame of perception had merely shifted from the stereotype 'model migrant' to 'Islamic fundamentalist.' Even though sympathy turns into suspicion and at times even disgust, the narrative itself remains unchallenged. Yet the closer we come to the end, the more the narrator challenges these frames, suggesting more complex interrelations that do not allow for generalizations and the more the focalizer character feels the need to emphatically add truth claims and justifications to his tale.

This subversion of audience expectations and the mocking irony in the narrator's tone then reveal the main hidden agenda of this dialogue. It was not only or not primarily the narrator's tale of justification of his actions, but in the mockery of his audience turns rather turns into a lecture on ethics in economic, cultural and political matters in a globalized world, highlighting the shortcomings of the U.S. in that regard.

This attitude of the narrative is thus – given the narrative situation – at the same time also a crucial factor in the actual characterization of the focalizer Changez on the discourse level. Seen under this light, he turns out to be a rather arrogant character, self-congratulatory and proud of his wit and intelligence, perceiving himself as superior, while insulting the American with his dismissive comments.<sup>325</sup> Ironically, these are qualities that would have been cultivated in his previous profession, and in general regarded as 'typically American.' The initial focus of his lecture is to create an awareness for the cultural complexity of his home-country, and to criticize his audience's readiness to resort to homogenizing stereotypizations. However, his deeper criticism focuses on us/they dichotomies and problems created by and inherent to certain processes of globalization stemming from such dichotomies. Through historical references or calling for a historicizing perspective,<sup>326</sup> the text complicates international political alignments,

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<sup>325</sup> This self-image is evident in a multiplicity of references to his behavior or attitude in various situations, but it is also prominent in the narrative present, especially in comments on cultures or the arts. For example, during their walk through a dark alley Changez again insinuates threat when he inquires "Are you familiar with *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*? You have seen the film, you say? I have not, but I am sure it was faithful; certainly the prose version was a most powerful work" (RF 171). Changez here exhibits his self-image of cultural superiority by emphasizing that he was familiar with a classical text of American literature, while the American was – it is implied – not even aware of the existence of a literary source to the film. In addition, the film adaptation he here (condescendingly and tongue in cheek?) 'assumes' to be faithful, is most likely the Tim Burton movie *Sleepy Hollow* of 1999, which took quite a lot of liberties in the adaptation of the text.

<sup>326</sup> The narrator stresses a necessity of a historicizing approach even for the immediate situation of the frame narrative, when he remarks "[c]oming upon this scene now, one might think that Old Anarkali looked *always* thus, regardless of the hour. But we, sir, who have been sitting here for some time, we know better, do we not? Yes, we have acquired a certain familiarity with the recent history of our surrounding, and that – in my humble opinion – allows us to put the present into much better perspective." (RF 45)

emphasizing that world politics had more axes of power and interrelations than the binary world-model that the post 9/11 war on terror was willing to see. Moreover, he stresses that the gaze one applies will always color the outcome of one's perception. An ability to adjust the gaze to the object we observe, to allow for its particularity, does not mean to necessarily change one's beliefs but one's approach to examining and thus valuating – which, incidentally, is the opposite attitude of what Changez had been taught and had practiced at Underwood Samson.

There are adjustments one must make if one comes here from America; a different way of *observing* is required. I recall the Americanness of my own gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing. I was struck at first by how shabby our house appeared. (RF 124)

While Changez emphasizes that a gaze is directed and formed by socialization, he at the same time and even more so stresses that this is not inbred, but just accustomed practice. The important thing then is to be open to reflection on one's own attitudes and to adjust according to surroundings.

But as I reacclimatized and my surroundings one again became familiar, it occurred to me that the house had not changed in my absence. *I* had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country's elite. This realization angered me; staring at my reflection in the speckled glass of my bathroom mirror I resolved to exorcise the unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed. (RF 124)

His dismissive attitude – obvious in word choices like 'exorcise' – thus belies his claim of a deeper concern of cultural co-existence. Moreover, what gets increasingly omitted through the narrative perspective is that in his critique, Changez' own approach to the USA is equally homogenizing in its sweeping dismissal. Although when his parents asked about New York, he does allow that "[i]t was odd to speak of that world here, as it would be odd to sing in a mosque; what is natural in one place can seem unnatural in another, and some concepts travel rather poorly, if at all" (RF 126). Changez insofar puts the basic problem of cultural difference in a nutshell.

When he finally approaches the topic of his own political activism, he not only justifies anti-American-agitation but through his long deferral of addressing the issue he situates both his motives and his actions in a complex context. Even when he finally explicitly broaches the topic that from the title page was lingering in the text, he does so teasingly, ridiculing his opponent to some extent.

What exactly did I do to stop America, you ask? Have you really no idea, sir? You hesitate – never fear, I am not so rude as to forcibly extract an answer. I will tell you what I did, although it was not much and I fear it may well fail to meet your expectations. (RF 168f.)

The teasing here is doubled. On the one hand it lies in the phrasing itself, in questioning his opponent and in word choices like "never fear", and on the other hand in suggesting that his admissions will disappoint the American's expectations. Moreover, he defers an answer for

another ten pages, when he again points out that it will not live up to what the American may expect. In this way, *Changez* not only frames his narrative with directives of how to perceive them, but also employs reverse psychology, as it would actually heighten the other's expectations and consequently in effect possibly lessen the impact of his confession.

The conclusion drawn so far, that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is not, in effect, the portrait of a transcultural dialogue but on the contrary a lecture on proper political, economic and cultural conduct to an American, is further supported if we apply an allegorical reading to the romance story in the memory narratives. Hamid consciously plays with the notion of national allegory<sup>327</sup> in a double bind – the central characters of both of *Changez*' life stories are at best thinly veiled metonyms of the USA: Erica, his love interest who, after 9/11 is “disappearing into a powerful *nostalgia*, one from which only she could choose whether or not to return” (*RF* 113); and Underwood Samson, the financial giant who values and thus governs decision making processes globally without, however, having to bear the responsibilities of consequences of said decisions. The company, not by coincidence, bears the initials U.S. while Samson, of course, also evokes the biblical hero endowed with supernatural strength by God.

A closer look at the romance plot offers a roman-a-cléf interpretation: the heroine (Am-)Erica is still mourning her childhood friend and first love Chris who had died of cancer. Chris could be read as Christopher Columbus the explorer who is still credited with bringing ‘America’ into existence, discovering her; but it can also be read as reference to Christianity and the Puritans or – if one were to take into account the current growth of Christian fundamentalisms across the nation – the dominant and thus by implication ‘proper’ religion of the continent. It is then of little surprise that the Muslim protagonist is unable to penetrate or fully integrate into either version of America, neither the ruthless financial superpower nor the nostalgic innocent self-image. His name too allows for two different interpretations in this context. First it is spelled like the French

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<sup>327</sup> This claim that the author *consciously* uses ‘national allegory’ is not limited to the plot. On the contrary I think that Mohsin Hamid may be well aware of the contestedness of this concept that pervades his story. Even though he is a graduate of Harvard Law School, he did his undergraduate work at Princeton University and studied with literary scholars and writers like Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates. He would thus very likely be aware of key critical discussions in the field of literary and cultural studies, as well as postcolonial criticism. The concept ‘national allegory’ stems from Fredric Jameson’s work, most explicitly his 1986 essay on “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” in *Social Text*, where he – by now (in)famously – claimed that “All third-world texts are necessarily. . . allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*” (Jameson 1986, 69). This “sweeping hypothesis” (ibid.) raised much and emphatic criticism, most famously in the 1987 response in the same journal by Aijaz Ahmad. Even though Jameson’s generalization calls indeed for objection, the concept itself has become a useful metaphor of literary interpretation, as continued interest in the topic – as for example Imre Szeman’s 2001 revisiting essay “Who’s Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization” (*The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100:3) proves. Hamid, then, to some extent actually subverts the controversy, as he may be perceived as a ‘Third World Writer’ by origin, yet his allegory concerns the USA.

imperative of the second persona plural of ‘changer’, and thus implies a command to change in order to belong. It is, however, pronounced like the first name of the ancient conqueror Ghengis Khan, which would imply a threat or a hostile takeover, bringing the novel’s theme full circle.

Not only are both plot lines of Changez’ life story in the USA only thinly veiled national allegories, he moreover diagnoses the nation in the aftermath of 9/11 with the destructive and debilitating malady that had already traumatized his childhood: nostalgia. Nostalgia comes up in three key descriptions in the novel. First it is mentioned when Changez describes his family heritage. He had not grown up in poverty, but had suffered an almost more tragic fate, that of a family who once was wealthy and still very much held on to that idea, status and habits. “*Nostalgia* was their crack cocaine, if you will and my childhood was littered with the consequences of their addiction: unserviceable debts, squabbles of inheritances, the odd alcoholic or suicide” (RF 71). It is consequently of little surprise that he is weary, when he sees Erica as a person (“she was disappearing into a powerful *nostalgia*” RF 113), and the nation as a whole (“America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at the time” RF 113f.) slip into nostalgia, which also takes them outside the realm of the rational and of reality.

Nostalgia, in its practice is closely linked to the celebration of traditions. (The reinvention of) traditions in the form of rituals suggest(s) a shared past and form(s) communities that claim stability, authenticity and relevance, and thus a counter force to the loss at the root of nostalgic longing. However, Hamid’s novel is not a celebration of such a form of nostalgia, nor is it a trauma narrative. On the contrary, by intimately intertwining nostalgia with threat, he rather highlights nostalgia’s powers as well as its constructedness. Recent investigations, too, focus on nostalgia as representation, rather than a psychological condition, which led Fredric Jameson to his concept of “nostalgia for the present”<sup>328</sup> in his analysis of how science fiction and historicity collapse the future with the past. Arjun Appadurai appropriates Jameson’s term to talk about “nostalgia without memory” (Appadurai 1996, 30) in investigating global cultural flows and appropriations. Both approaches to nostalgia represent modes of cultural globalization as they exemplify the time-space compression that marks this condition. What is more, as Susan Stewart emphasizes in the introduction to her study *On Longing*, nostalgia is intrinsically dependent on representation, because

[n]ostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire. . . . Nostalgia is the repetition that

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<sup>328</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Nostalgia for the Present,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 88.2 (Spring 1989) 517-537.

mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity. (Stewart 23)

Nostalgia, despite its utopian longing, disallows a future oriented progressive identity, because, as Linda Hutcheon<sup>329</sup> in her revisiting of Stewart's argument outlines, nostalgia denies or at least degrades the currently lived present. "Nostalgia makes the idealized (and therefore always absent) past into the site of immediacy, presence, and authenticity" (Hutcheon 2000, 197).

Hutcheon's predominant field of investigation is postmodernity and irony, so her analysis focuses on the interrelatedness of these with the notion of nostalgia, a combination that is also shaping Hamid's text. Hutcheon's investigation then draws parallels between irony and nostalgia that at the same time make them polar opposites. Their sameness lies on the one hand in their doubling structure, and on the other hand in the fact that they are not qualities inherent to a (hi-)story, but located in the realms of response and effect. Yet, at the same time the two signify opposite approaches and interpretations. While the power of nostalgia "comes in part from its structural doubling-up of two different times, an inadequate present and an idealized past" (ibid. 198), irony emerges from the doubling of the said and the unsaid, from the very ambiguity of expression. Consequently, there is a "knowingness" to irony (ibid. 197), while nostalgia remains in the emotive. Even though both share "a perhaps unexpected twin evocation of both affect and agency" (ibid. 199), as they are not entities but reactions, nostalgia makes claims on authenticity of feelings and belonging, while irony denies the very concept of authenticity in its deep inherent ambiguity.

Stewart, who – much like Hamid's protagonist – regards nostalgia as a "social disease" (Stewart 23), claimed that nostalgia denies identity formation in repetition. This argument then again shows the conceptual split between individual and collective identity constructions. As the case of Erica in Hamid's novel exemplifies, nostalgia indeed is a pathological condition preventing identity formation. In the novel, the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent atmosphere in the city results in a depression that eventually kills Erica. It results in a withdrawal into herself and her past that forecloses any interaction with the present surroundings. Changez is aware of the many potential triggers for this withdrawal, yet helpless in the face of it, because the present – and his presence – only remind her of her loss and made her withdraw ever more. From his position of critical distance – in both her nostalgia, but also the collective nostalgia of the city and the nation – Changez is keenly aware of the constructedness of these gripping narratives.

Perhaps the reality of their time together was as wonderful as she had, on more than one occasion, described to me. Or perhaps theirs was a past all the more potent for its being imaginary. I did not know whether I believed in the truth of their love; it was after all, a religion that would not accept me as a

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<sup>329</sup> Cf. Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*, eds. Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor, *Studies in Comparative Literature* 30 (2000) 189-207.

convert. But I knew that *she* believed in it, and I felt small for being able to offer her nothing of comparable splendor instead. (RF 114)

The pathological aspect of it is that she never even wanted her nostalgia to be cured, her lover to be replaced.

In contrast to Stewart's individual approach, regarding group mechanisms, Hutcheon acknowledges the collective identity building potential of nostalgia as a "positive response to . . . homelessness and exile" (Hutcheon 2000, 197f.). However, she is at the same time weary of a commercial exploitation of the concept. As she puts it, "there is little doubt that there has been, in the last few decades, a commercialization of nostalgia, especially in the mass media, a commercialization that many have seen as a real evasion of contemporary issues and problems" (ibid. 204). She further outlines this position by emphasizing that nostalgia implores to miss things or times we never actually lost or had, consequently it creates an emptiness and yearning that is without actual memory, because nostalgia exists only as narrative and representation. Hamid's novel exemplifies this in Changez' depictions of New York's reaction to the terror attacks of 9/11, and how the commodity industry invades the city with flags and other nostalgia-paraphernalia. Simultaneously, the fact that nostalgia did *not* permeate every fiber of society, especially not the economy outside of this commercialization, further suggest the industrious drive behind it, created through narratives rather than an actual trauma experience. Because, as Changez emphasizes, even though

I had been telling you of the nostalgia that was becoming so prevalent in my world at the onset of the final winter I would spend in your country . . . one notable bulwark continued to hold firm against this sentiment: Underwood Samson . . . which was – as an institution – not nostalgic whatsoever. (RF 116)

Here again a symbolic or allegorical reading heightens the statement by once more juxtaposing the nation's narrative of America – which is gripped by nostalgia – with the institution of the U.S. that is driven economically.

Hamid's text, then, exemplifies the convergence of postmodern irony and nostalgia as the narrative voice serves as an ironizing commentator on the 'nostalgia without memory' emerging in post-9/11 New York. Nostalgia is the diagnosis of the social, irony the narrative mode with which he relates it.

Possibly this was due to my state of mind, but it seemed to be that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time. There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as *duty* and *honor*. I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look *back*. . . . What your fellow countrymen longed for was unclear to me – a time of unquestioned dominance? of safety? of moral certainty? I did not know – but that they were scrambling to don the costumes of another era was apparent. I felt treacherous for wondering whether that era was fictitious, and whether – if it could indeed be animated – it contained a part written for someone like me. (RF 115)

The turn backwards then is motivated by a yearning for *Sicherheit* in the triple sense Zygmunt Bauman expressed, of safety, security and certainty,<sup>330</sup> a longing that usually roots itself in the reiteration of traditions and a restrictive sense of community. The list of questions, emphasizes this need while at the same time highlighting the irrationality of such a collective turn, as well as criticizing the dominant self-image of the U.S. As the nostalgia narrative automatically highlights his outsider status, Changez attains the necessary distance to perceive the changes, what motivates them, and the dangers inherent to collective nostalgia. However, he himself too experiences a deep need for certainty. Even though his approach may be less backward-oriented, it is just as illusionary, as he searches for stability in the promise of the knowable of finances and progress as promised by the other idea of America, that of the neo-liberal imperialist forces Underwood Samson represent.

Our creed was one which valued above all else maximum productivity, and such a creed was for me doubly reassuring because it was quantifiable – and hence *knowable* – in a period of great uncertainty, and because it remained utterly convinced of the possibility of progress while others longed for a sort of *classical* period that had come and gone, if it has ever existed at all. (RF 116f.)

This belief is short-lived, as the international developments and the hostile atmosphere make Changez increasingly uncomfortable and thus at the same time critical of his life in New York. This reaches a climax when he returns after his Christmas visit to Lahore, observing everything as if through an anthropologist's perspective. The passage oozes of the pathos and arrogance sometimes found in early anthropologic studies on e.g. African tribes, a self-congratulatory superiority that already suggests his future directions.

Seen in this fashion I was struck by how traditional your empire appeared. Armed sentries manned the check post at which I sought entry; being of a suspect race I was quarantined and subjected to additional inspection; once admitted I hired a charioteer who belonged to a serf class lacking the requisite permissions to abide legally and forced therefore to accept work at lower pay; I myself was a form of indentured servant whose right to remain was dependent upon the continued benevolence of my employer. *Thank you, Juan-Bautista*, I thought . . . *for helping me to push back the veil behind which all this had been concealed!* (RF 157)<sup>331</sup>

The stylization of himself as a victim is likely as much due to being rejected by his love interest as to the political directions of the nation. This is further manifest in the fact that despite his criticism, his own narrative, too, is never without traces of nostalgic longing. He too suffered loss without possession, actually a double loss, that of New York and that of Erica, both of which he only imagined having a claim on. From the outset of the novel Changez had stressed that he had immediately felt at home in New York: “I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was *immediately* a New Yorker” (RF 33). This perception necessarily vanished in the aftermath

<sup>330</sup> Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p. 117.

<sup>331</sup> The lifting of the veil suggests a reference and thus allusion to another crime of American history, slavery, as it recalls the Booker T. Washington memorial at Tuskegee University *Lifting the Veil of Ignorance*.



of 9/11, not only because the USA invaded countries akin to his own home, but moreover, because America *invaded* New York.

Your country's flag invaded New York after the attacks; it was everywhere. . . . They all seemed to proclaim: *We are America* – not New York, which, in my opinion, means something quite different – *the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us, beware our wrath*. Gazing up at the soaring towers of the city, I wondered what manner of host would sally forth from so grand a castle. (RF 79)

His wording here is highly significant. An invasion is by definition an act of aggression and carried out by foreign powers. This particular invasion of his home then is an invasion of his identity and self-image as it obliterates the basis of his cosmopolitan identity, the source on which his belonging is founded. In the final image he furthermore challenges the foundation and the imagery of this nostalgia. After 9/11 New York was suddenly symbolized by the emblematic absence of the twin towers, the visible loss that anchored the collective nostalgia. By 'gazing up at the soaring towers of the city' Changez in contrast emphasizes the continued presence of the city's (other) skyscrapers, turning the vanished towers into two among many, while emphasizing the threat and might of the 'host,' whose 'wrath' was even more frightful as the city was *not* destroyed, but injured. The imagery he uses here, insinuates – especially with the 'castle' at the very end – the idea of a fairy tale about a dreadful mighty beast, a force outside reason not least because it had been injured and seeks revenge.

As the meeting between Changez and the American in the frame narrative slowly draws to a close we begin to increasingly see remarks in the narrative that suggest that this conversation – on top of all the above outlined motives – is also just the very personal story of an individual. First and foremost, this individual is aware of the dangers he is in and thus strategically tries to talk his way out of it. Secondly, we also encounter likely less purposefully planted comments that suggest that Changez' actions were far less politically motivated than he made them out to be, because they were caused by a deep emotional longing for his lost love, a condition largely motivated by hope beyond the rational.

In the first case of his personal motives of trying to save his own life in the bazaar of Lahore, Changez admittedly plays with fire, as he deliberately provokes the American, both in his lecture, and in his constant observations, teasingly trying to expose the hidden agenda of the agent, if that indeed was the foreigner's profession and intention. However, he always immediately backpedals after each provocation, couching his utterance in supposed cultural difference, never providing enough substance for action for the other. He observes and comments on the American's reactions in body language, or counters his statements. Changez – no matter what he may be saying – continues to use a polite register, he shows consideration and hospitality towards the

foreigner and claims to simply want for the American to fully partake in the tastes and simple pleasures the bazaar in Lahore has to offer. Yet, these instances of being an assiduous host simultaneously also serve to endear or oblige the visitor to him. Putting the American under his obligation serves – in a distant reminiscence of Levinas’ concept of the face – as a ‘though shall not kill’ (me) request. Changez at the end of their afternoon insists on paying the bill, suggesting the American can pay on their next encounter. The system of reciprocity to which Changez refers necessitates continued meetings and thus continuity as well as the belief in relationships based on trust. The splitting of bills, as the American would have suggested, in contrast, terminates every meeting without indebtedness and releases either partner from obligation once the bill is settled.

At the same time, however, almost every utterance of Changez is ambivalent and fraught with multiple meanings, that are not only directed towards saving his life, but also reveal that he too is haunted by a loss. He suffers from the same malady that he claims has destroyed so many lives, even if he is unwilling or unable to fully acknowledge that, or the fact that Erica is most likely dead. The best he can do towards the end of the text is acknowledge that memories of Erica held him in a firm grip.

I had been telling you earlier, sir, of how I *left* America. The truth of my experience complicates that seemingly simple assertion; I had returned to Pakistan, but my inhabitation of your country had not entirely ceased. I remained emotionally entwined with Erica, and I brought something of her with me to Lahore – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I lost something of myself to her that I was unable to relocate in the city of my birth. (RF 172)

Changez is caught up in elaborate fantasies of an imagined shared life in Pakistan, he continues to subscribe to the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* “which I read unfailingly from cover to cover, with particular attention to the class notes and obituaries sections at the end” (RF 174), and he continued to e-mail her until eventually her account became inactive, after which he continued to write her letters but “I limited myself to a single letter each year, sent on the anniversary of her disappearance, but it was always returned to me unopened” (RF 175). Given this – by any rational means – overburdening amount of evidence of her permanent disappearance if not her death, his continued obsession with a woman who never had loved him, can only be diagnosed as the same *powerful nostalgia* that had traumatized Erica. If, as the American seems to have reason to think, Changez has joined anti-American-fundamentalist groups, his sudden political engagement, his finding communality in a collective joined around a common objective, is at the same time an exemplary illustration of the above outlined argument of Laclau on the power of the empty signifier.<sup>332</sup> Laclau in his study *On Popular Reason* had argued that individuals are lured into collectivities of a political agenda and clear ideology out of a dissatisfaction, an unmet demand.

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<sup>332</sup> Cf. my summary of his argument in chapter 3 above.

If an ideology offers a signifier that promises to address this demand through its rhetoric and repetition, the dissatisfaction is mobilized into active participation. Moreover, as Changez admits, his motivation to become an Anti-American agitator was to get attention by the media so that his face would be seen on American TV and Erica might see him and get back in touch.

Being in full control of the narrative throughout the text allows Changez to constantly subtly – or not so subtly – present his opinions on America and the behavior of Americans in general, as well as his opponent in particular. Changez oozes a sense of superiority in his self-styled cultural hybridity and, given that he is the only voice to be heard ‘unmediated,’ we cannot but listen to his voice. Insofar, the ‘dialogue’ is successful on the discourse level between text and reader. This, of course, brings us to the question of the role of the reader in the text and in how far this form of ‘dialogue’ is being formed and effected. First and foremost, the constant address of a second person ‘you’ by the homodiegetic narrator, even though it is explicitly defined within the narrative as an opaque partner in the conversation, still has the surplus effect of direct reader address. Even though the individual chapters alternate between narratives of work and love in Changez’ past, the frame narrative in the present is far from relegated to only framing these chapters, meaning to only intercept at the beginnings and end, although that too is the case.

The speaker constantly shifts between memory and present and consequently not only emphasizes the dialogical mechanism of memory narratives as such, but also implicates the narrative situation and – in the form of address – the American, as well as the reader. The reader is constantly in the position of either feeling addressed or refusing address and consequently can’t help but reflect on Changez’ narrative and whether and with whom to side. In addition, the open ending which forces the reader to exit the text just before the culmination in either violence or the two characters simply parting ways, compels us to reflect on the probable outcome of that situation, as well as the meeting and moreover the form of presentation of the biographical stories in general. The ultimate ambiguity invites us to rethink and scrutinize assumptions we may have drawn throughout the dialogue. In so far, the dialogue of text and reader just as much as that on the plot level itself highlights the real risk of dialogue as Appadurai sees it: The risk of being understood.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Appadurai also mentioned another aspect of risk in communication, one that the plot level of the novel excludes, yet one that may on the level of reader interaction be present and having an effect on the audience. The risk he talks about is the psychological dimension of individual identity in relation to difference and that each and everyone always has doubts, is divided into several roles and constantly changing. This can then be divided into two categories of risk in illocutionary acts: the risk of speaking about something or someone and the risk of speaking for someone. The latter is again similar to the already repeatedly discussed issue of collective identity assumptions, of group memberships based on shared values where utterances may not only be made in the name of the group but also be taken to hold for each and every member of the group. Speaking for also includes the question of agency

With regard to the underlying suspense plot of a meeting between a secret agent if not assassin, and an anti-American agitator an evaluation is impossible as the novel ends just short of a climax. Through the presentation of his biography, Changez may not only have provided insights into possible motives but may also have been able to downplay or contextualize his actual involvement, as he stresses the complicity of the media in creating an image of him far more radical and far simpler than was in fact the case. However, his tone and attitude may have the opposite effect. In addition, the American at the end of the text is definitely not at ease, but he seems to feel threatened, not so much by Changez but by some shadow figures who seemed to have followed them since they left the bazaar. At the same time, he too continues to pose a threat. If, as the text would allow, his gesture in the final scene was to draw a weapon, it may at this point be as much for self-defense as to assault.

I hope you will not resist my attempt to shake you by the hand. But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards. (*RF* 184).

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and how disenfranchised members of societies (elderly, children, disabled, but also legally disenfranchised subjects like illegal immigrants etc.) are often spoken for rather than given a voice.

The former then entails talking about subjects (both human and non-human) in certain contexts and from certain positions that thus present these in certain lights that may or may not be justified, shared or generally acceptable. Once again both risks become crucial and possibly violent when identitarian fields, especially culture and religion, are at issue. Appadurai – given the objective of his talk of looking for modes of interaction in globalized social settings – puts the risks of dialogue in relation to migration and cultural differences, stressing that in our globalized world it is increasingly difficult and fraught with problems to talk about others without being challenged. The source of this challenge is a general spread of ideas about freedom, and in so far the challenge is the part to be welcomed as it highlights the complexities of social structures.

## 9 Conclusion

Deeply influenced by psychoanalysis and Marxist theory, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in particular the last three decades of the century have seen a vigorous engagement with theory and critical thinking, focusing on ideology critique and identity discourses, diagnosing and unearthing that which lies hidden through highly self-reflexive symptomatic and allegorical reading practices.<sup>334</sup> In *The Political Unconscious*, which is often called an influential trigger, if not even *the* originary moment of the turn towards critique in literary and cultural studies, at least in the U.S., Frederic Jameson describes his approach as

a way into the text ... through its diagnostic revelation of terms or nodal points implicit in the ideological system which have, however, remained unrealized in the surface of the text, which have failed to become manifest in the logic of the narrative, and which we can therefore read as what the text represses. (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 48)

In recent years, however, literary analysis is experiencing another turn, one that at least since the publication of Marcus' and Best's contribution to *Representations 108* (Fall 2009) has very much returned to the 'surface' of the text as they advocate for 'surface reading'. That is to say, contemporary reading practices seem to favor what is present in the text to uncovering that which may be absent. However, such a 'surface reading' to use Best's and Marcus' term, or 'responsible reading' which is the terminology Derek Attridge developed in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004),<sup>335</sup> is far from simply signifying a (re-)turn to ethics and a belletristic appreciation of a literary work. More importantly, it is not just a *reaction* to the intense involvement with critical theory that had marked the previous decades. While it is true that most fields of inquiry show a somewhat cyclical pattern over time, with the primary research focus oscillating back and forth between contrary approaches, it would be a great simplification and erroneous generalization of both, critique and post-critique, to assume that either emerged *only* in reaction to what had been the focus of the discipline prior to its emergence.

First of all, 'surface reading' or 'responsible reading'<sup>336</sup> do not reject theory, on the contrary, these approaches are keenly aware of the fundamentals of critique and very much informed by the theories developed over the previous decades. The relevant and significant difference lies in our approach to the text. Symptomatic reading<sup>337</sup> approaches the text from a

<sup>334</sup> For a concise summary of the different movements from Freudian and Marxist analysis to deconstruction see Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski's introduction to the volume *Critique and Postcritique*, published 2017.

<sup>335</sup> Derek Attridge's argument for an ethics of reading may not be as much in the center of the post-critique debate but is akin to this turn towards a new engagement with the literary text as such.

<sup>336</sup> Cf. chapter 2 above. These two terms are not synonymous, but similar in their focus on what is actually disclosed by the text and both advocate careful, close attention to the text as such, rather than what may be hidden within or repressed by the text.

<sup>337</sup> I use the term "symptomatic reading" as a shortcut to encompass a variety of critical approaches from Freudian and Marxist analysis to deconstruction. I am aware that the theories thus subsumed vary greatly, but what they have

political perspective, interested in the underlying ideology of the text, or its allegorical or representational function as a social instrument, whereby the reading practice is to regard texts as reflections or symptoms of a larger social or cultural unit.<sup>338</sup> A responsible reading, in contrast, approaches the text via its particular singular identity, “committed to treating texts with respect, care, and attention, emphasizing the visible rather than the concealed in a spirit of dialogue and constructiveness rather than dissection and diagnosis” (Anker and Felski, 16).

More importantly, neither reading practice has emerged from within a vacuum. The way we read is not only determined by our prior reading experience, our socialization and training, or merely the decision to read a certain way. It is most of all determined by the texts themselves, and by the dynamics and issues that shape the social at the time of writing as well as the time of reading. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an explosion of human rights struggles and social movements, of minorities demanding to be heard and minority literature increasingly finding a market. It is, consequently, not surprising that literary texts produced during that time would also in a variety of ways and in different modes engage with such issues. Furthermore, the issues society struggles with are keenly observed by critical thinkers in cultural and literary studies as well as sociology and anthropology, fields that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century became increasingly interdisciplinary. As a result, critique and text would engage, in a dialectical interdependence, in questions of identity, ideology, hegemony, and minorities. Many texts emerging during the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially by authors of ethnic heritage or other minority backgrounds, intended to speak for their group and were, in the course, interpreted as representative. Moreover, returning to texts written in prior centuries, symptomatic reading provided important insights into that which societies refuse to acknowledge or are unable to acknowledge.

However, much writing of the past two decades is no longer faced with the same social realities that had shaped the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>339</sup> The social changes of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century brought changes to the foci or topics of literary productions of more recent years that invite a different approach and may even foreclose or ridicule symptomatic reading. My above analysis takes the case study of a number of authors that would in the past have almost self-evidently been

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in common is a tendency to read literary texts for symptoms and repressed meaning that are at the same time symptoms related to the larger social or a social condition.

<sup>338</sup> This is of course somewhat of a simplification, as in practice there is no absolute division between symptomatic reading and surface reading, nor is either approach in itself actually a single, defineable approach. The most critical, theory focused analysis in literary and/or cultural studies will still always also be descriptive, appreciative of its subject matter, and engaging with it in an affective way, while surface reading will engage with theories and ideologies if applicable to the text in question.

<sup>339</sup> In addition, the past few decades have witnessed a vigorous onslaught on academia, especially the humanities, and in particular literary studies. This is in part also due to the increased interdisciplinarity of literary criticism. The overlapping profile of literary studies with other fields gave impact to forces trying to cut funding and eliminate chairs and departments. Although these dynamics are not a primary factor in the recent refocusing by academics on the literary qualities of texts, they certainly provided an added incentive.

grouped together and whose work would have been approached via symptomatic reading: fiction by authors who share roots of the same cultural heritage – in the present case authors of South Asian heritage. My analysis investigates how and to what degree these texts resist being read *as* ethnic or diasporic literature, and what more productive results may be achieved in a reading practice that stays on the surface of the texts.<sup>340</sup>

This study traces a trajectory from texts still fairly grounded within the frame of ethnic literature, yet critical of notions of collective identity assumptions, to texts celebrating a more cosmopolitan existence less determined by cultural identity than life choices, and texts that focus on the particular situation and fragility of the individual, to conclude with Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which excessively uses the trope of the representative ethnic immigrant story in the embedded memory narrative while raising issues of othering in the frame narrative. What these texts have in common is a general weariness with the notion of cultural collective identity.

The historiographic novels discussed in chapter 5.1, Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* and Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* both emphasize the dangers of subscribing to such notions of belonging. Sing Baldwin's text addresses the formation of distinct exclusivist identitarian groups in the wake of colonial India's independence movement. The novel sets out detailing the peaceful coexistence between Hindu, Muslim and Sikh Punjabis in a rural setting, where respect for the individual other and a joint despair with the colonizer governed human interaction. Her presentation of the division of colonial India, then, foregrounds how communitarian politics divided not just the nation, but communities and families, drawing arbitrary borders through relationships much in the same way the colonizer had drawn the dividing lines on the maps, causing unrest, fear, hatred and bloodshed.

Badami's novel, in contrast, depicts the diaspora's involvement and culpability in separatist or fundamentalist movements, illustrated by the example of a Sikh community. The book once again emphasizes the arbitrariness of group divisions along ethnic and religious borders, as events in the homeland suddenly start to divide the community in the diaspora that had been peacefully coexisting and mutually supportive. More importantly, the text depicts how the diaspora, out of touch with the actual daily events in the homeland, is susceptible to sensationalized information and fundamentalist ideas. Although both texts still show strong affinities with ethnic literature, their thorough deconstruction and criticism of notions of group identitarian belonging foreclose a reading *as* representative for diaspora literature, or at least as literature in support of the idea of diaspora. Both novels carry a strong political agenda, but it is

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<sup>340</sup> This resistance illustrates how Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' as violence in being addressed or "hailed" and thus already categorized by the very form of address, not only applies to people being turned into subjects, but by extension also applies to works of art.

not one in tune with earlier diasporic writing that negotiated questions of identity and belonging. On the contrary, both of these texts send a clear warning as to the potential dangers of subscribing to an identitarian group membership.

A more humorous take on the issue of cultural identity can be found in Rakesh Satyal's *Blue Boy*, which portrays the fallacy of symptomatic reading within the text itself, as young Kiran reads his otherness and lack of acceptance by his peers as cultural otherness, when in fact he is simply a bit too childish and flamboyant to fit in with his peers. Furthermore, his otherness is just as pronounced within the South Asian cultural community, yet, for lack of a better set of references, he resorts to established modes of interpretation of 'otherness.' By misreading the cause, he cannot but fail in his attempts to fit in or stand out in a positive way. The humorous tone of the narrative voice as well as the ironic distance typical for the genre of the *Bildungsroman* then result in an affective reading where the reader anticipates each cringeworthy situation the little boy maneuvers himself into and is thus keenly aware of all his errors in judgment with regard to the social around him. The identity emerging from the boy's formation is then a very individualistic and ambiguous one, both culturally and sexually, and the book simply ends with the boy's decision or realization that he was simply and island of one, at least for the time and place being.

Individualization outside of or beyond collective identity constructs also mark Jhumpa Lahiri's short story cycle "Hema and Kaushik" and Abha Dawesar's *That Summer in Paris*. Where Lahiri's earlier novel *The Namesake* may serve as the prototypical transcultural diaspora celebration text, that invites a representative reading and identity discourses on multiple levels, her more recent work situates her characters in a global, highly mobile setting where collective ethnic identities are unveiled as hypocritical limiting constructs, rather than truly identitarian. Lahiri creates detachment and distance through an overpoweringly observant, reporting style. The three intertwined stories deal with loss and atrocities in global warfare, but also love, agency and global mobility. While the detachment in her storytelling keeps the reader at bay, the stories repeatedly use a second person pronoun that results in an ambivalent form of address, thus, coloring the reading experience.

Dawesar's equally cosmopolitan novel *That Summer in Paris* may share basic plot traits with Lahiri's short story cycle, in so far as both narrate an ultimately unfulfilled love story with the tragic demise of one of the lovers. Yet, were Lahiri uses a detached, reporting style, Dawesar draws the reader in with sensual enchantment. Where Lahiri focuses on global atrocities, Dawesar zooms in on the most personal and intimate life episodes which, it turns out, are highly transgressive of about every sexual taboo. However, the reading experience, full of sensory



appeal, enchants the reader to the point where common moral judgment may be set aside in favor of the transgressive protagonist.

Cultural ‘otherness’ as a trope has lost its appeal, not least due to a certain market saturation, yet literature continues to be interested in otherness. Transgressiveness, the abject and taboos supply an otherness that fuels the literary imagination and Dawesar’s oeuvre is a prime example of it.<sup>341</sup> In contrast to the sensual reader engagement of *That Summer in Paris*, Dawesar’s next novel, *Family Values*, foregrounds shock over enchantment in its focus on the abject, and consistently enforces a distance between plot and reader through defamiliarization. Not a single character in the book is given a proper name, each is simply addressed by a dominating characteristic, many of which from the realm of the abject. While the living conditions of the central family unit are deplorable, ridden by illness and poverty in a slum neighborhood, the actual deplorable decay the text portrays is that of greed, corruption, and hypocrisy that shapes the larger social around them. The title, *Family Values*, then, is a sarcastic, disillusioned commentary rather than the moral high ground it may seem to imply.

Like Dawesar’s *Family Values*, Saleema Nawaz’ short story collection *Mother Superior*, too, looks at close relationships. But, where Dawesar focuses on dysfunctionality, Nawaz’ stories desperately cling to a need for connection. Her configurations are very intimate, involving only a small number of characters locked into interdependencies and family-like constellations, trying to provide care for each other, yet ultimately failing to really understand their other. These stories focus on the cracks in human relationships, the fragility of the individual, social outcasts, and the limitations of ‘belonging’.

Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, finally, uses the intimate setting of a conversation between two people in a bazaar in Lahore to expose the dangers of dialogue, if fraught with preconceptions about the other. All of which is presented through a ridiculing ironic narrative voice coupled with a second person form of address that not only addresses (and also speaks for) the audience within the novel (‘the American’ who is not given an active voice), but also implicates the reader. At first glance, due to its excessive reuse of familiar tropes and motives from diaspora literature, Hamid’s text may seem to invite a symptomatic reading in terms of ideology and identity discourses, yet it, at the same time, forecloses such an approach by putting these issues so blatantly on display. The irony suffused narrative voice dissects these discourses and as an alternative suggests looking more closely at the actual story and consider the individual and his motivation aside or outside of cultural or collective identities – in this particular case the

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<sup>341</sup> Her first two novels, *Miniplanner* – also published under the title *The Three Of Us* by Penguin India – and *Babyji* also both revolved around socially taboo sexual relationships.

young narrator's infatuation with a traumatized girl and his rejection by her. Admittedly, the text only allows or suggests such a closer look for the Pakistani narrator, Changez and not the American, who remains a stereotype throughout. Yet, this too is done in a calculated move to further emphasize the first point. Through the form of direct second person address throughout the frame narrative, the reader is implicated on the side of the American. This at times makes for an uncomfortable reading experience as the addressee's creed and assumptions are scrutinized. The impression of being lumped in with a stereotype results in the experience of cultural othering and collective identity assumptions that the narrator himself suffered from, and that is common for members of ethnic minorities, yet often unfamiliar to majority group Americans.

These texts have little in common and would only yield a restricted glimpse of their impact on the reader if subjected to being read as ethnic literature. However, the fact that they do not readily appeal to a symptomatic reading, and on the contrary, to some extent foreclose or ridicule such an approach, does not imply that they are any less political. By staying on the surface of the text and reading responsibly, looking at what is present in the text, the reader will gain a strong sense for the *Zeitgeist* that colors the texts. This somewhat elusive quality speaks to the mimetic element of literary texts. The political agenda of these texts is not the same as that of the literature of the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It does not aim at any form of generalizations from the text to deduct the struggles of the repressed in a collective sense or with regard to specific groups. On the contrary, the focus is very much on the individual in their very particular circumstances, without imbuing the individuals with a representative function. As a result, the reader is left with a sense of the individual's insignificance and precariousness in the larger scheme of global events, with the complexities of life and a general lack of determination, or progress. What emerges from the analysis is a body of literature that in different ways and through different methods and narrative modes reflects the social manifestations of globalization much in the vein of Arjun Appadurai's analysis of the complexity of human existence in our globalized world in *Modernity at Large*.<sup>342</sup> His idea of overlapping and interacting -scapes – *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes* and *ideoscapes* – and his emphasis on the subjective and ever changing observer's perspective, can serve as a model of a new awareness of the social for the chaotic and undetermined world we live in. The result is a keen awareness of disjuncture, complexity and precariousness. It is thus not surprising, that the focus of the arts, and in turn also of criticism is to the particular, individual instances of social interaction, intimate units seen within their unique situatedness, without claims for larger hypothesis or predictions for future developments based on past events.

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<sup>342</sup> Cf. chapter 3.1 above.

However, by diagnosing that contemporary fiction is informed by the impact of globalization is not to be understood as a categorization of this body of text as ‘fictions of globalization’ or ‘globalization literature’. This would only be exchanging one label – ethnic literature – for another one, and again suggest a categorization that would shape and determine the reading process rather than allow for a surface reading. Moreover, as my above descriptions of the individual reading experiences shows, there are no common characteristics or general modes of narration that could be said to distinguish a text as a ‘fiction of globalization’. Rather, I see a mosaic emerging in terms of multifaceted manifestations of the social condition of globalization. Various themes presented in the texts may, of course, be said to deal with the impact of globalization directly, such as the aftereffects of decolonialization and the continued unrest the partition of India and Pakistan brought to the region and its diaspora, as portrayed in the historical novels discussed above; or a celebration of cosmopolitan mobility, as depicted in “Hema and Kaushik” or *That Summer in Paris*; or the threat of terrorism that informs Hamid’s novel; or finally the horrible living conditions of the underprivileged in the second and third world that forms the backdrop to *Family Values*. Yet, the *Zeitgeist* of globalization, manifests itself in these texts less on the plot level than in the mood and affective impact on the reading experience created through narrative techniques. Political message and aesthetic form are indivisible and inform each other. The detached narrative style of “Hema and Kaushik” emphasizes isolation, while the sensual poetics of *That Summer in Paris* celebrate the freedom of a cosmopolitan lifestyle that can transgress limitations set by a society without much repercussion; the ironic distance in *Blue Boy* and even more so in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* where it is paired with a direct second person address, emphasize questioning of whatever position is taken by the characters on the plot level, while adding ridicule and humor to the text; the intimacy of Nawaz’s stories highlights the precariousness of life and the helplessness of the individual; and the strong imagery of the abject in *Family Values* juxtaposes the actual decay with the metaphorical decay and corruption of those in power and the political system. Each individual reading experience raises questions of belonging and of detachment, of othering or the questions like when is a life considered a life? How to lead an ethical existence in a corrupt society? What goes into the making of a fundamentalist and what exactly is fundamentalism? These fictions do not necessarily provide (easy) answers but aim to engage the reader on an emotional level.

Moreover, although this case study is limited to a certain region or ethnic origin, the findings of my analysis equally apply to other recent fiction by authors with ethnic roots. For example, Gina B. Nahai’s *Caspian Rain*, while possibly inviting a representative reading of Jewish minorities in Persia during the last years of the Shah’s regime at first glance, subverts any

ideas of representative collective identities in the eccentricities of the characters populating her novel, as well as the unique plot line, which furthermore is hardly focused on identity negotiations. The minority existence is repeatedly emphasized in the disadvantageous living situations it may generate, yet the real dichotomy and conflicts the novel then deals with are between the social classes among the Jewish communities. Nahai's text, much like the above discussed examples, focusses on a very peculiar individual character constellation and, through the child focalizer character, offers only a limited perspective of events which keeps the reader guessing and perpetually surprised.

Similar communalities may emerge from a responsible reading of texts like Nam Le's short story collection *The Boat*, or Lynnie Tillman's small volume *Someday This Will Be Funny*. Though widely different in style and form, they too are both fraught with contemporary euphoria and anxieties.

Consequently, although ethnic literature is still being produced and may have an important role especially within communities affected by trauma either in the past or present, it would be a great fallacy to generally approach literature by authors of ethnic heritage from that perspective. Approaching a text *as* ethnic already limits our reading experience and ultimate understanding of the text. Categorizations, while not fully avoidable, need critical reflection, which is only possibly through the emphasis on the particular instead of the universal or the collective and shared characteristics. Rather than a criticism focused deep analysis of repressed meaning, this thesis therefore advocates for a practice of affective re-reading, based on the assumption that the meaning of the text is on its surface. As Rita Felski put it: "[n]o work of art can yield up all its resonance in a single moment. There is always . . . a surplus of meaning" (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 66). Each re-reading of the text will yield another layer of its meaning construction and its particularities and complexity.

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## Deutsche Zusammenfassung

In der Analyse zeitgenössischer Werke von nordamerikanischen Autoren und Autorinnen südasiatischer Herkunft übt sich die vorliegende Arbeit in ‘Surface Reading’<sup>343</sup> beziehungsweise ‘Responsible Reading.’<sup>344</sup> Diese Begriffe bezeichnen eine Lesart, der es um den Text selbst geht, also um das was an der Oberfläche des literarischen Textes greifbar ist. In der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts erlebten die Literaturwissenschaften eine Verdichtung von Theorien und von Textkritik basierend auf symptomatischen Lesarten, deren Ziel in der Textanalyse darin besteht, das aufzudecken, was der Text verborgen hält oder unterdrückt. In den letzten Jahren hat sich im Gegensatz dazu eine Herangehensweise entwickelt, die sich verstärkt auf das konzentriert, was der Text den Leserinnen direkt offenbart. Für die Analyse bedeutet dies eine mehr in der Beschreibung verhaftete Darstellung, die Erzähltechnik, Stilmittel, und Sprache betont, und dabei vor allem deren Auswirkung auf das Leseerlebnis miteinbezieht. Ein Fokus auf Leseerlebnis anstelle von Identitäts- oder Ideologiediskursen, Ethnie, sowie Gender oder Klassenkampf bedeutet jedoch keineswegs, dass die Texte ein geringeres politisches Bewusstsein hätten, oder dass deren Analyse das politische Spannungsfeld für eine Ästhetik-orientierte Beschreibung vernachlässigen würde.

Surface Reading ist deutlich geprägt von den Theorieerkenntnissen der letzten Jahrzehnte im Bereich der Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften. Eine der Textoberfläche verhaftete Lesart ist also keineswegs eine Ablehnung von Theorie, sondern vielmehr ein Resultat veränderter sozialer und kultureller Umstände, die zu einem neuen Ansatz anregen. Während die zweite Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts bestimmt war von einer Vielzahl sozialer (Protest-)Bewegungen und Verhandlungen von Minderheitenrechten innerhalb von Gesellschaftsstrukturen, dominiert heute ein allgemeines Bewusstsein über die Auswirkungen der Globalisierung, insbesondere im Hinblick auf die Machtlosigkeit des/r Einzelnen. Das gesellschaftsweite Bewusstsein beeinträchtigt sowohl sie Texte selbst, als auch das kritische Interesse an Texten und damit auch unsere Herangehensweise an die Literaturanalyse. Ein Gesellschaftsumfeld das sich um Anerkennungsdiskurse im weitesten Sinne dreht, bringt zu einem gewissen Grade Literatur und Literaturkritik hervor, die sich der Repräsentanz bestimmter Gruppen und Minderheiten verschreiben, und Identitäts-, Ideologie-, und Hegemoniediskurse erörtern. Im Gegensatz dazu, zeichnet sich in der jüngsten Literatur – wie aus meiner Analyse zeitgenössischer Texte von nordamerikanischen Autoren und Autorinnen

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<sup>343</sup> Cf. Best und Marcus.

<sup>344</sup> Cf. Derek Attridge.

südasiatischer Herkunft hervorgeht – eine Distanz zu derartigen Diskursen ab. Die hier analysierten Texte verweigern sich einer repräsentativen Lesart. Im Unterschied zu Narrativen, die symbolisch für eine Gruppenidentität gelesen werden können, konzentrieren sich die hier analysierten Texte vielfach auf kleinste soziale Einheiten und spezielle, intime Figurenkonstellationen in sehr bestimmten Situationen.

Strukturell gliedert sich die vorliegende Arbeit in einen literaturtheoretischen Teil, der eine kurze Einleitung zur hier praktizierten Lesart des ‚Surface Reading‘ oder ‚Responsible Reading‘ bietet, gefolgt von einem sozio-kulturellen Überblick zu Globalisierung und Diaspora. Die Miteinbeziehung des Diaspora-Begriffs erscheint sinnvoll, da Diasporas häufig als Rahmen für die Verhandlung literarischer Werke von Autoren und Autorinnen ethnischer Herkunft dienen. Darüber hinaus sehen manche Wissenschaftler, wie etwa Robin Cohen, ein Naheverhältnis zwischen Globalisierung und Diaspora, aufgrund der transkulturellen und transnationalen Eigenschaften, die Diasporas auszeichnen. Dieses so wahrgenommene Naheverhältnis ist jedoch ein Trugschluss. Ungeachtet ihrer Transnationalität gründen sich Diasporas auf dem Prinzip der kollektiven Identität. Kollektive Identitäten basieren aber notwendigerweise auf rigiden, institutionalisierten Strukturen und gleichen damit in ihrer Logik mehr der Idee der Nation, als der ständig sich wandelnden, dezentralisierten Idee einer globalisierten Gesellschaft.

Als Einführung zur Fallstudie, die in der vorliegenden Arbeit behandelt wird, bietet das vierte Kapitel eine kurze Darstellung der Geschichte der südasiatischen Migration, sowie einen Abriss der Literaturgeschichte dieser Migrationsgruppe mit Bezug auf die USA und Kanada. Dieser kurze Abriss unterstreicht darüber hinaus die signifikanten Unterschiede zwischen den Texten die kollektive Identitätskonstruktionen verhandeln und sich für eine repräsentative Lesart anbieten, und den jüngeren Texten, die in der vorliegenden Arbeit behandelt werden.

Die Analyse der einzelnen Texte wird in Kapitel fünf mit einer kurzen Gattungsdiskussion eingeleitet, indem zwei beliebte Gattungen der ethnischen Literatur aufgegriffen werden, der historische Roman und der Bildungsroman, um aufzuzeigen inwieweit sich auch innerhalb dieser ein Wandel abzeichnet: von repräsentativer Literatur mit einem Schwerpunkt auf kollektive Identität hin zu Werken die diesem Konzept ausgesprochen kritisch gegenüberstehen.

Dem folgt in Kapitel sechs die Erörterung von zwei Texten, die in höchst unterschiedlicher Weise globale Mobilität behandeln. Jhumpa Lahiris Kurzgeschichtenzyklus „Hema and Kaushik“ betont durch die distanzierte Erzählhaltung, sowie einem Schwerpunkt auf Tod und auf Fotografie, Isolation und die prekäre Situation des Individuums. Im Unterschied dazu fokussiert Abha Dawesars Roman *That Summer in Paris* die positiven Seiten der Globalisierung für eine



kosmopolitische Elite, die in New York genauso zu Hause ist, wie in Paris. Der Protagonist in Dawesars Text verletzt im Laufe seines Lebens fast jedes soziale Tabu, und trotzdem werden die Leser und Leserinnen nicht abgestoßen, sondern sind vielmehr bezaubert von der sinnliche Erzähkraft des Romans der sich ständig um Kunst, Musik, Essen und Sexualität, aber auch Tod dreht.

Das siebte Kapitel untersucht zwei Texte in denen Familie als kleinste soziale Einheit im Mittelpunkt steht. Saleema Nawazs Kurzgeschichtensammlung *Mother Superior* betont den Aspekt der Zuwendung und Sorge für die jeweilig anderen. Diese Geschichten bieten ein umfassendes Bild unterschiedlichster enger Bindungen von traditionellen Familienkonstellationen zu Wohngemeinschaften. Jede dieser sehr unterschiedlichen Geschichten dreht sich um das menschliche Bedürfnis umsorgt zu werden oder Fürsorge für andere zu tragen, wobei wir jedoch schlussendlich immer an Grenzen stoßen. Der zweite Text, in dem die Familie im Mittelpunkt steht ist Abha Dawesars Roman *Family Values*. Dieser Text zeichnet sich vor allem durch den hohen Grad an Verfremdung aus, vor allem in der Namensgebung der Charaktere. Keine der Figuren in diesem Roman trägt einen herkömmlichen Namen, alle werden durch eine sie besonders auszeichnende Eigenschaft identifiziert. Der Text beschreibt eine Ärztesfamilie, die sich um die Armen in den Slums von New Delhi kümmert, wobei die Familie symbolisch mit der Nation verglichen wird. Beide werden fälschlicherweise idealisiert, da in beiden Korruption und Heuchelei vorherrscht. Stilistisch fokussiert der Text auf Abscheu und Grauen, wobei das Grauen, das den Alltag des jungen Protagonisten in Form von Krankheiten und seiner Obsession mit Exkrementen bestimmt unbedeutend bleibt im Vergleich zur Korruption und Verrohung der breiteren Gesellschaft. Der Titelbegriff der Familienwerte kann am Ende nur als sarkastischer Kommentar gesehen werden.

Mit der Analyse im letzten Kapitel, Mohsin Hamids Roman *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* schließt sich der Kreis insofern, als der Text aus einer Rahmenhandlung und einem darin eingeflochtenen Erinnerungsnarrativ bestehen. Diese stehen in scharfem Kontrast zueinander. Die Vergangenheitserzählung bietet eine traditionelle, stereotype Immigrationerfolgsgeschichte, während die Rahmenhandlung eine solche Lesart durch den ironischen Kommentar der Erzählperspektive und durch die Erzählsituation ständig in Frage stellt und entkräftet. Die Rahmenhandlung besteht aus einer Konversation zwischen einem Amerikaner und einem Pakistaner im Bazar in Lahore, wobei nur Changezs Seite des Dialogs artikuliert wird. Die ungewöhnliche Erzählperspektive der zweiten Person spricht dabei nicht nur den Konversationspartner, den amerikanischen Gast, an, sondern implizit auch die Leser und Leserinnen. Die Unterhaltung der Rahmenhandlung stellt die Gefahren, die einem Dialog

innewohnen dar, insbesondere dann, wenn die Dialogpartner jeweils davon ausgehen, den anderen zu verstehen, also bereits zu wissen, aus welcher Motivation heraus und mit welcher Absicht der Dialog geführt wird.

Meine Anwendung einer verantwortungsbewussten Lesart – eines Responsible Reading – auf diese so unterschiedlichen Texte zeigt zum einen auf, wie wenig diese Texte gemein haben und wie wenig daher eine Bindung dieser Texte unter ein Stichwort oder einen Forschungsansatz wie „Ethnie“ an Ertrag bringen würde. Zum anderen hebt diese Lesart die speziellen Eigenarten der individuellen Texte hervor, ohne jedoch lediglich eine beschreibende, rein auf ästhetische Stilmerkmale konzentrierte Analyse zu bieten. Was sich am Ende als Ergebnis abzeichnet sind Einblicke in eine Stimmung oder den Zeitgeist, der diesen Texten aber auch meiner Leseerfahrung zugrunde liegt. Dieser ist geprägt von den mannigfaltigen Auswirkungen, die die Globalisierung auf unsere Sozialwelt hat, insbesondere einem Bewusstsein für die die prekäre Situation und Machtlosigkeit des Individuums, und damit verbunden der Erkenntnis der Dezentralisierung von Machtpositionen. Gleichzeitig, sind aber auch die sich neu eröffnenden Chancen nicht zu vernachlässigen, allen voran internationale Mobilität und die Möglichkeit, Beschränkungen, die unsere jeweilige Gesellschaft ihren Mitgliedern auferlegt, zu überschreiten.

## English Abstract

The present study practices ‘surface reading’<sup>345</sup> or ‘responsible reading’<sup>346</sup> in the analysis of recent fiction by authors of South Asian North American heritage. While the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen an upsurge in theories and critique that applied a symptomatic reading approach in an attempt to uncover that which is hidden in or repressed by the text, the more recent idea of post-critique returned its focus to what is present in the text. In practice this means a more descriptive approach that focuses on modes of narration, tropes, and language and most importantly, how all of these affect the reader. However, foregrounding reading experience over discourses of identity, ideology, or ethnicity, as well as gender and class struggles, does not mean the texts are any less political, nor is the analysis merely focused on the aesthetic.

Surface reading remains deeply informed by the theories that had dominated the past decades in the fields of literary and cultural studies. But, as the social environment changed from the last decades of modernity that were marked by social movements and minority rights discourses, to a general awareness of the impacts of globalization and the precariousness of the individual in the globalized world, our analytical tools also shifted their focus and approach. The literature coming out of a social struggling for recognition would invite a representative reading and engagement with questions of ideology and hegemony. In contrast, as the present analysis of texts by South Asian North American writers shows, more recent literary productions largely dismiss or foreclose such an interpretative approach. These texts are often intimate stories of very particular situations of specific individuals.

My thesis first offers a general introduction on this shift in reading practice and on responsible reading. This is followed by some socio-cultural background on globalization and diaspora, as diasporas are not only a frequent frame within which fiction by authors of ethnic heritage are considered, but moreover, critics like Robin Cohen see diasporas as having a particular affinity with globalization, which would make them particularly adept to benefit in the changing social environment. This argument, however, is based on a misconceived underlying logic of diasporas. Despite their transcultural nature, diasporas actually more closely resemble the rigidity of the nation state in their adherence to the idea of collective identities than the fluidity of decentralized global interdependence.

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<sup>345</sup> Cf. Best and Marcus.

<sup>346</sup> Cf. Derek Attridge.

As an introduction to the particular case study, chapter four will offer a brief overview of the history of South Asian migration and South Asian North American ethnic literature. By including these glimpses into ethnic literature, the significant differences not only in reading practice, but also as a shift in the more recent literary production becomes apparent. Accordingly, the analysis of the individual novels and short story collections that comprise my case study are structured in terms of their degree of difference. The initial genre analysis of historiographic fiction and the Bildungsroman features examples of texts with a significant ethnicity component in setting and theme, yet each in their way is highly critical of collective identity constructions.

This is followed, in chapter six, by two texts set in an environment of global mobility. Jhumpa Lahiri's short story cycle "Hema and Kaushik" emphasizes isolation and precarity, in the reporting narrative style and use of photography, as well as a focus on death. In contrast, Abha Dawesar's *That Summer in Paris* focuses on sensuality, drawing the reader into a text full of taboo transgressions by enchanting them with descriptions of sensual experiences from the arts, music, and food to sexual encounters.

Chapter seven then takes a closer look at the smallest social unit, the role of the family, and the depictions of changing family constellations as well as a less nostalgically idealized notion of family in recent texts. Saleema Nawaz' short story collection *Mother Superior* depicts a wide variety of intimate relationships, from traditional families to the cohabitation of peers. Each of her stories grapples with the human need to give care and be cared for, and the ultimate limitations or failure of caring. Abha Dawesar's novel *Family Values*, juxtaposes the small unit of the family with the larger unit of the nation. Set in the slums of New Delhi, the novel depicts the abject that the small family unit of the protagonist is faced with on a daily basis, from actual illness and horrifying living conditions, to the more symbolical abject of a lack of ethics and values among the larger family, and uses that as a template for the larger ills of society in terms of all pervasive corruption and crime.

The final chapter takes the study full circle with a reading of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which combines a traditional, stereotypical immigrant narrative in the embedded storyline, with an ironic, critical reinterpretation of that perception. The frame narrative depicts a dialogue between an American and Changez, a suspected Pakistani terrorist, in the bazaar in Lahore. The underlying theme of this frame narrative is the danger inherent to dialogue, in particular if the conversational partners base their actions on preconceived notions of the other and of understanding the other's motivations and goals. The text, through its form of second person address, implies the reader in the ironic commentary given by the narrator, Changez, while the American, like the reader, is not given a voice.

My responsible reading of these diverse texts emphasizes not only that these texts would share very little if grouped under a common header like Ethnic Literature, but moreover, that a reading practice focused on the particularities of the individual text and on reading experience does not limit an analysis to merely descriptive results. What emerges from such a reading may be less tangible than results from a symptomatic reading but offers valuable glimpses into the *Zeitgeist* and prevailing mood in all of its varieties. In the case of the texts analyzed in the present study, what emerges is a general awareness of the manifestations of globalization in the social fabric, in particular, the precariousness of the individual in a globalized world paired with an awareness of shifts of power, but also a celebration of cosmopolitan mobility that offers transgressions of social boundaries.

## Curriculum Vitae

### Education

- since Oct. 2008      PhD student at the Graduate School of North American Studies, JFKI, Freie Universität Berlin.
- March 06 – June 08      PhD student at the Engl. & American Studies Department of the University of Vienna (program not completed)
- March 97 – Jan 06      MA in Comparative Literature and English & American Studies at the University of Vienna
- Feb - June 2001      ERASMUS exchange semester in Rome at the Università Roma Tre

### Teaching

- Summer Term 2009/2010      Proseminar “The Cultural Dimension of Globalization and Recent South Asian North American Fiction”
- Summerterm 2005 u.  
Winter term 05/06      Tutor for the lecture course „Introduction to Literatures in English“ by Dr. Dieter Fuchs, Department for English and American Studies, University of Vienna
- Winter term 2004/05      Tutor for the lecture course „Introduction to Literatures in English“ by Prof. Margarete Rubik, Department for English and American Studies, University of Vienna

### Academic Activities

- Jan. 2003 – Sep. 2008      FWF Project Research Assistant  
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