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AN INTERVIEW WITH M. K. NAIK

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M. K. Naik is a familiar name in criticism of Indian Writing in English . When we think of criticism in Indian Writing in English, the names of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, C. D. Narasimhaiah and M. K. Naik flash in our minds. Naik is more than a critic. He wrote, criticized and translated a bulk of Indian Writing in English. Besides, the people of Indian Writing World know that he (Naik) is known for his wit and humour. One can really enjoy the sparkling dialogue with him. One never gets fatigued with him.

The interviewer has good fortune of meeting Naik in Pune on 7th June, 2009 at his residence, and recording an interview. Given below is the transcription of the interview which may be useful to the lay reader as well as the tribe of students and researchers engaged in meaningful research.

Q. If you are asked to choose one of your books, which book would you choose?

Ans. The answer is very clear that the book is *A History of Indian English Literature*, published in 1982 by Sahitya Akademi. I say so not because the book was published into several editions and hundreds of copies are sold, but because it costs me a great deal of labour. The grant of a National Fellowship by the University Grants Commission enabled me to work on a project, which had been at the back of my mind for a number of years viz., *A History of Indian Writing in English*. A regular systematic history like this had not been attempted earlier. My History, therefore, flourished beyond the expectations of both author and publishers.

Q. What are the influences on you?

Ans. I stood first in English at the B. A. examinations. I got an opportunity to meet Barr. Balasaheb Khardekar. I spoke to Khardekar that I wanted to study Marathi Literature. Khardekar said No. Marathi is your mother tongue. So, you should study English literature because after independence of the country we need English teachers and English researchers.

Bertrand Russell impressed me for his simple, lucid and elegant style.

The large family of my uncle and a good library at home influenced me. There was the public library in the town one of the best of its kind.

Q. You seem to specialize in Fiction- Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Somerset Maugham and T. S. Eliot. Is there any specific reason?

Ans. That is very interesting question. I grew up with my uncle who had at home with six daughters. These children play themselves. I isolated myself from them. The house has a good library; there are copies of a couple of newspapers, and there a number of magazines. So, I grew in this atmosphere, and inculcated reading the novels.

Q. There is often the mention of the Indianness or Indian sensibility in Indian Writing in English. Do you think this to be a valid approach? How would you define the concept of Indianness?

Ans. We have to study Indianness. We are to ensure that our authors are rooted in their soil. "Our aesthetic can not be divorced from our roots." The last thirty pages of *Azadi* is a good example.

Q. There are a few translations also to your credit. What made you do them?

Ans. My mother tongue is Marathi. I am a bilingual. Translated- both ways: from English into Marathi, my language, and vice versa, had always interested me. My wife is B.A. with Marathi and she used to help me in translation.

Q. What makes you to write novel *Corridors of Knowledge* at the end of your career. What do you want to tell your readers through your novel?

Ans. I tried to put my memories of the last thirty years that I spent on the campus of the University. The readers may find what they want. I do not want to say anything to the readers.

Q. You do not seem to subscribe any of the theories currently in fashion-Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction etc.

Ans. Two answers are possible. The new theories are applied to language and not to literature. Criticism becomes one sided. We must learn from all the disciplines.

Q. In light verse, you not only reveal yourself as a poet but also as a critic. It is a rare combination of a poet's vision and a critic's authority. Do you agree?

Ans. I can only say that I am fascinated by light verse; I have read E. C. Bentley and Edward Lear. Light verse naturally came to me and applied the technique to Indian light verse.

Q. How do you react to the title. "Big Three" of Indian Criticism in English? How do you compare yourself with K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar and C. D. Narasimhaiah? In what way are you different from them?

Ans. Label-sticking is a pastime. There is no meaning. Iyengar and Narasimhaiah are stalwarts. *Indian Writing in English* was the result of

Iyengar's lectures that he gave at the University of Leeds. He was a pioneer in the field. Narasimhaiah introduced Indian Writing in English in most of the Universities of India. Narasimhaiah introduced *Kanthapura* at the university and college levels. I have tried to be a balanced critic of Indian Writing in English.

Q. It is not fair to ask you about the main features of your style of writing. Shyamala A. Narayan has written much about your style. Do you want to say anything about your style, that Shyamala A. Narayan has missed in writing?

Ans. Shyamala A. Narayan has inevitably done a thorough job. My style is lucid, clean, brief and to the point. I am influenced by Somerset Maugham, B. Russell and Lukacs.

Q. It is said that there is always a woman behind the great man. What is the contribution of your 'captain's captain' in your academic career?

Ans. The contribution of my 'Body guard' is in two ways – I am a kind of academic person. She never disturbed my work, nor do I in her. She pursued her own ways, her own inspirations. Second, she is a student of Marathi literature. She helped me in the translation work.

Q. Do you feel the sense of fulfillment now?

Ans. I have a sense of fulfillment. I am reminded of an apple-picker in Robert Frost's "After Apple-Picking". The apple-picker has done the day's job, yet he has by him an empty barrel and there is a bough he has not picked upon. But he is tired completely. The scent of the apples is heavy on him and he must now run home and drowse off. My sense of fulfillment is similar to that of the apple-picker.

Q. What message would you like to give to the budding critics?

Ans. I admonish the budding critics to put their findings in a very useful and remarkable manners.

Q. What are your plans of writing now?

Ans. Now I am 84. I look forward and not backward. I have done a lot in fiction, criticism. I have not done much for short stories. Now I am planning to write short stories. I have already written seven short stories, based on Indian legends and mythologies. My stories are historical and mythological.

The interviewer concludes his interview with these words : Sir, you are now 84 years; God bless both of you and prolong your life.

Identity Crisis in Girish Karnad's "A Heap of Broken Images"

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The theme of identity crisis, as prevalent as it is in the plays of Girish Karnad, is the most pronounced in this play as it is titular - *A Heap of Broken Images*. The play starts off from T.S. Eliot's "Wasteland":

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats
...for you know only,
And the dead tree gives no shelter,...

The discordant images refer to generation gap, spiritual disintegration, communication lapse and political instability in a transfigured existence. And in this pseudo-modern world, we have limited ourselves to broken electronic images. The electronic media has given birth to a new kind of reality termed 'virtual reality'-a reality that the media daringly project and the audience willingly believe. Something that was the initial response to the Aarushi murder case in Noida. Electronic channels are quite often far from the truth in an age where news channels have rendered themselves into gossip channels. Here, we find the image fighting itself back, unveiling the truth on the other side. At the end of the play the term 'virtual reality' exchanges itself-as the human being seems virtual or fraudulent and image grows to be more real. This is a pointer for the audience who is credulous at the cost of their own intelligence. The 'invisible audience' connotes the lack of coherence and co-ordination of the psyche of modern man in relation to his surroundings, and with respect to himself. It also highlights lack of perception. Hence the stage direction at the beginning of the play:

A big plasma screen hangs on one side, big enough for a close-up on it to be clearly by the audience.(261)

A woman's identity is forever fleeting. When she is unmarried, her identity is deeply entangled with her father's surname. As she drifts on to married life, the change in surname brings with a change of identity. In the play, the truth unfolds later as to why Manjula uses the surname 'Nayak' instead of 'Murthy'. She emphasizes that her creative self continues to be Manjula Nayak. It has always been debated as to

whether a woman should change her surname after marriage. Perhaps then, that would be the only possession entirely her own, that she would carry to her husband's abode. The process of change of surname even leads one to modify one's signature that is a mark of one's individuality. A number of other problems relating to legal documents also crop up. Divorce complicates things further. The protagonist hits the nail on the head when she retorts:

There are some areas in which we must not let marriage intrude too much (263).

The writer also highlights the age-old conflict between writing in one's own language and a foreign language, through the objective correlative of the writer's confrontation with her own image. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry says: "On another register this play deals with the politics of language. How language is not just ciphers on paper but contain within them a cultural history, and images as well as being time-bombs of hierarchy and discrimination." Girish Karnad ascertains that the seed of the play was planted in his mind by a conversation that he had with the writer Shashi Deshpande who had an emotional encounter at the writer's conference in Neemrana between the regional writers versus the English writers. Again, on another occasion, the Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy is supposed to have burst out against English writers claiming that English writers were like prostitutes since they wrote with an eye for money and global reach the language offers.

Karnad is a playwright who most of the time pens his plays in Kannada first and then translates them into English. *Broken Images* is the first play that was simultaneously staged both in Kannada and English, and therefore lends justice to the theme of the play.

If a writer aspires to showcase his culture to the world, why refrain from 'mediating' through a widely spoken language. Thanks to the modern post-colonial theories, English has been quite often demarcated as the colonizer's language intruding into the vernacular languages. U.S.A, the most successful country in the world, has adopted and adapted, the colonizer's language as its national language, then why do Indians dissuade from merely utilizing this language for practical purposes. Besides, as long as one earns one's bread honestly, what is unethical if money comes from creativity? The writer is alleged to have betrayed her mother tongue as though she has committed a crime because those who pen their works in English are termed "prostitutes". There is a direct indirect reference to U.R. Ananthamurthy here. A prostitute is a person who sells her honour for money. Here, the

protagonist is trading her creativity for money. The writer seems to echo that those who write in their mother tongue also do accept royalties and trade their creativity, rather than wield the pen for social service.

Again, the playwright reminds us that most of the people who wrote in Kannada were lecturers in English. These include the likes of earlier ones like B.M.Shree, Gokak, Adiga; and modern ones like Lankesh, Shanthinath, Anatha Murthy and A.K.Ramanujan. This seemed to be the greatest irony that these safe guardians of the native language wanted to “teach” people the colonizers language and initiate them into “prostitution”. And funnily, these verdicts on the Indian English writers are passed in English. As long as the subject and theme is Indian, how illegitimate is writing in English? Manjula argues that her novel has sold as it retains the ‘smell of the soil’. Definitely, writing in English gives wider readership to the writer. The protagonist, Manjula Nayak goes on to claim that no writer can express himself/herself honestly in English.

Therefore, the writer Manjula Nayak stands as a metaphor for all those writers limited to their native language (Kannada); not out of responsibility, but due to lack of choice. Malini stands for the Indian English writer worthy of global recognition. Given a chance, Manjula readily trades places with Malini for richness, renown and recognition. Manjula, a hypocrite, projects herself as a person who by default wants to “breathe the language. Live in the heart of Kannada culture.”(270) She claims to have sold the Koramangala house as she detested the idea of living amidst Non-Kannadigas.

Manjula is a lesser-known Kannada short story writer till she wins accolades for her maiden English novel. *The River has no Memories* turns out to be a bestseller. The announcer at the television studio introduces the literary genius Manjula Nayak who puts on an image of treading success effortlessly. She adorns a bright green sari flamboyant as her superficial self. A lecturer in English in Bangalore, she gives up her job as she has received a huge advance for her masterpiece. A Kannada channel is to broadcast the premiere of a movie based on the novel. Manjula enters putting on air and attitude, quipping about her worldwide ventures. She comments nonchalantly on Indian technology. As she has finished her ‘rehearsed’ 15-minute speech, she prepares to leave the room when she encounters her image on the screen that is not her reflection. It comes across as ‘absurd’ to her. The image interrogates Manjula in a scene reminiscent of the trial of Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session*. The truth is unraveled as Manjula is

entrapped in a whirlpool of questions from which she has no escape. The only alternative left for her is to wear her heart inside out. “Her guilt is expressed not as a Dostoyevskian interior monologue but through tense agitated dialogic exchange,” writes Tutun Mukherjee. This enhances the theme of fragmentation.

The novel is said to be based on her crippled sister who suffers from meningomyelocoele- a disease in which a person is disabled for life due to dysfunction of the nervous system. Her whole life was confined to the wheel chair. She was the apple of her parents’ eye and was always the focus of attention. Manjula had to always settle for second place and was constantly disregarded. Malini excelled in all areas over Manjula- in looks and in intelligence. Manjula was made to stay with her grandparents who loved her, but who were, according to her, “no substitute” for parents. The most cherished moments of her life were the times that she spent with her parents during her vacations. It was later that she met Pramod, married him and settled down in Jayanagar. Her father left most of his assets in Malini’s name. After her parents’ demise, Malini moved in with them. Manjula affirms that her sister had adjusted beautifully with them and died a few months before the book came out. She takes care to cite that Malini is the only character drawn out of real life.

However, later the truth unfolds. Manjula has not penned even a word of the novel, and has ‘literally’ stolen Malini’s identity, creativity and language. Apparently, it was her revenge for years of agony, frustration and anguish. Malini had first caught her parents’ attention, and later Pramod’s. She gradually reveals how she had taken Malini in, only for her wealth. Pramod, being a software engineer, worked from home most of the time, and finally found his intellectual match in Malini. Earlier on, Manjula used to ignore Pramod due to her job, and later she side-stepped his sentiments in her newfound success. Pramod strived to discover new ways of entertaining himself. Manjula confesses that there were times when she doubted that Pramod fantasized and romanticized about Malini than herself. Manjula is often portrayed as the venomous first cousin in the novel, she says, as Malini stalked her and pinned her down in “coruscating prose”. Finally, the image on the screen becomes real in comparison to the deceptive human being on the other side. The image of Manjula morphs into Malini at a climatic juncture in the play.

The image of Malini therefore projects the Indian English writer who is ostracized for his stupendous success because the native writer (Manjula) has to settle for second place. Given an opportunity, Manjula steals Malini’s work in English, though she pretends to be addicted to the Kannada language. The sisters’ rapport with Pramod

symbolizes their bond with their motherland. Manjula is with him out of the matrimonial ties of responsibility, and fails to live up to her responsibilities of a wife, as Pramod continuously pines for attention. Malini is with him purely out of love. Pramod craves for her treatment of love that is all encompassing. As the image finally morphs, it ascertains:

However I am in truth Malini, my genius of a sister who loved my husband knew Kannada and wrote in English. (284)

When the image claims that Malini “loved my husband” it is evident that Manjula did not. More significantly, Malini “knew Kannada” and therefore knew her roots. Manjula looks into a ‘broken mirror’ to reveal bits and pieces of the personality-some hers, some of her sister’s-but totally disjoint. Hence the term *Broken Images*. The objective correlative of these broken mirror images are the different small screens that flash different images of Manjula at the end of the play. These are in contrast to real broken mirror parts that at a fraction of time reflect the same image of the person in all the pieces. The only coherent image appears to be the image of Malini that eloquently asserts:

I am Malini Nayak, the English novelist. Manjula Nayak, the Kannada short-story writer was decimated the moment she read my novel. She thus obliterated all differences of ink and blood and language between us and at one full stroke morphed into me. (283)

The Kannada writer betrays herself the very moment she makes association with an English novel by reading it. This is why Malini avows that the Kannada-writer was decimated at the very moment she read the English novel. This leaves the readers wondering that if writing in English is termed “prostitution”, then what does it make the Kannada writer reading the English novel at the other end.

Images rule the roost today. In particular, ‘simulated’ images-images that people wish for us to believe. These false images are assertive, as they have to magnify their so-called truthfulness. Karnad points out that the ‘play begins with a false image of Manjula giving her speech before the television camera because she has never written anything creative in English.’ The play as a whole is a mirror to the false image of invidious green-eyed writers. *Broken Images* is essentially Karnad’s response to his critics. The significance of the play reverberates as Manjula utters a Kannada proverb in the play:

A response is good. But a meaningful response is better. (265)

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The Location of Culture: Homi K. Bhabha's New Methodology of Cultural Analysis

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Introduction:

Homi Bhabha was born into the Parsi community of Bombay in 1949 and grew up in the shade of Fire-Temple. He is an alumnus of St. Mary's High school, Mazagaon, Mumbai. He received his B. A. from Bombay University and his M.A., D. Phil. from Christ Church, Oxford University. Bhabha's work in postcolonial theory owes much to poststructuralism. We observe the great influence of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction; Jacques Lacan and Lacanian psychoanalysis; and the works of Michel Foucault. In addition to these, he also stated in his interview with W. J. T. Mitchell (in 1995) that Edward Said is the writer who has most influenced his thought. Bhabha is a popular lecturer, and is regularly invited to speak at universities across North America, Europe and Asia.

Homi Bhabha is a leading voice in postcolonial studies. He is highly influenced by Western poststructuralists, theorists, notably Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Michael Foucault. In *Nation and Narration* (1990) he argues against the tendency to essentialize Third World Countries into a homogenous identity. Instead he claims that all sense of nationhood is narrativized. He has also made a major contribution to postcolonial studies by pointing out how there is always ambivalence at the site of colonial dominance. In *The Location of Culture* (1994) Bhabha uses concepts such as mimicry, interstice, hybridity and liminality all influenced by semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis to argue that cultural production is always most productive where it is most ambivalent.

He is one of the most important thinkers in postcolonial criticism. He has contributed a set of challenging concepts, such as- Hybridity, Mimicry, Ambivalence, the Stereotypes, the Uncanny, the Nation, Otherness, etc. to postcolonial theory. All these concepts reflect the colonized people's ways to resist the unsecured power of the colonizer. Bhabha succeeds in showing colonialism's histories and cultures that intrude on the present demanding to transform our understandings of cross-cultural relations. Bhabha states that we should see colonialism as straightforward oppression, domination, violence only but also as a period of complex and varied cultural contact and interaction. His writings bring resources from literary and cultural theory to the study of colonial archives.

The Location of Culture:

Bhabha's New Methodology of Cultural Analysis

In *The Location of Culture*, A collection of his important essays, Bhabha generates a series of concepts that work to undermine the simple polarization of the world into Self and Other. Here, Bhabha advocates a fundamental realignment of the methodology of cultural analysis in the West away from metaphysics and toward the 'performative' and 'enunciatory present.' Such a shift, he claims, provides a basis for the West to maintain less

violent relationships with other cultures. In Bhabha's view, the source of the Western compulsion to colonize is due in large part to traditional Western representations of foreign cultures. His argument attacks the Western production and implementation of certain binary oppositions. The opposition targeted by Bhabha includes centre/margin, civilized/savage, and enlightened /ignorant. Bhabha proceeds by destabilizing the binaries insofar as the first term of the binary is allowed to unthinkingly dominate the second. Once the binaries are destabilized, Bhabha argues that cultures can be understood to interact, transgress, and transform each other in a much more complex manner than the traditional binary oppositions can allow. According to Bhabha, hybridity and "linguistic multi-vocality" have the potential to intervene and dislocate the process of colonization through the interpretation of political discourse. In this book he uses the concepts such as mimicry, interstice, hybridity, and liminality to argue that cultural production is always most productive where it is most ambivalent. Speaking in a voice that combines intellectual ease with the belief that theory itself can contribute to practical change. His work, *The Location of Culture* is a collection of his writings. They are characterized by his promotion of ideas of 'colonial ambivalence' and 'hybridity' and also by his use of aesthetic terms and categories (mimesis, irony, parody etc.) to mobilize an analysis of terms of intercultural engagement within the context of empire. For him, the rich text of the civilizing mission is remarkably split, fissured and flawed. According to him the question of the ambivalence of mimicry as the problematic of colonial subjection arises from the colonial encounter between the white presence and its black semblance. He also states that the obligation on the part of the colonized to mirror back an image of the colonizer produces neither identity nor difference. Thus the 'mimic man' who occupies the impossible space between cultures is the 'effect of a flawed colonial mimesis in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English'. According to him occupying the precarious area between mimicry and mockery, the mimic man seems to iconify both of the enforcement of colonial authority and its strategic failure. Bhabha has become one of the leading post-colonial theorists of this era.

Bhabha's interest in these figures or figurings of the 'in-between' of colonial discourse is evident also in his invocation and transformation of the Bhaktian notion of 'hybridity'. In Bhaktin, hybridization destabilizes univocal forms of authority whereas; Bhabha sees it as a 'problematic of colonial representation. According to him the production of hybridization not only expresses the condition of colonial enunciation but also marks the possibility of counter colonial resistance. In other words, hybridity marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility as a sign of spectacular resistance. He further extended the theory of resistance in his theorization of the 'Third Space of enunciation' as an assertion of difference in discourse. He also states that the 'transformational value of change' lies in the rearticulating, or translation, of elements that are neither the one nor the other, but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both.

The radicalism of Bhabha's work lies in its deployment of the idea of difference within an analysis of colonialism as a 'cultural text or system of meaning'. He accounts the need of the performative dimension of cultural articulation. This thinking provides the development of a postcolonial practice as a guiding concern. This practice also recognizes the 'problem of cultural interaction that emerges at the signatory boundaries of cultures, where the meanings and values are read or signs are misappropriated. Bhabha's clearest statement of the 'postcolonial perspective' is outlined in the essay, 'The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of

Agency', which also forms a defense of his interest in 'indeterminacy' against charges of the formalist orientation of his work.

In 1999 Newsweek Magazine listed Bhabha as one of '100 Americans for the Next Century.' Bhabha has become something more than the everyday cultural critic, contributing to worldwide debates in contexts like the World Economic Forum. You will see that even the most critical commentators accept Bhabha's importance. Many feel that the lesson of his work needs serious qualification before they are turned once again to the colonial and neo-colonial contexts. Almost every text in the post-colonial studies references Bhabha's work at some point.

Homi Bhabha generated the concept-hybridity of cultures, refers to mixedness or impurity of cultures knowing that no culture is really pure. According to Bhabha, every culture is an original mixedness within every form of identity. He states that the cultures are not discrete phenomena, but being always in contact with one another, we find mixedness in cultures. Bhabha insists on hybridity's ongoing process- hybridization. He further asserts that no cultures that come together leading to hybrid forms but cultures are the consequence of attempts to still the flux of cultural hybridities. He directs our attention to what happens on the borderlines of cultures, and in-between cultures. He used the term, liminal on the border or the threshold that stresses the idea that what is in between settled cultural forms or identities is central to the creation of new cultural meaning. He further states that *The Location of Culture* is both spatial and temporal: so the terms- hybridity and liminality do not refer only to space, but also to time. So he asserts that the people living in different spaces are living at different stages of progress (Huddart, 2006:6-7).

Homi bhabha expresses his views on the relation between the culture and hybridity. According to him, just like colonial culture, contemporary culture is also hybrid. Hybridity idea characterizes the mechanism of the colonial psychic economy. He states that the important point to recognize is that cultures are always retrospective constructs means they are consequences of historical process. So he adds further that cultural hybridity is not something absolutely general and so hybridity appears in all cultures. It blurs all deference into difference, making all hybridity appear the same. His theory of hybridity is associated with mimicry and sly civility and also a denial that there were cultures already there that became hybrid.

The term 'Mimicry' underlines the gap between the norm of civility presented by European Enlightenment and its colonial imitation in distorted form. This notion is based on Foucault's term that was based on Kant's notion. Bhabha's term 'mimicry' is a part of a larger concept of visualizing the postcolonial situation as a kind of binary opposition between authority and oppression, authorization and de-authorization. He states ahead that all modes of imposition including the demand on the colonized to be like the colonizer results in mimicry. According to him the mode of asserting authority over the colonized gave rise to mimicry. He further asserts that mimicry can be taken as a way of eluding control that also gives rise to postcolonial analysis by subverting the colonial master's authority and hegemony. The comic quality of mimicry is important because colonial discourse is serious and solemn, with pretensions to educate and improve. Bhabha says that mimicry represents an ironic compromise between two ideas- that things are eternally the same and that there is continual change (1994:86). Homi Bhabha finds

mimicry as central to colonial discourse. Bhabha suggests that the structure of mimicry derives from a fundamental but unstable urge on the part of colonial authority.

Homi Bhabha uses the concept of 'the uncanny' to characterize the post colonial experience. He describes the colonial psychic economy of monstrous doubling with his uncanny to explain the feeling we get when experiences of childhood that have been repressed return to disrupt our everyday existence. Bhabha states that in the beginning of modern western history something is repressed that inevitably breaks through the veneer of civilization. Bhabha suggests the uncanny concept as the unhomey too. He evokes the uncanniness of migrant experience through a series of familiar ideas like- half-life, (like the partial presence of colonial identity), repeats the life lived in the country of origin, but this repetition is not identical, introducing difference and transformation. He also says further that this difference in repetition is a way of reviving that past life, of keeping it alive in the present. The idea of the uncanny is itself ambivalent and is used in many contexts throughout Bhabha's work. All the hesitations, uncertainties and ambivalences with which colonial authority and its figures are imbued are characterized in terms of the uncanny. In other words, the split in the political subject, and the way new contexts change the meaning of a statement- can also be described as uncanny. Due to the term's (uncanny) general currency in cultural theory, everything in Bhabha's work begins to seem a little uncanny. Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva (psychoanalytic literary critics) use the idea of the uncanny. This inspired Bhabha's sense of the hybrid, post-colonial perspective.

Homi Bhabha reads with particular care the discourse of stereotypes in colonialism. The stereotype is a form of anxious colonial knowledge. Bhabha's writing on this anxiety revise traditional studies of colonialism. The colonizer circulates Stereotypes about the laziness or stupidity of the colonized population through racist jokes, cinematic images etc. Bhabha states that these stereotypes seems to be a stable if false foundation upon which colonialism bases its power, and are something we should perhaps simply discuss. He analyses Edward Said's classic book *Orientalism* and presents the comments in the third chapter entitled, 'The Other Question' in his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994). Here, he explores the ways stereotypes and discrimination work in terms of a theory of discourse. Bhabha calls this project as 'a theory of colonial discourse' (1994:66). This theory is based on the ambivalence he finds central in the colonial discourses of stereotyping.

The concept of 'Nation' is very important in the discussion of colonialism. The idea of nations means the forms of nationalism involved in anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial reconstruction. Many writers have pointed out that oppressed people have identified with clear national identities. So nations have been seemed a vital organizing principle for many writers in post-colonial studies. On the contrary, Homi Bhabha rejects the well-defined and stable identity associated with the national form as he wants to keep this identity a open one. He claims that nations have their own narratives, but very often a dominant or official narrative overpowers all other stories of minority group.

Summing Up:

I observed the influence of many western writers on the work of Homi Bhabha. He has developed his ideas from the work of M. M. Bakhtin, Antonio Gramsci, Hannah Arendt, W. E. B. Du Bois, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, and many more. We also observe the key influences- Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, on his development as a critical thinker. He takes two terms- 'Iteration' and 'the statement' from Derrida and Foucault respectively.

(Iteration means the necessary repeatability of any mark, idea, or statement if it is to be meaningful and statement refers to a specific meaning) His work reflects the significance of reading that helped him to derive some ideas, concepts, views from his influences. He takes an analysis of thought's complexity and a philosophical approach, stressing difference from Derrida and Foucault. This helped him to understand how the meaning of terms and ideas change in accordance with context. From that he also has developed a critical thought emphasizing process. We can observe that this thinking is specific to each situation, and cannot offer a 'global' answer to specific problems or issues without understanding specific histories.

Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* looks like a container of different concepts and ideas that could help us to analyse different cultures. Here he points out that no culture is pure in modern sense as we observe the blending of many cultures together. It is highly impossible to draw a line to mark one's indigenous culture. At present, no one can claim one's culture as it became the part of another culture. Mixedness is the feature of modern culture. This book generates many new concepts such as: Hybridity, Mimicry, Nation, Stereotypes etc. that may be used as tools of analysis.

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Marginal Existence: A Study of Sindi's Search for Identity in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*

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Over the past two decades, the term 'marginality' and 'identity' have received much critical attention from the scholars in various disciplines. Marginality refers to something that pertains to the edge, border or boundary. Something that is on margin or close to the limit, below or beyond which something ceases to be possible or desirable. Something below level, insignificant, secondary and subsided. Now a day, 'marginality' emerges as a literary concept and behavioral model, shaped by societal norms and traditional canons.

Few people have been living on the 'margins' of the society that hosted them after their massive exclusion from their native soil at the hands of civilization. They live there as an outsider, a foreigner, a Diaspora. They still adhere to their identity using different survival strategies. Arun Joshi's first novel *The Foreigner* (1968) is a study of its protagonist- Sindi's search for 'identity' in materialistic modern society of America and India. In it, Joshi has shown that how his protagonist, being depressed by cross-cultural background and marginalized existence, has lost the feeling of his identity and awareness of his individuality.

Throughout the novel, Sindi, the protagonist, considers himself "quite a misfit (15)" and finds himself lonesome, annoyed, depressed, isolated and almost estranged due to his detachment and non-involvement with his fellow beings. Born of an English mother and an Indian father who died when he was only four, he was brought up by his uncle in Kenya. He was educated in East-Africa, London and America. Deprived of love, care, safety and civilizing roots, Sindi grows with a crack in his persona and becomes a rootless, wandering alien. When Mr. Khemka wants to know how the death of his parents took place, his reply has a sting: "for the hundredth time I related the story of those strangers whose only reality was a couple of wrinkled and cracked photographs" (12). Sindi is estranged from the whole apparatus of society. This dilemma is clearly revealed in his dialogue with Mr. Khemka:

But you at least knew that. You had a clear-cut system of morality, a caste system that laid down all you had to do. You had a God; you had roots in the soil you lived upon. Look at me. I have no roots. I have no system of morality. How does it mean to me if you call me an immoral man? I have no reason to be one thing rather than another. You ask me why I am not ambitious; well I have no reason to be. Come to think of it I don't ever have a reason to live (118).

The novel relates the story of Sindi, who reflects vulnerably on his hollow past and is apprehensive of his equally pointless future. He feels uprooted and lost like a "foreigner anywhere" (29) and endeavor all through his life not to get involved with anybody or anything. His non-involvement, indifference, isolation and incongruity make him distant and stranger wherever he went. In the words of S. Rengachari "this kind of loneliness plunges him into apathy, cynical indifference, spiritual bankruptcy (he is aware that his soul has gone bankrupt)

and a concomitant sense of the purposelessness and inanity of human existence- the traits of an inhabitant of the Wasteland” (1984:04).

June remarks on his foreignness: “There is something strange about you, you know. Something distant. But I have a feeling you’d be foreigner anywhere” (29). Even Sheila during Sindi’s visit to India, comes to the same conclusion, she says to Sindi: “You are still a foreigner. You don’t belong here” (122). He himself muses over his foreignness in the society he belongs:

...I wondered in what way, if any, did I belong to the world that roared beneath my apartment window. Somebody had begotten me without a purpose and so far I had lived without a purpose, unless you could call the search for peace a purpose. Perhaps I felt like that because I was a foreigner in America. But then, what difference would it have made if I had lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter? It seemed to me that I would still be a foreigner. My foreignness lay within me and I couldn’t leave myself behind wherever I went . . . (55)

Dr. Ghanshyam and Mr. Iyenger aptly say: “without love, familial nourishment and cultural roots in the civilized society of the West, Sindi grows with a built-in-fissure in his personality and becomes a wandering alien rootless like Naipaul’s and Camus’s protagonists” (2003:105). Sindi though labeled as an Indian, is an outsider, a stranger, a foreigner in India too.

In spite of Sindi’s most intimate and intense moments of passion with various girls in England, he cannot get knotted with anyone of them in matrimony as he comes to the conclusion that “Marriage was more often a lust for possession than anything else. People get married just as they bought new cares” (67). Sindi is threatened with the fear of the loss of his identity, by his contact with other. But the false disinterest of Sindi drives both June and Babu to death.

Witnessing the terrible consequence of aloofness, Sindi decides to leave America and come to India in search of his identity. Sindi notices the pretense, dishonesty and futility of the modern society in America. Experiencing vainness and bitter futility of American civilized society, Sindi by just a flip of coin leaves America and comes to India in search of a new identity. But his hopes of ‘a new life’ are traumatized. He finds India no better than America.

Sindi discovers both the civilizations to be vicious and oppressive. The material affluence and individualism unbridled in both the civilizations make Sindi unhappy and fail to provide him a state of tranquility within and calm around. In India, Sindi comes to understand: “In truth it had only been a change of theatre from America. The Show had remained unchanged” (174).

The rapid growth of well heeled society, the poverty and starvation of the masses, the corrosion of moral values, and the tension between ensuing generations resulting from changing ethos make mounting and often distressing demands on the individuals and lead to their dilemma. Sindi is a quester who “wanted to know the meaning of life” (142). He goes on hopping from one country to another because he finds his life pointless, void, worthless and empty. He realizes the uselessness of human achievements and futility of his life at the bare age of twenty-five when normally a young man is full of zest, vigor and passion for life. He gives expression to his feelings thus:

And yet all shores are alien when you don't belong any where. Twenty fifth Christmas on this planet, twenty five years largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places. Twenty five years gone in search of peace, and what did I have to show for achievements; a ten stone body that had to be fed from the times of a day, twenty eight times a week. This was the sum of a lifetime of striving (80).

Ursulla in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* ponders similarly: "A life of barren routine without inner meaning, without any real significance . . . One could not bear any more of this shame of sordid routine and mechanical nullity . . . And all life was a rotary motion mechanized, cut off from reality" (Lawrence 1950: 219). Like Ursulla, Sindi too, suffers from the horror of civilized society in which his identity was marginalized. Since he considers his life to be full of illusions, he is unable to find his roots anywhere in the world. He ruminates: ". . . I was a foreigner in America- But then, what difference it would have made if I have lived in Kenya or India or any other place for that matter?" (55). Thus, Arun Joshi, in this novel delineates Sindi's search for his identity, his predicament, particularly the feeling of futility and meaninglessness of his life and his marginalized existence.

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Diasporic (Non) Identities of Chinese Women in *The Harmony Silk Factory*: Snow Soong as the Anti-Stereotype?

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From the Empress Dowager to Suzie Wong, East Asian women are no strangers to being stereotyped by Western media as either the ‘dragon lady’ or more commonly, the bashful Oriental courtesan who is exotic and subservient, often to a white, dominant man. In the film based on the book by Richard Mason, *The World Of Suzie Wong*, Suzie, the archetypal ‘hooker with the heart of gold’ tries to don Western attire, a dress as she imagined Englishwomen would wear only to be angrily reprimanded by Robert Lomax, the character played by William Holden, and called a ‘cheap European street walker.’ In the chapter on ‘Representing Ourselves, Films and Videos by Asian American/Canadian Women’ by Marina Heung in Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Media. Global Diversities, reference is made to Marchetti who comments that ‘the Western gaze insists on maintaining categories based on distinct racial differences. According to her white lover, Suzie Wong must conform to his expectations of what a “real” Chinese woman looks like, so her putting on “Western” dress immediately earns her his abuse and rejection. Following the same logic, it is only when Suzie puts on a “traditional” Chinese costume that she wins her lover’s respect and approval (Marchetti, 1991, pp. 45-48)’ (93). Similarly, Anna May Wong, the first woman to portray the image of the Mysterious East on the American screen, played Hui Fei, a Chinese courtesan in Josef von Sternberg’s *Shanghai Express*, and thus contributed to the image of ‘the oriental mystique.’ She does not speak much and is the epitome of ‘Chinese inscrutability’ (Pan 202).

Edward Said uses the example of an Egyptian courtesan Flaubert called Kuchuk Hanem in his travel accounts of the East, on whom the latter based a model of the Oriental women, who ‘never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her’ (6). According to Said, the fact that Flaubert was foreign, wealthy and male would have been dominating factors which allowed him to not only ‘possess [her] physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was ‘typically Oriental’ (6). Flaubert’s nineteenth-century portrayal of the stereotyped Oriental, Said states, has since been perpetuated through ‘standardization and cultural stereotyping’ of ‘the mysterious Orient’ (26). As Lynn Pan puts it, ‘[t]he China Doll and the Dragon Lady never really existed as such, except in the imaginations of Western men and women; but once invented, they took on a life of their own. And when a Western man looked at a Chinese woman, all too often it was the image rather than the reality that he saw’ (201).

What was and is still more worrying is Hagedorn’s notion of a ‘colonisation of the imagination’ when the general public ‘accept[s] stereotypes of Asian women as truth and then project them onto us without our consent’ (Pan 201) and greatly affects how Asian women view and experience themselves. This form of ‘internalised colonisation’, Hagedorn states, especially with reference to depiction of Asian women in films, can cause them to accept that ‘[they] are either decorative, invisible, or one-dimensional’ (201).

The representation of women in postcolonial literature, who are more often than not in ‘third world’ countries often remains stagnant to the ‘demonology’—using the term coined by Edward Said—of exoticism and subservience that is the Western perception of the Eastern Oriental. Mohanty in her article ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ argues that the ‘average third world woman’ is usually depicted as leading ‘an

essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third-world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimised, etc.)’ whereas Western women are self-represented as ‘educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decision’ (261). Minh-Ha in explains that ‘...the Third World representative the modern sophisticated public ideally seeks is the unspoiled African, Asian, or Native American, who remains more preoccupied with his/her image of the *real* native—the *truly different*—than with the issues of hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change’ (267). She uses the example of what would be considered the ‘real’ type of Japanism; that in order to be truly ‘authentic’ to the Western eye, ‘Japanism ought to be in Japan’. The inaccessibility of this ‘made-in-Japan’ product makes it all the more trustworthy, she says, and creates ‘the desire to acquire and protect it...’ (267).

Chinese Immigrant Women in Malaya

In Catherine Lim’s fiction, Chinese immigrant women are portrayed as either ‘single-mindedly in tune with the prevailing cultural environment and focus on achieving material comfort and socially-defined success, even to the extent of suppressing their own humanity and real emotional needs’ or alternatively ‘find romantic escape in rebellion and rejection of their current social norms, but usually to their own ultimate damnation and destruction’ (Koh 364). The latter is frowned upon, certainly because traditional Chinese culture does not encourage and even hostile to individualism (363). Society above self is almost a mantra, and the individual is constantly expected to obey authority figures, including parents. In order to ensure harmony, there is ‘a system of reciprocity of duties or responsibilities’ and to ‘ensure harmony’ one must repress one’s desires and wishes for ‘self-fulfilment, self-identify and self-actualization.’ There is no room to be, as Malaysian writer Lee Kok Liang states, ‘true to yourself’ (364).

Inevitably, money played a big part in ‘separating the wives and daughters of the rich from all the others.’ As Pan explains, ‘[o]ften one or more generations removed from their family’s immigrant roots, these well-to-do leisured women lived lives of great ease and luxury, were usually surrounded by servants, and were denied little in the way of material satisfaction’ (191). Snow Soong in Tash Aw’s novel would fit the description of these women from wealthy families in colonial Malaya. Her grandfather, as described by Aw in the novel, had come from a long line of scholars in the Imperial Chinese Court, and came to Malaya in the 1880s as ‘a traveller, a historian and observer of foreign cultures’ (67). He married a wife who was the daughter of one of the richest of the new merchant class of the Straits Chinese, a ‘nonya’, which entrenched his status as a well-respected, wealthy man in Malaya.

Despite the dividing factor of wealth, Chinese women in diaspora were nevertheless still subject to age-old rule of having their husbands chosen for them. Pan states:

[T]hey were not offered many chances of personal fulfilment. Their place was in the home, and their contribution to the world was in their reproductive capacity. Each would have had her husband chosen for her by her elders, was usually in her teens when she went to him, and it was generally only a matter of time before she stood by while he took a concubine. (191)

Snow is no exception to the rule as despite her education, which would have been considered extensive for a woman in colonial Malaya and a rarity as such, she was nevertheless considered only by the worth of the husband to whom she would be married:

As with all beautiful young women of a certain background, Snow had already had a good deal of experience of suitors and tentative matchmaking. All of these possibilities had been created and choreographed by her parents. They took her to Penang, KL and Singapore, where she was displayed like a diamond in a glass box. (70)

Despite seemingly having little choice in determining their fates in marriage, Lynn Pan argues that the fact that the immigrant woman is exposed to other cultures, style and manners in her adopted country, the ‘moneyed overseas Chinese woman [was] a different creature from her sisters in China. Standards were bound to be less absolute overseas, and, for all the restrictions of the feminine status, she could stand outside convention more easily than could her contemporary in the home country’ (Pan 191). Indeed this seems true to form in *The Harmony Silk Factory*—Snow does not fit the stereotypical Oriental as depicted in some Western literature and certainly enjoys more freedom and has access to a wider array of choices than a *mui tsai* (literally ‘little sister’, a Cantonese euphemism for bond maidservant) who were girls born to poor families, ‘prostitutes or unmarried mothers and sold off to rich families to be brought up as unpaid domestic servants or as future concubines for the household’s male masters’ (191).

Snow Soong As the Anti-Stereotype

In Maxine Hong-Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*—a collection of semi-autobiographical stories depicting her experience as a Chinese-American in America—the protagonist, a Chinese girl in the story entitled ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’ describes her disgust at the idea of ‘fragility’ and meekness in the quintessential Chinese girl:

I hated her weak neck, the way it did not support her head but let it droop; I wished I was able to see what my own neck looked like from the back and sides. I hoped it did not look like hers; I wanted a stout neck. I grew my hair long to hide it in case it was a flower-stem neck. I walked around to the front of her to hate her face some more. (158)

Hong-Kingston also describes Chinese girls as quiet and who barely spoke, compared to their American counterparts: ‘The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl’ (150). The quiet Chinese American girl or woman in diaspora in Hong-Kingston’s experience seems to entrench the idea of the Chinese woman as quiet and submissive, to be seen but not heard. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, in her poem ‘Between Women’ describes what is presumably the modern Chinese-American woman, the ‘[t]aller, tougher curved Amazon’.

Which then is Snow Soong in Tash Aw’s novel? The ‘taller, tougher curved Amazon’ or the meek Oriental courtesan? As the novel has three narratives, it is difficult to ascertain Snow’s actual appearance. The first narrator, Snow’s son, Jasper can only regurgitate his mother’s features from what he has been told:

When she was born the midwives were astonished by the quality of her skin, the clarity and delicate translucence of it. They said that she reminded them of the finest Chinese porcelain [...] A visiting Chinese statesman once famously compared her appearance to a wine cup made for the Emperor Chenghua: flawless, unblemished and capable of both capturing and radiating the very essence of light. As if to accentuate the qualities of her

skin, her hair was a deep and fathomless black, always brushed carefully, and usually for her time, allowed to grow long and lustrous. (66)

With skin like the ‘finest Chinese porcelain’ of the tea cup of an emperor and ‘long and lustrous’ ‘deep and fathomless black’ hair, Snow appears dangerously close to the stereotypical conception of Asian beauty. Her height, however, rescues her from this fate; as Johnny Lim meets her for the first time and is surprised by the fact that she is not a ‘tiny, exquisite jewel’ but ‘instead he found himself looking up at a woman who seemed to tower endlessly above him’ (74). It is also rather amusing that Snow’s height or general appearance causes somewhat of a role-reversal as regards the Chinese man and woman interaction—quite far apart from the shy and demure Chinese woman who, under the veil of Orientalism, would not have stared ‘intently into [Johnny’s] eyes’, causing him to ‘quickly lower[ed] his gaze’(74).

The narrative of Peter Wormwood is arguably more accurate and believable—an Englishman who one might assume would have, from the three narrators, the highest propensity to impose a stereotypical description of Snow Soong, does not do so:

I know she is a woman, but her body has the straight lines of an adolescent boy, flat-chested and slim. She is taller than any woman I have seen in the Orient; her face is almost level with my collarbone. (263)

His comparison of Snow Soong with the other women is even more illustrative of his perception of how the average woman in the Orient looked. Moreover, Wormwood’s views of Snow’s physical traits—describing her as almost androgynous—as well as what he perceives as her boldness, lack of demureness and even being devoid of the child-like quality that formed part of the misguided Oriental description, would certainly cast her away from the definitive stereotypical Oriental woman indeed:

She spoke in a very direct manner, open and forthright, unlike the charmingly veiled way in which the other young women in the rooms poke. It was impossible to tell how old she was. Her face was distinctly pubescent, yet there was something in her features that made her seem harder than a mere teenager—a quality of manliness, I thought. The way she carried herself, too, lent her an air of maturity. (279)

Despite his earlier descriptions of Snow however, Peter Wormwood does occasionally succumb to, or one might even argue, insist on fitting Snow Soong into a mould that he cannot shake off in his mind of the Oriental beauty. Although Snow is often depicted in the novel as wearing loose-fitting trousers and a blouse, the traditional *samfoo*, he describes her, in that same outfit, as looking very ‘refined, just like an imperial Manchu consort’ (292).

Although there remain certain inconsistencies of her description by different narrators, the fact that she does not conform to the Western perception of the stereotypical Asian beauty is still discernible. In addition to non-conventional physical traits, Snow also appears to be indifferent to her own looks, debunking the gender-biased myth that women are usually more concerned about their appearances than men, and further entrenching Snow Soong’s characterization as an anti-stereotype by her lack of adherence to the aggrandized notion of femininity prescribed for an Asian woman:

The wind continued to sweep through my hair. I made no attempt to smooth it away from my face as I had done earlier, but instead enjoyed the sensation of knowing that here, in the open seas, no one would comment on my appearance. (182)

Snow is depicted in the novel as an educated, well-read and articulate woman; she reads widely, speaks good English and is well-versed in Western literature and music. She is not afraid to voice her thoughts, although she still conforms to what is considered proper etiquette and decorum for a young lady—she is almost Victorian at times, like an Asian Elizabeth Bennet who speaks her mind whilst maintaining a certain degree of propriety. One might contrast her with Lemon who is almost the total opposite of Snow:

Her name was Lemon and she was not yet married. She led me by the hand down the dim corridor leading to my bedroom; she padded quickly across the bareboards, the pale soles of her bare feet flashing against the dark teak floor. Giggling she locked the door. She could not wait to speak about the experience of being married. [...] “Surely it must be more exciting now, what with a man in your room!” (131)

She throws her head back in laughter, constantly giggles, and is the epitome of the child-like Oriental woman envisaged by the West. Even Snow herself admits that she feels “tall and ungainly” next to the delicate Lemon. The latter’s feminine wiles and behaviour is further illustrated when she is asked to play the piano, which is naturally a skill learnt by women in well-to-do families so that they could perform for guests at their parents’ or husband’s will. Lemon plays a piece that is not recognised by Snow, pouts ‘like a girl ten yours younger’ and said, ‘Oh, Uncle TK, you know what it is, don’t you?’ (133)

Despite Snow’s seemingly independent behaviour, she seems to still be tied to the idea of a woman’s fate to submit to forced marriage and its ensuing consequences. Snow’s diary starts with the words ‘[a]ccept your fate. Accept your fate. Mother’s words invade my dream’ (123)—words that echo throughout her life, but instead of ‘accepting her fate’ as her mother drones, Snow Soong’s diary is peppered with her intentions to tell her husband, Johnny Lim, that she intends to leave him. There is a confusion here as to Snow’s true inclinations—*does* she accept her fate? The answer appears to be ‘no’ as she clearly demonstrates her boldness in her interactions with Mamoru Kunichika, to whom she is greatly attracted and even swims in the river with him, with flirtatious overtures (208). There is a further ‘love’ scene where she “reached out to [Mamoru] and gathered him in [her] arms” (219), exhibiting not only maternal instincts but also strength, as well as an even more apparent gesture of defiance against staying in a troubled marriage in resignation.

Yet there are troubling contradictions—it is unclear whether Snow was forced to marry Johnny—Lemon asks whether the rumours of Snow marrying Johnny against the will of parents is true; her parents are described as being agreeable to the marriage as Johnny was a wealthy textile merchant, wealth is a deciding factor in the eligibility of the groom as is apparent from Jasper’s narrative:

[...] To top it all, Snow and the boy looked such a pretty pair and would surely attract all the right comments when the time came for them to venture into the public eye... Thankfully, before such an understanding was reached between the parents, TK and Patti discovered that the boy’s parents were not quite as wealthy as they seemed. The

Superintendent's lavishness at the races had taken its toll on the family's finances, and it was thought that much of his wife's fabulous jewellery were borrowed from sympathetic relatives. It was clear that the dowry which TK and Patti expected in return for the hand of their daughter could never be fulfilled.' (71)

Whether Snow was indeed forced into the marriage, or as Lemon speculates, had married Johnny against her parents' wishes, she later shows her resolve in leaving the marriage but at the time constantly hesitates in making her wishes known. The fact that Snow's narrative is in the form of a personal diary is telling—the voice of an Asian woman in the 1940s would not have been allowed to be forthright and honest as it would be otherwise. Despite Snow's boldness and unsterotypical ways, there are nevertheless still traces of her upbringing in a time of gender bias, ironically mainly exhibited by her mother who insists on objectifying and trivialising women:

“This is our daughter, Professor,” Mother said. “Nothing to look at, I told you, didn't I?” (124)

‘[...] you would not be interested in a thing like her!’ (125)

‘You are his wife,’ she said simply and laughed, as if there was no more to say...(139)

‘In the kitchen Mei Li was sitting on a low wooden stool, dipping little pink balls of sweet dough into a bowl of flour.

“Don't sit with your legs like that,’ mother hissed at her. “Only whores behave like that.” She looked to see if I was listening. “Only whores behave like that,” she said again. (136)

We may well ask the same question as Johnny Lim who says, ‘How would you know what her *self* is?’ (308) referring to Peter Wormwood commenting that Snow is not herself. Not only does Snow make her decisions on contradictory terms, it appears to be difficult to pin down her definite sense of identity as an immigrant Chinese woman in Malaya. She is different from her counterparts in the ancestral homeland in China, and yet she displays no affinity to her adopted homeland either. What can be noticed is simply her collage of habits which almost mirror her as a Victorian woman, but at the same time she retains the values of her upbringing, to accept her fate in a loveless marriage. Her efforts to seduce Mamoru Kunichika do not fully materialise, and even more so when he tries to later rape her and appears to be unsuccessful.

Snow Soong as anti-stereotype is at best half convincing—even as she is a far cry from her oppressed counterparts who have no access to education nor possess any of the myriad of privileges and choices that she does, her identity is ill-defined or even non-existent. The only thing that remains constant is her dependence upon a colonial source of one kind or another, be it one that is gender-based or from the imperialist coloniser of her adopted homeland. She is, in effect, doubly colonised—with remnants of her cultural obligations when she is groomed for her looks and ability to present herself, only to later die during childbirth, clashing with a legacy of literature and music not of her own culture. As much as it might have been intended for Snow Soong to be depicted as the antithesis of the stereotypical Oriental, in the end, she is left with a mishmash of a cultural personality; an identity that is neither emancipated nor certain in its definition.

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The Scarlet Letter Revisited: A Study of John Updike's S

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In an interview ¹ with Prof. Sukhbir Singh (Osmania University, Hyderabad) John Updike explained what he called his "Hawthorne novels". Updike's three later novels – *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger's Version* (1986) and *S* (1988) – comprise his "Hawthorne novels". Each of these novels displays amazing intertextual resonance with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and are thus known as "The Scarlet Letter Trilogy" of John Updike. Robert M. Luscher² observes that John Updike's *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger's Version* (1986) and *S* (1988) constitute "the trilogy of modern offshoots of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*".

S (1988), the final novel in "The Scarlet Letter Trilogy", exhibits even more conspicuous intertextual filiations with Hawthorne's masterpiece. The Hawthornesque influence is tellingly evident in this pseudo-comic novel, a conscious intertextual version of *The Scarlet Letter*. Updike tried to explore adultery as an American myth by retelling the story of *The Scarlet Letter* and contemporizing Hawthorne in his twentieth-century milieu.

"It's no paradox: religion and sex are traditionally linked in the United States"³, said Updike in an interview with Jan Nunley (1993). As Donald J. Greiner has so pertinently pointed out that the common point where Hawthorne and Updike meet is the "inextricable unity of religion, sexual transgression and guilt"⁴. In *S* this preponderant curious conflation of sex and religion is embodied in the female protagonist of the novel, Sarah Worth, the Updikean equivalent of Hester Prynne. Although a critic of the stature of George Hunt has stressed the male dominance in Updike's novels and observed that Updike's "fiction is always a man-centered fiction in that the controlling voice retains an ultimately masculine perspective",⁵ it is in *S* (1988) that for the first time that we find a woman's view voiced by the female protagonist. I believe that since Hunt had not gone through *S* when he wrote that book in 1980, he has made such a comment, and that Hunt would surely have recanted his earlier stance, had he read *S*.

The creation of Sarah Worth calls for especial attention, inasmuch as Updike himself considers the novel as having autobiographical elements. As Updike so candidly puts it in an interview with Terry Gross (1988):

Certainly, in *S*, only the innermost essence of my heroine could be called me. The rest is all made up[...]In writing about her, I had to sort of rethink what her past would have been.⁶

One may be tempted to say that *S*, along with its feminist perspective, amply reflects what David Macey calls "Her Story". According to Macey, "Her Story" is a "Feminist coinage from early 1970s, formed by analogy with the pseudo-etymological transformation of 'history', and stressing that the historical experience of women is often ignored or suppressed by conventional historiography".⁷ Richard Gilman considers *S* an important book written from the feminist point of view:

It's in the light of Updike's recent strategy of trying to correct his image in feminist eyes that we have to look at *S*. Even more than *The Witches of Eastwick*, *S* seems to celebrate the freedom of women to pursue their carnal and emotional ends, and to be relieved of guilt for doing so. [...] This is what accounts for Updike's decision to rewrite, or to "up-date", perhaps the greatest

of all American fictions in which sex and religion confront one another, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, with its archetypal female victim.⁸

In none of the novels in the Trilogy are the pervasive intertextual echoes of *The Scarlet Letter* as audible as in *S.* That Hawthorne looms large over Updike's consciousness and that Updike had *The Scarlet Letter* at the back of his mind have been clearly borne out by the two epigraphs of this novel, both taken from *The Scarlet Letter*:

Epigraph (1) She had dark and abundant hair, [...] in which she was enveloped.

Epigraph-(2) Much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression [...] no law for her mind.

If the first epigraph from Chapter-2 ("The Market Place") refers to the serene, soothing august and dignified aspect of Hester, the second epigraph from chapter-13 ("Another View of Hester") hints at the rebellious nature of her, fighting against all odds and breaking all conventional codes in supreme isolation. The two epigraphs telescoping the two opposite views of Hester – the soothing and the seething, the mild and the wild – have a strong bearing on the protagonist of the novel, Sarah Worth, Updike's twentieth-century equivalent of Hester.

Updike in his intertextual version embraces every possible experimentation, including both conversion and inversion of Hawthorne's text. Updike further experiments on the antithetical processes of "fusion" and "fission"⁹, as I would prefer to call it. If Sarah strikes an amazing resemblance with Hester, she also shares some akinness with Dimmesdale about which I shall refer to later.

Hester's name echoes the Greek goddess of the hearth, Hestia, whose Roman equivalent is Vesta. In *The Scarlet Letter* there are ample references to Hester being attributed with divine quality. The very first view of Hester emerging from the prison "like a black shadow emerging into sunshine" (48) with a baby of three months in her arms reminds one of the Virgin Madonna. Born and brought up in a rigid puritanical society, although Hawthorne had no other choice but to punish Hester for her adulterous union with her pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale, his sympathy with Hester betrays itself occasionally throughout the narrative of the book. It is this tacit support with Hester that also constitutes the subtext of Hawthorne. Hawthorne with the cachet of his genius weaves an ingenious narrative which sparks off momentary flashes of his empathy in the adulteress (Hester) whom he publicly punishes. Thus Hawthorne's narrative, in a sense, serves to deconstruct the text. We find a second Hawthorne playing hide and seek with the omniscient narrator, and this second suppressed voiced betrays the deep structure of Hawthorne, the man, camouflaged in the garb of Hawthorne, the artist.

Against the continual onslaughts of the vitriolic social condemnation Hester registers an all-tolerant *sangfroid* and equanimity befitting a Christ:

Hester had schooled herself long and well, she never responded to attacks, save by a flush of crimson that rose irrepressibly over the pale cheek, and again subsided into the depths of her bosom. She was patient – a martyr, indeed – but she forbore to pray for her enemies [...] (79).

Thus, without mentioning Jesus Christ — that was dangerous for Hawthorne to use in this context — he equates Hester with Christ. That Hawthorne was on Hester's side is evident when he endows the scarlet letter with hallowed connotation:

[...] the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom. It imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness [...] (156).

Hawthorne's support for Hester was first pointed out by none other than D. H. Lawrence who, rumbles out the "marvellous undermeaning" and "perfect duplicity"¹⁰ underlying the ostensible placidity of Hawthorne's narrative. Later other critics followed suit. While David Leverenz refers to the "narrator's symbolic advocacy"¹¹, and while Richard H. Brodhead argues that "Hawthorne's technique forces us to observe the action from a double perspective"¹² and that Hawthorne's narrative is marked by a "kind of double presentation"¹³, Daniel Cottom speaks of "Hawthorne's equivocal style"¹⁴. Similarly, Marshall Van Deusen prefers to call it "a kind of ironic *de'doublement* of perspective"¹⁵. What these critics and Lawrence have pinpointed is that being a direct descendent of John Hathorne, one of the notorious judges of the infamous Salem Witch Trial of 1692, and bred in a stern puritanical society, Hawthorne could not freely say what he had felt, and therefore, had to devise a narrative which implicitly hints at a double meaning, expressing his anguished concern for Hester whom he fetishizes and elevates almost to the divine status of Virgin Mary:

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of
Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful
woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien,
and with the infant in her bosom, an object to
remind him of the image of Divine Maternity,[...](52)

If in *A Month of Sundays* Updike uses, as his narrative trope, the diary- jottings of Tom Marshfield, in *S* he explores the epistolary device to narrate his tale. When we turn to Updike's twentieth-century equivalent of Hester, Sarah Worth, we find that Updike exploits the device of inversion in Sarah. Like her Biblical namesake – the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac (Genesis 17: 15-22) who was derided by people for bearing a child at her ripe age – Sarah Worth is laughed at by her acquaintances for her unnatural spiritual quest at the age of forty-two. Hester was similarly the object of derision to the puritanical society. Updike turns Sarah into a somewhat waspish woman, who, quite unlike her Hawthornesque counterpart, is given to feats of jealousy and bouts of anger. Thus, while Hester blushes, Sarah blusters. For example in a letter to her mother, Sarah accuses her for having 'squelched' Sarah's previous romance and for compelling her to marry Charles, and finally, raves and rants against herself for being unable to resist her daughter's unsuitable infatuation:

My anger is at myself, all the worse in that my recent attempts to squelch an infatuation of my daughter's have proved totally ineffectual, thanks in part to the transatlantic meddling of your groom-of-choice, the impeccable Charles(212-13).

Hester "had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam" (49), and Sarah possessed "dark hair and rich complexion" (7). The intertextual tie is reinforced when we come to know that Sarah's only daughter bears the same name as Hester's: Pearl. If Hester was abandoned by her cold, intellectual husband, Roger Chillingworth, Sarah has arranged a deliberate estrangement from her husband Charles in order to busy herself in her own world. Further, like Roger Chillingworth, Charles is also a physician.

Interestingly, this Charles/Sarah relationship puts Updike's *S* in an intertextual relationship with John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. One may note that John Neary¹⁶ makes an interesting comparative study of the novels of Updike and Fowles. Hester's marriage to the old and cold Chillingworth was an uneven match, and they were keenly aware of it:

"I have greatly wronged thee", murmured Hester.
"We have wronged each other", answered he.

“Mine was the first wrong when I betrayed
thy budding youth into a false and unnatural
relation with my decay[...]”(25)

Sarah, too, had suffered from a cold unhappy marriage. In the very first letter written to Charles, Sarah fulminates:

Your own genteel atrocities of coldness and blindness toward me were not by themselves enough. [...] I shed you as I would shed a skin, with some awkwardness perhaps and at first sensitivity to the touch of the new, but without pain and certainly without regret. [...] The affront to your pride and convenience, of my desertion should weigh little, in any wise court, against the nearly *twenty-two years of mental and emotional cruelty you with your antiseptic chill have inflicted on me* (12-13).

[Emphasis added]

Sarah complains her mother, that she was just “another piece of furniture” to Charles (24). In another letter to Charles (May 23) she refers to their unequal match:

You and I, my dear, I see now, were such a pair of
troublesome opposite (61).

The theme of disgruntled marriage and its resultant adultery may also be found in Updike’s *Couples* (1968) and *Marry Me* (1976).

If Roger Chillingworth’s ruling passion constitutes his obsession of finding out the partner of Hester’s adultery and if Hester is bent on not revealing the identity of her partner, Sarah is anxious about Charles’s undesirable intervention in her whereabouts, and therefore warns him:

I have left you out of love for another. [...] I needed
another. Who he is, and where we are together, I will trust you
not to seek out (12).

The ‘tape’ to Midge also hints at Charles’s possibility of spying on her personal life:

I know you won’t, but you *mustn’t* tell
Charles about Fritz – my hunch is he’s going
to start suing me. Charles, I mean(47-48).

Hawthorne talks back, as it were, in the linguistic system (text) of *S*. The very names—Madame Blithedale, Bellingham, Mr. Rogers, Miss Priscilla Pilgrim, Aunt Hilda, Mrs Pyncheon, Midge Hibbens and the Prynnes— with which Updike’s text is bestrewn, make us increasingly aware of Hawthorne’s pervasive presence in Updike’s text. Hawthorne’s characters are scattered and resuscitated, as it were, with their new roles in Updike’s book.

Pearl was the ecstasy and the agony of Hester’s heart. Mischievous and pretty, Pearl sustains the lonely Hester and animates her. When Governor Bellingham and the puritan authorities decide to transfer Pearl to other hands since she was Hester’s ‘badge of Shame’, we can get a view of Hester as a true mother protesting against Pearl being taken away from her:

She (Pearl) is my happiness! – She is my fortune, none the less! Pearl
keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me too! See ye not, she is the
scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a
millionfold the power of retribution for my sin? [...] I will not give her
up!(106)

The mother in Hester speaks out vociferously for her daughter’s possession. When we examine Updike’s heroine as a mother, we find that Sarah, too, is meticulously careful as a mother and pays a punctilious attention to Pearl’s upbringing, despite her busy engagements.

As Sarah reminds Pearl of her maternal role in a movingly painful letter registering her suppressed bickering for Pearl's fondness towards her father:

You write of what a tender and attentive father yours was when the sad truth is he hardly bothered to kiss you goodnight most nights let alone read a bedtime story as you and he both seem to be fantasizing. [...] precious Pearl, make no mistake: *I* nursed you, *I* changed your diapers. I dried your tears. I sang your songs when you were nervous at nights, on and on until my own eyes could hardly open. You sucked milk out of *my* breasts, took hold of life in *my* belly, not your father's (156).

Updike, like Hawthorne, glorifies motherhood as an alternative structure to the hegemony of fatherhood engendered by our society. Both Hawthorne and Updike subvert the autonomy of patriarchal hegemony.

Hawthorne refers to Pearl as "the elf-child", thereby endowing her with an aura of romance. In fact, the very title of chapter eight is "The Elf-child and the Minister". Updike strikes a close intertextual phrasal resemblance when Sarah writes to Pearl about her mental "stress" caused "from worrying about my priceless elf-child" (158).

Against this social power and authority wielded by the "Fatherhood", Hawthorne tried to create the myth of the "Motherhood" represented by Hester Prynne, the archetype of lonely suffering independent American woman. She similarly teaches Pearl to forge out her identity in terms of her mother. "I am Mother's child" (103), Pearl boldly replies to Mr. Wilson's queries and Hester Prynne tells her, "Thy Heavenly Father sent thee" (99), thereby deconstructing and subverting the traditional patriarchal structures.

If Elaine Showalter describes gynocriticism as "the feminist study of women's writing, including readings of women's text and analyses of the intertextual relations both writers (a female literary tradition), and between women and men",¹⁷ such a study befits *S*, inasmuch as Sarah herself can be regarded as the writer of her own story penned through her series of letters. If the diary of Marshfield in *A Month of Sundays* assigns the dual roles of the author and the character to him, the epistolary trope endows Sarah with the ambivalent roles of the writer and the written. Sarah becomes the writer of her own tale.

In an endeavour to subvert patriarchal autonomy, the Arhat Ashram gives us a wonderful picture of women management:

The executive committee is mostly all women – the Arhat has his theory that women are stronger in selflessness than men, which may be a nice way of saying they are subservient (55).

"Wouldst thou avenge thyself on the innocent babe?" asked Hester when Roger Chillingworth reappears and enquires of Pearl (67). Although Updike's counterpart of Dimmesdale, Charles, is not an irresponsible father (and not to speak of a hostile one), Sarah takes him to task for his excessive attachment to Pearl:

And do lay off little Pearl. Try to think like a father instead of a strategist in the war between the sexes(171).

The gravity of the puritans experienced and delineated by Hawthorne has been supplanted by the telling frivolity, detailed by Updike. Sarah refers to the Kali Club, the ashram mall, the ashram disco, electronics boutique and other pleasure items.

Let me come to an interesting device employed by Updike. Updike's intertextual experimentation involves a process of fusion of more than one character. If Charles resembles Roger Chillingworth as being the cold, chilling husband prototype, he also displays a strange

affiliation with Arthur Dimmesdale. Like Dimmesdale's adulterous inclination, Charles has liaisons with a succession of nurses. Thus we find an intertextual fusion of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale in Charles. Similarly if Sarah is the equivalent of Hester, she is more akin to Dimmesdale than to Hester in her oratorical skill expressed in her letters. Like Dimmesdale's felicity of the tongue, Sarah displays a suave facility of her pen, writing a series of letters which Updike has deliberately chosen as the narrative trope of this novel. Finally, Sarah loosely resembles Chillingworth in her astute machinations. Under the ostensible camouflage of her sham religiosity and her gnomic mystic jargons, lurks her utterly selfish motive of luxuriating in voluptuousness and indiscriminate liaisons. Astute and acquisitive, she embezzles funds from the ashram coffers to her secret foreign bank accounts. Thus Sarah reveals a curious intertextual fusion of Hester, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth.

If Updike succeeds in experimenting with intertextuality in terms of fusion, he is able to do it with equal *éclat* in terms of its opposite method, i.e. fission. For example Dimmesdale's adulterous aspect is scattered among all the major characters: Sarah (of course), Charles, Steinmetz (Dimmesdale- counterpart in this book) and a plenty of other ashramites. Similarly Dimmesdale's hypocrisy has been intertextually transmitted through Sarah and the Arhat, Steinmetz. Both Sarah and Steinmetz practise profuse profligacy under the garb of religion. Updike recreates the myth of adultery in his twentieth-century society as a prevailing American malady prevailing particularly in the middle-class, suburban American society.

Like Hester who has deserted her ancestral Europe to peregrinate through the wilderness of New England, Sarah has abandoned her domestic moorings in New England to promenade in the deserts of Arizona. Hester is wont to wandering wildly among the "without rule or guidance in a moral wilderness", and "Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods"(192). Sarah, too, rambles wildly in the desert of Arizona for spiritual fulfilment and individual freedom. The Utopain Arhat Ashram reminds one of Hawthorne's experiences with the Utopain community of George Ripley during his seven-month sojourn at Book Farm recorded in his novel *The Blithedale Romance*.

If Hester has crossed the Atlantic like other European immigrants to settle in America, Sarah travels in flight to reside in the Arhat Ashram. In fact, the first letter she writes to Charles is from the jet. Needless to say, this journey motif is a typical American feature, and is evident in all such great works as Melville's *Moby Dick*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and its sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, to name only a few. In Hawthorne and Updike the journeys of the heroines assume a quest for freedom from the asphyxia of religion and society respectively. The epitome of suffering woman, Hester Prynne, is, as Stuart P. Sherman¹⁸ so pertinently observed, "a free spirit liberated in a moral wilderness". As Hawthorne puts it:

The world's law was no law for her mind
[...]She assumed a freedom of speculation,
then common enough on the other side of
the Atlantic(157).

If Hester finds her emotional sustenance in her pastor, Sarah, too, finds a spiritual 'father' and was impressed by his "spiritual magnetism"(40). Ultimately Hester's adulterous union with Dimmesdale is paralleled by the liaison between Sarah and Steinmetz, her so-called 'Spiritual father' and 'Master'. Significantly enough, Steinmetz not only parallels Dimmesdale in his actions, but shares his first name 'Arthur'.

Another point of intertextual kinship between Hawthorne and Updike lies in the fact that both lay bare the flagrant hypocrisy underlying religion. Dimmesdale's hypocrisy in acting as a judge in Hester's trial is felt all the more intensely by none other than Dimmesdale himself:

[...] I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow sufferer! Be not silent from any mistake pity and tenderness for him; for believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him – yea, compel him, as it were – to add hypocrisy to sin? (62).

The inner Dimmesdale speaks out here under the pomposity of his gifted tongue.

Sarah resembles Dimmesdale on more scores than one: in her adulterous nature, in her facility in writing (as Dimmesdale's in speech) and finally in her hypocrisy. Although she indulges in indiscriminate licentiousness and even lesbianism, she justifies her actions in terms of gnomic religious clichés as the union of "Shakti" and "Shiva", that of "Krishna" and "Radha", that of "prakriti" and "purusha", etc. As Sarah puts it:

[...] sexuality and spirituality are forms of our energy [...](60).

Here again we find a striking intertextual echo of Hester Prynne's interpretation of her adulterous act. In the famous forest assignation Hester considers her act not as a course but as a "consecration":

What we did had a consecration of its own.

We felt it so! We said to each other!(188)

The opening chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, "The Prison Door", hints at the gruesomeness of a strictly rigid puritanical milieu of Boston and describes the prison where Hester was interned. Hester's emerging out from prison bespeaks more a psychological freedom than a physical one. Sarah, too, has been immured in the invisible prison of the stifling condition of a materialistic America rolling in voluptuousness and yet dictated by a patriarchal social structure. As Sarah gives us a glimpse of her slavery in a letter to Charles (May 23):

Did I not labor for you for twenty-two years without wages, serving as concubine, party doll, housekeeper, cook, bedwarmer, masseuse, sympathetic adviser, and walking advertisement – in my clothes and accessories and demeanor and accent and even in my body type and muscle tone – of your status and prosperity?(62)

It is chiefly to shake off the shackles of this patriarchal imperative and the "antiseptic chill" and "bondage" provided by her husband that Sarah isolates herself from Charles and sets out for a spiritual quest in the deserts of Arizona. What strikes our amazement is that like Hawthorne who refers to "a wild rosebush"(1), Sarah refers to "that area by the roses"(1) in her very first letter (April 21) written to Charles.

Hawthorne's pervasive impact is felt throughout the text not only through intertextual resonances of themes, motifs, events, characters and even names, but also through the direct reference made to Hawthorne's very name. When Sarah lands in Los Angeles, she had a brief sojourn in a "motel near the airport in a dreary area called Hawthorne [...]" (31).

If *The Scarlet Letter* presents us with plenty of harsh, cruel, unrelenting clergymen and judges as John Wilson and Governor Bellingham, among others, who mete out their diabolic punishment to Hester Prynne, Sarah describes her age as an "age of misogynistic judges and shameless lawyers" (139).

The greatest, most prominent and typically Updikean case of 'intertextual' rewriting is the seemingly incongruous and yet inalienable conflation of religion and sex. Hawthorne mythicizes Dimmesdale's syndrome, while Updike domesticates it. It becomes a recurrent motif in Updike and an American malady racking and rocking the society for centuries. In an Interview with Edney Silvestre (1993) Updike states:

Surely sex and religion are such basic human concerns – the first a tribute to our bodies and animal selves, the second a tribute to our

mental (and some would say) spiritual selves – that I cannot imagine myself without them, even as a small child. Both are inextricable from human vitality, and tracing their form is one of the tasks that fiction performs uniquely well.¹⁹

George Hunt²⁰ makes an interesting and elaborate survey of Updike's preoccupation with "Three Great Secret things: Sex, Religion and Art". Updike's preoccupation with sex and religion and his re-enactment of the Adam-myth have been succinctly captured in his poem "Apple":

Since time began, such alphabets begin
With Apple, Source of knowledge and Sin.

"Adultery is not a choice to be avoided; it is a circumstance to be embraced", writes Tom Marshfield in one of his diary jottings in *A Month of Sundays* (44-45), and this sums up the typical syndrome of Updikean characters for whom adultery has become as much irresistible as it is invaluable. What Hunt has observed in *Couples* can be broadly applied to any Updikean novel:

[...]sex now becomes the metaphor and symbol for the exploration of human meaning in a world that seems devoid of meaning. Sex "as the emergent religion" will parody those spiritual instincts and efforts of communal groupings that religion once energized and channeled. Sex "as the only thing left" becomes the only viable metaphor for man's search for personal and communal meaning. Adultery in such circumstances thus becomes the only modern equivalent for romantic adventure and spiritual aspiration [...](117-18).

Sarah becomes the prototype for the Updikean characters for whom religion is paradoxically realized through unscrupulous license, permissiveness and adultery. The Updikean characters engage themselves in adulterous promiscuity in order to find a substitute for or perhaps a better religion's equivalent for the spiritual bankruptcy prevailing in their society. As Prof. David Thorburn has so pithily put it:

Updike has consistently associated the marital transgression of his characters with metaphysical or religious longings, as if to suggest that adulterous cravings in our affluent rootless era are the confused expression of an instinct for freedom itself, a rebellion against the confinements of age and circumstance.²¹

Sarah relates how she had slept with Fritz in Arhat's A-frame, how in her transformed person (appellated as Kundalini) she had fornicated with her spiritual master, Arthur Steinmetz, a Jewish Armenian from Watertown, Massachusetts, how she resorts to lesbianism even in the Ashram. As always with Updike, he describes the sexual encounters with an explicit raunchiness.

Another telling intertextual echo lies in Sarah's carrying a tape-recorder concealed in her bra in a surreptitious way. She adopts this clandestine device so as to capture the exact words of the Arhat. The tape records the verbatim encounters between Sarah and the Arhat, and thus remains a rare document and a proof of the concupiscent actions of the Arhat:

*Come on, Kundalins. What's your old
name? I've forgotten*
Sarah
Come on, Sarah, put away that long face[...]
Don't touch my breasts. I mean it.
*What's this protecting your tits again
suddenly? (222-23)*

Like Hester's scarlet letter 'A', the tape hidden under Sarah's breast remains for us a glaring evidence of some untold mystery and some hushed-up scarlet deed. If Hester's scarlet letter epitomizes the tale of a sinful passion, the tape of Sarah — which like Hester's scarlet letter she carries on her breasts (although furtively) — bears testimony to the tale of sinful lust.

Sarah's daughter Pearl, like her Hawthornesque namesake, is the epitome of a free woman who defies the constrictions of any order being imposed upon her. Hawthorne was conscious enough to depict Pearl according:

The child could not be made amenable
to rules. In giving her existence, a great
law had been broken, and the result was
a being whose elements were perhaps
beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder [...] (84)

Hester "could recognize her (Pearl's) wild, desperate, defiant mood, the rashness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondency that had brooded in her heart"(84). Sarah's Pearl is also an image of desperate defiance and freedom, one who wants to "become a free intelligent woman among her boyfriends and girlfriends"(63), and behaves in a recalcitrant manner with her mother regarding her affair with a Dutch guy, Jan, whom Sarah does not approve of. What Sarah fears is that Pearl may be repeating the same folly that she had committed years before, sacrificing her 'womanhood' to Charles:

[...] I just get frantic fearing that Jan won't let you *grow* – that you'll allow him to put a permanent cramp in the ongoing splendid adventure of your womanhood just as your father with the connivance of *my* parents did to me twenty years ago(157-58).

Similarly, Pearl grows defiant of Sarah when Pearl decides not to come back to Yale and declines to finish her degree. Sarah exhorts her to get her degree, inasmuch as it "is the invisible tiara a woman must wear now, otherwise people write her off as a bumpkin, an ignoramus, a throwback, an archaic creature"(203). Pearl's defiantly free nature culminates in her conceiving a child which makes her mother so deeply injured:

After wounding me in these various other
ways you want me into a *grandmother*(206).

This anarchic version of Pearl also justifies Updike's second epigraph to the novel.

And yet, these differences notwithstanding, Pearl is the spitting image of Sarah, as Hawthorne's Pearl was of Hester's. Sarah's Pearl becomes her mother's *alter_ego*, for all one through whom Sarah would find her dreams realized vicariously:

You can say I was trying to live my life
through you in a way I never lived in myself [...](205).

Sarah's dream of fearless womanhood is embodied in the blooming Pearl, as her mother would like to image it:

How thrilling it has been for me [...]to see
you grow, tall and fearless and carrying
your femaleness like a battle flag!(16)

Finally, Pearl Worth, the epitome of all "free women – women standing upright and having ideas"(205) in Sarah's projected vision, is not unlike the Hawthornesque version of Pearl Prynne, the very embodiment of "the steadfast principles of an unflinching courage – an uncontrollable will – a sturdy pride, which might be disciplined into self-respect [...]"(173).

Both Hester and Sarah are characterized by their loneliness. But while Hester's loneliness is conditioned by her social persecution, Sarah chooses to remain aloof from the comforts and luxuries of her New England society. "Standing alone in the world", Hester was fighting her

own silent battle against a society pervaded with an avalanche of rigid laws and constrictions which she defiantly flouted:

The world's law was no law for her mind(157).

Sarah's self-imposed isolation in the Arhat Ashram in the Arizona is suggestive of her lonely wrestling against the patriarchal hegemony.

Both Hester and Sarah are the embodiment of the guiltless American feminist. Despite her sinful adulterous union with Dimmesdale, Hester is not, in the least, tormented with any kind of guilty feeling whatsoever.

Sarah similarly does not care a tuppence about any guilty conscience:

Why do Americans always think they should feel guilty about their *things*? I loved our things. Things are what we strive for, what all the waves in the air tell us to strive for – things are the stuff of our dreams and then like Eve and Adam digesting the apple we must feel so *guilty*. I didn't, I don't think(9-10).

Updike makes abundant use of the scarlet letter 'A' in his intertextual version of Hawthorne's classic. Sarah repeatedly refers to 'A' frame in the Arhat Ashram, and relates how she had gone to Fritz's "A-frame" and "slept with him"(46). She addresses Alinga as "Dearest, dearest A,-"(99). She advises her mother to "Use lotions with PABA and take vitamin A 500 mg. twice a day"(26), and writes to Pearl about "an A-line tulle-and sating gown"(207). The sannyasins are required to wear "purple and pink" dresses (64). Any perceptive reader may notice that the colour "purple and pink" is not unlike the colour 'scarlet' and thus links up the intertextual connotation of shame.

In a reference to a college textbook on Zoology, Sarah sums up her paradoxical situation in a letter written to Myron:

The book talks about "the simultaneous eagerness of the female for sexual stimulation and her inherent fear of body contact with any other animal, including a male of her own species".[...] The story of my live and all other lives really.[...] It goes on to talk about how lady gray squirrels [...] "feel torn between two powerful instincts: they want to escape and at the same time they want to greet the male"(248).

This situation also succinctly presents the moral dilemma in which most Americans suffer from. Sarah herself is a split, fragmented self. Sarah is herself caught between her "two powerful instincts". One half of Sarah is in quest for spiritual salvation; the other half luxuriates in carnal carnival, in sensual bacchanalia, in physical voluptuousness and sexual ecstasy. She can scarcely reconcile between the two, and therefore suffers from its resultant anguish and a lack of fulfilment. Sarah becomes a prototype, as it were, for her young bohemian generation in general and the Updikean characters in particular. In Sarah religion is paradoxically realised in and through uninhibited promiscuity. In the ultimate analysis, it may be said that Sarah herself epitomizes "the scarlet letter"of shame. In her twentieth-century America where there is an awful topsy-turviness of values and a veritable travesty of ideals, Sarah finds it rather useless to assign a complete, unified identity to her, and hence tries to represent her fissiparous, dissociated, split identity by reducing her name to an unassuming "S". Thus what was "A" for Hester Prynne is epitomized in "S" for Sarah Worth. A critic like Donald J. Griener, however, treats the letter "A" linguistically and observes:

In Updike's world, the A on Hester's breast can be nothing more than the vowels of Sarah's name.²²

If Sarah resembles Hester, she is also distinctive from her nineteenth-century counterpart. Unlike the serene, calm, goddess-like Hester who acquiesces in her suffering with an almost Christ-like tolerance and who engenders a Madonna-like sympathy, Sarah is antithetically

waspish. She sasses back with an eruptive fury to Charles for his previous “antiseptic chill”(13) imposed upon her, to her mother for having forced her to marry Charles, and to her daughter Pearl for her characteristic defiance. In stark contrast to Hester’s irradiating ingenuity and innocuousness, Sarah can go to the extent of embezzling funds from the Arhat Ashram. Other instances of inversion lie in the very setting of Updike novel. While Hawthorne’s novel is set in a sombre and sullen puritanical seventeenth-century America steeped in gravity, Updike turns the tables to create an ambience fraught with frivolity. Similarly Sarah’s utopian Ashram resort, equipped with all kinds of materials comforts and a utopia of absolute freedom, is a flagrant inversion of the dystopian puritanical world of Hester Prynne. It is chiefly because of this opposing nature of Sarah that critics and commentators have declined to see her as a literary descendent and a remaking of Hester Prynne. Richard Gilman, for example, feels that Updike does not succeed in it:

What Hawthorne was able to do with Hester Prynne, as *Updike isn’t able to do with Sarah*, was to extend his imagination to encompass her difference from him, and then to inculcate himself in her sorrowful fate. In wishing to make his modern Hester’s destiny a lighthearted one, Updike takes no responsibility at all.²³

Alison Lurie²⁴ in another review criticizes Updike and observes that “if difficult [...] to see any real connection between Hester and Sarah Worth.” What these reviewers and critics fail to realize is that this change serves but to strengthen the intertextual knot by betraying the links between the two texts. It is the difference that also draws us towards the similarity. Updike here actually resorts to the device of intertextual inversion which is more tenable and more attuned to his twentieth-century situation. Updike’s inversion becomes inevitably necessary, inasmuch as he is trying to present a faithful portrait of American middle-class in his time. Hawthorne was faithful and realistic to his nineteenth-century society; Updike remains loyal to his twentieth-century America. This inversion is therefore amply-justified not only on account of this realism, but also because it fills the long historical and socio-cultural gap of nearly three centuries.

To reviewers who decline to accept Sarah as Hester’s literary counterpart, it may safely be replied that intertextuality hinges around the principle of “difference”. As John Frow has put it:

The concept of intertextuality requires that we understand the concept of text not as a self-contained structure but as differential and historical [...] Texts are therefore not structures of presence but traces and tracing of otherness.²⁵

The “change”, “difference”, “inversion” or “otherness” — whatever we may call it — is therefore thoroughly justified in terms of the social, cultural, historical, literary and theoretical considerations. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter* is, as it were, resurrected with a new meaning and significance befitting the twentieth-century milieu through the ingenious intertextual appropriation of the genius, John Updike. I wish to conclude with a discreet observation made by Donald J. Griener:

[...] Updike’s transformation of *The Scarlet Letter* is both an homage to a masterpiece and a radical feat of intertextuality.²⁶

Notes and References

In this paper I have used the *Watermill Classic* edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Canada : Watermill Press, 1983), as the mother text for reference and citation. I have followed John Updike's *S* (New York: Knopf, 1988). The numbers within brackets suggest the relevant page numbers.

¹John Updike, Interview with Sukhbir Singh. "The Novel According to John Updike". SPAN (September / October 1977) : 35-40.

² Robert M. Luscher, "Preface". *John Updike : A Study of the Short Fiction*. (New York : Twayne Publishers, 1993) p. ix.

³Jan Nunley, Interview with Jan Nunley. "Thoughts of Faith Infuse Updike's Novels", From *Episcopal Life*, May 1993. Reprinted in *Conversations with John Updike*, ed. James Plath (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1994), p. 256. All further references to this book will be cited as *Conversations*.

⁴Donald J. Greiner, *Adultery in the American Novel: Updike, James and Hawthorne*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), p. 50

⁵ George W. Hunt, S. J. *John Updike and the three great secret things: Sex, Religion, and Art*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 8

Henceforth all references to this book will be cited as *Secret Things*

⁶ Terry Gross, Interview with Terry Gross. "Fresh Air with Terry Gross", 1988. Reprinted in *Conversations*, p. 208-9

⁷David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin, 2000.

⁸ Richard Gilman. "The Witches of Updike". *The New Republic*. 198 (20 June, 1988): 40

⁹I have taken the metaphor from nuclear Physics. While fission refers to the splitting of an atomic nucleus along with the discharge of energy, fusion involves the opposite process in which two or more atomic nuclei are combined to form a larger nucleus.

¹⁰D. H. Lawrence. *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Heineman, 1924), p. 94.

Hereafter all references to this book will be cited as *Studies*.

¹¹David Leverenz. "The Ambivalent Narrator of *The Scarlet Letter*". Reprinted in *The Scarlet Letter* ed. Seymour Gross, et al. Third Edition. (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 416. Originally reprinted from *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 37.4 (March 1983): 552-75

Hereafter all further references to this book will be cited as *SL* (Norton)

¹² Richard H. Brodhead, "Method in *The Scarlet Letter*". Reprinted in SL (Norton), 400.

¹³Richard H. Brodhead, "Method in *The Scarlet Letter*." In *SL* (Norton), 400.

¹⁴ Daniel Cottom, "Hawthorne versus Hester: The Ghostly Dialect of Romance in *The Scarlet Letter*". Reprinted in *SL* (Norton), 408.

¹⁵Marshall Van Deusen, "Narrative Tone in "The Custom-House" and *The Scarlet Letter*. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 21 (1996): 61-71. Reprinted in *SL* (Norton), 250.

¹⁶John Neary, *Something and Nothingness : The Fiction of John Updike and John Fowles*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992.

¹⁷Elaine Showalter, 'Feminism and Literature' in *Literary Theory Today*, Peter Collier and Hega Geyen-Ryan (eds), (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990)p. 189.

¹⁸Stuart P. Sherman, "Hawthorne: A Puritan Critic of Puritans". *Americans* (New York, 1922), p.148.

¹⁹ John Updike , Interview with Edney Silvestre. "Sex, Religion, and Politics: Interview/John Updike" (1993), Reprinted in *Conversations* p.246.

²⁰George W. Hunt, S. J., In *Secret Things*

²¹David Thorburn. "Introduction: 'Alive in a Place and Time'". *John Updike: a Collection of Critical Essays*. Eds. David Thorburn and Howard Eliland. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979.

²² Donald J. Griener "Body and Soul:John Updike and *The Scarlet Letter*", *Journal of Modern Literature* 15 (Spring 1989): 495

²³ Richard Gilman "The Witches of Updike". Review of *S*. by John Updike. *New Republic*. 198 (20 June, 1988): 41

²⁴Alison Lurie. "The Woman Who Rode Away". Review of *Trust Me* and *S* by John Updike. *New York Review of Books*. (12 May, 1988): 4

²⁵ John Frow. "Intertextuality and Ontology". *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Eds. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester. Manchester University Press, 19

²⁶Donald J. Griener. "Body and Soul: John Updike and *The Scarlet Letter*". *Journal of Modern Literature* 15 (Spring 1989): 495

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Then we came home

Charles Bane Jr.

Florida, USA

Then we came home;
your fingers pushed my hair,
grew flowers in the ash
and I was young.
I loved you and wrote
of it in candlelight. Je t'aime,
I wrote. You stirred
and I returned to bed. Then,
we made ourselves a single,
breathing soul.
Stars made fireworks,
the sea was changed
to a coat of sparks
and we stopped
the hours.

Resuscitation

Skye Leslie
Oregon, USA

I want to tell you my story mouth to mouth.
I want to whisper struggles - feel your lips go
soft in understanding and when my voice grows stronger
I can tell of the mountains - how at a point in my climb
my breath went crystal, became the ice in my veins.

I want our margins to match and stretch in smile.
In the knowledge that our dance is not complete
until we've merged sorrow with celebration.

I want you to know the salt of my words; the gall which has risen.
That there were days when my speech corroded and rust,
lodged in my throat like the birds who built nests in base of
a chimney.

More, I want my transformation to be visible like a chrysalis
hanging from a pear tree bough, with internal wings beating, beating
against its encompassing shroud.

I want the honey which lies now on my tongue to pour down your throat
as my recollection now song.

New City

Adrienne J. Odasso

Leeds, UK

I've spent some time in this quiet afterlife
dreaming journeys just beyond my reach.
The men by the waterside watch me
as I watch them, lift their eyes to seek
my knees as I flick ash against the sky.
There is nothing here that I could want
more than wishing for this silence. I'll teach
my mind to be still, my thoughts to swim
below in the breezes skimming askance
the brook. My stillborn poems will haunt
this small and squared space long after
I'm gone. I turn from my watch alone
to close the latch, desiring little else
than plum-skin and smoke between my teeth.

Unhappiness

K.K. Srivastava

UP, India

Terrible unhappiness,
the wonder of it
death wish pushed on us
unhappiness and life
two sides of one darkness
darkness is no experiment.

*

The outside pressing
malignance of light flies
numbed with waiting for long
appallingly we feel like
a dying coal receding slowly.

*

Newness of the room
always the same
vying for the most helpless
thoughts of unending roads
keep musicing us.

*

Life needs big hands
to tackle it's vagaries
what alters these vagaries
credulous and waning stillness
answers really matter little.

*

Happiness is no virgin
let us not suspend assertions
of existence,
dawning on itself is not
waking to ourselves.

*

In the idea of distance
limping away is no anodyne
unhappiness is a secret art
though evolved so much
we still stand so still.

*

It stands
it sways where it stands

all that is left before us
is horizon
our screams don't reach there.

OCTOPUS

Ram Sharma

UP, India

Man has become octopus,
entangled in his own clutches,
fallen from sky to earth,
new foundation was made,
of rituals, customs and manners,
tried to come out of the clutches,
but not
waiting for doom`s day.

Chartreuse Lust

Anastasia Voight

Texas, USA

The wood wound path's detritus
is smirched with green-grit flotsam.
As our steps disturb the verdant dust,
even the newest jetsam
is chalked with chartreuse lust.

Such delicto flagrante would disgust
if done by most any other.
But a tree is a dissembling lover.
No love-thrust, no convulsed spatter
betrays arborous ardor.
Only wind-shiver stirs
spring cones in carnal quiver.

Lamb

C. J. Sage

California. USA

Fence jumper, yet devout avoider
of low obstructions in your path,
water walker you are not.

Your mild way is counted,
follow-the-leader, and by coveters
your wooly coat is woven.

Gate gazer (your herds
from highlands & countrysides),
the flesh is culled from your soft carcass.

o shyer away from shadows,
decliner of darkness and loud address,
bearer of bell at the throat,

you are all ascent and incline
toward the sunlight. You walk away
from haste and toward stillness.

At rest alongside the greatest beast,
your belly is to the earth,
and your little ear.

Crane / Crane

C. J. Sage

California. USA

Urgent bird, mathematical
machine, you copulate
the hill and go in seconds
over her head.

Nest builder, stick tosser,
bog dweller, bog culler,
your beak is a plier;
your head is all jaw.

There was once a leg
and a brace whose parts
collided. The two
may never square again.

River sleeper, sky climber,
wiry crier, erect opponent,
raiser & razer, wild walk-and-wielder,
your tract demands you

homonym, namesake, antonym, kin.

"mowing the grass"

Robert William Gaglione

Florida, USA

they thrive
under the droning
within hum of ancient hymns
legend-fed in a compost of their belief

others open
like moonlit perennials
sprawled beneath blistered cover
kneeling in fields
with all which freedom brings

relighting heaven and earth green
rooting out
mowing down
rounding up
clearing away

mimicking those moving on
this very morning
wildflowers aim skyward
amongst the shells and shattered stone

as a playwright. I know I said if I wrote about
someone it was really me, but
I never phoenixed myself.

Too scared to
dowse myself in fuel, spark the match
and pyre anew. I admired
guys like that. But only as the river
adores the sky, smart enough to know

it's not me that I reflect.

The Borrowing

for Beckian Fritz Goldberg

if you allow yourself to let go: to concentrate on a dot in the sky:
until you are part of the dot: just behind its mind: then you can see
your own life below: the body stretched out in the open field: and you
can watch the other people around the nearby miles: up here you can
hear the heart of airplanes: before this was lost to your earthly ears
with the voice of wind: fanning your feathers out to catch another
thermal: you rise: the white houses below looking like mouse skulls:
and where your earthbound eyes had thought the land was relatively
flat: you can see every grassy buckle and wavy hill: you feel the
bird-mind impulsing: as it takes an interest: your own body having not
moved in a while: you ghost out: a skydiver: back to the familiar
fragrance of grass and soil

The English Language: A Modern Babel

Udo Hintze

Texas. USA

How lucky we are we speak English.
The World uses English like fish use water.
It is the language of Hollywood, Wall Street,
The United Nations and the Olympics;
It is England's most reliable export.

From the shores of a tiny island in the North Sea,
English is a seed that has grown into a tree and prospered,
And covered the world,
Feeding the nations of the world,
And from that single tree, all the birds of the world nest.
English spreads forth its wings
Like a mighty eagle,
Casting a long shadow on the landscape.

Wherever this imperial language has landed,
It has absorbed and been absorbed
Like a black hole,
But not disappearing into oblivion
But existing in parallel universes,
Amongst the peoples of the globe;
Aboriginals, Africans, Asians and Native Americans,
Creating a rainbow of Englishes,
Half-brothers and sisters stretching around the world.

And although English is an Old World resident
It masquerades with New World clothing.
English then becomes a second language.
For example, in Massachusetts, the English there
Do not say, "Lake Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg"
They just call it Lake Webster.

English is a juggernaut gathering speed with every step.
English has carved out routes in the mountains,
Mapped out paths in desert,
And hacked a way through the jungles of the world.
Going back is like digging into the layers of Time itself,
Uncovering ancient civilizations
And there we see the layers of meaning,

The strata of connotations, and the formation of lexicons,
Built upon the backs
Of words, of words, of words
From other languages
(stanza continued)
Like Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit
Amongst the pantheon of lesser gods
Like French, German, Spanish, and Arabic
So “true” English is only is spoken in drips and dribs,
But at least we can be thankful to the Dutch,
That our Boss is not our Master.

And the English Lion has no master
Because it never rests.
Indeed, it surrounds and enfolds its prey at all times
And all places.
For example, in the 19th century
A Bengali playwright once said:
“I like to write a satire...
I like to show the creatures of my race,
Who go to England
And forget their traditions,
And come back dressed like foreigners...
I like to hold them up to ridicule
Their clothes,
Their habits,
And all their tomfoolery.”

English the kind of creature Darwin would have appreciated,
A kind of super-organism,
Self-aware and constantly evolving,
Evolving like the former red parts
Of the British Empire as depicted
On old Imperial dominion maps.
England is a noun, it is a place on the map.
But English is a noun and an adjective, too.
So it is the entire map, too.
It is the painter and painting merging,
Becoming one,
And not just the red parts,
Stained with the blood of violence and war,
But with life-blood,
Flowing into the mother’s womb,
Creating new life!

So do not fool yourself

By placing blame of this global
Tsunami on the British.
Just ask around and see for yourself,
(stanza continued)
That English is our commonwealth,
And it was not a British Empire
But an English one.

Market Garden

Michelle L. Brown

Texas, USA

She smells bruised onion despite
noon's chill, sees her kale
as cankered leaves for harvest,

green plagued by cabbage
loopers in the field, growth
a reluctant prayer half-answered.

Culls yonder in a waxy heap,
some trampled beneath rubber
boot heels, their impress already

dark with rot. Her late reaping
gamble a wash, diddling
with toil to squirrel away

a soupcon. She rinses grime
from scarred hands and stops to watch
the faucet drip. Bubbles form, break

where the drops fall, a nesting doll
of tin cans within her muddy
reflection. She asks the plastic

owl on the fencepost whether
Jenn ever reached Nepal.
The silent bastard never tells,

but this crop won't pick itself,
so she unpacks her pimento cheese
sandwich, Cheetos, green apple

and thermos of sweet tea.
She eats fast and sets her bearing back
to deliberate, hard-earned neutral.

THE COOK AND THE CHICKPEA

Shanta Acharya

Highgate, London.

(With acknowledgement to Rumi)

A chickpea leaping out of the pot,
no more dry and hard, but ready to sprout;
soaked overnight, then boiled fiercely

Yelled with all its might at the cook:
“Why are you doing this to me?”

The cook casting the chickpea back in the pot
as if guiding a whale stranded on land, breathless, lost
back into the ocean for its safety, replied calmly:

“When will you stop thinking only about your self;
accept my cooking, careful and constant, as your destiny?”

You think I am torturing you,
when I am enriching your flavour
with spices, salt, garlic, ginger, tomatoes
so you can mix with rice and vegetables,
and nourish my Master’s family.

Remember the way Gardener tended you
while you drank rain in my Master’s garden, for months
did nothing but fed on minerals and other nutrients?

You have come a long way from a seed
planted in the vegetable garden
to the dawn of a new life in a cooking pot,
to a taste conjured by me specially for you
providing nourishment to humans.

Don’t you know we are all returning,
our lives enriched by serving,
our home where we are going?”

Arms up to the Sky

Timothy Gager

Boston, MA USA

A shadow covered the east side of their home and it was now dark in the living room when previously it was hot and sunny in there. Jimmy opened the window and let the cool air blow in. It was the middle of the night which woke Helen, his girlfriend. Jimmy thought he saw trees from the woods pulling themselves out of the ground, their roots torn off, screaming. They had scampered around the yard in a low rumble and then jumped the height of the house, injecting into the ground. The trees now created a beautiful shaded area covering the east window, keeping their living room comfortable and cool.

He had sold his home in Millersville in order to buy this new house, a new commitment for both of them. He had sold his home in Millersville in order to buy this new house, a new commitment for both of them. You knew Helen didn't mind if the money was split, as long as they were both happy. He loved her, especially her hair, which she wore in bangs, like freshly made pasta, hanging to dry. What was love anyway? It was nothing you really found. It was more like some meteor falling from the sky and striking you without warning.

Jimmy pulled into the driveway when The Twist came on the radio. He pushed the volume arrow up on the car stereo, so he could hear Chubby Checker over the sound of the twisting trees. Some of the weaker branches crashed to the ground as Jimmy kept the radio on and observed his castle. "The grass looks healthy," he had said to Helen. "Yes, we've had a lot of rain," Helen added. Jimmy got out and danced by himself, ignoring the inconvenient flow of falling leaves and twigs. A small one drilled its way into his arm. "This is really a nice day," she said. Inside the house a strong Oak branch had broken the window and reached inside to unpack one of her boxes of books. A syringe fell out. Jimmy didn't tell her that he had started again. "I guess I forgot to do my homework," she said.

Later that weekend, as they sat on the deck and the sun set, the Checker song played again from the radio, "Come on everybody, let's do the twist." Jimmy awkwardly twisted some splinters out of the deck into his foot. He went out like a light.

By the time Monday rolled around more trees had jumped over the fence into their yard.

"That's fucking amazing," Jimmy yelled. "Check that out," he yelled to Helen while he read the town's recycling rules. "I'm going to have to put the information in my goddamn computer. I couldn't imagine having to keep track something like that! I don't think I can do it. Plastics...glass...cardboard.... .magazines...leaves...wood...me!"

“You’re right honey. It’s a lot to keep up with. We’ll get used to it, I hope, even if it is a huge fucking hassle!” she replied.

* * *

Mrs. Peaitch rang the doorbell. It was the first visit from any of their new neighbors. She wore a black hooded robe. Mrs. Peaitch shook Jimmy’s hand, noticed the veins were as hard as wood.

“Welcome to the neighborhood. I see my Dogwood has made it over here,” Mrs. Peaitch said. “Sure it has,” Jimmy said, noticing it for the first time. “That one has a certain glow,” Jimmy said and winked, which struck Mr. Peaitch strange.

“Well I’m just glad most of the leaves are gone. Any extra yard work will just mean more things to do.”

“Oh, is that so?” Mrs. Peaitch added noticing a fly buzzing around the foyer. It buzzed and struck the light bulb that was hanging over Jimmy’s head. She wondered if it would knock itself out and fall directly onto Jimmy’s bald head, which had been uptooted and glowed from the illumination of the bulb. It was incorrect wattage.

“Death’s a bitch,” Jimmy said. “You notice all the yard work and that I’ve painted the shutters.” He pointed past a new Elm. Jimmy ground his teeth as Helen appeared behind him in the doorway. He turned his back on Mrs. Peaitch, and walked close to Helen. “Some people don’t understand my habits,” he said under his breath as Helen introduced herself to her new neighbor. “It’s very nice to meet you,” she smiled, while shaking her hand.

As the weeks flew by, Jimmy added more yard work to his regimented schedule, a tarp to catch leaves that feel from the moving trees and turned brown. His arms grew and grew, led by the veins which were the size of railroad tracks. He kept on the schedule as all he wanted to do was stay high.

“Why you’re doing so much!” Helen said.

“Trying to impress the neighbors,” he said. “I never thought this would require so much work.”

Jimmy was finding it difficult to find enough open ground with all the new trees to spread his tarp flat. When another tree touched down it had to wedge its way between other trees, with Jimmy's arms--now bruised, battered and spanning twenty feet--stretched between the trunks. “I thought you were having some problems with that tarp,” Mrs. Peaitch said to him from over her sunny fence.

“I’m having as many problems as a man in debt needing to win the lottery.” Jimmy heard the trees laughing.

“I’d just be careful is all I’m saying. You never know about numbers....it’s all a crap

shoot.” Jimmy reached from between the trees to the fence and patted the top of her hood. Mrs. Peatch didn’t move.

Jimmy continued to work, but he couldn’t stop what he was doing. He added more and more reps until his eyes nodded and his arms were heavy and warm. The trees landed on him and Jimmy had no place to go, his wooden arms could only be raised straight up and they grew into the sky. He heard Helen faintly calling for him, like she was in another world. Mrs. Peatch told him to come to her quick and she pulled him by his arms, a shot straight to heaven.

THE RECKONING

Sangeeta Bhargava
Lucknow, India

Belinda groaned. The flight had been delayed by two hours. It was precisely at that moment that she noticed Shirley. Colour drained from her face. Her throat went dry.

Shirley looked the same – just a tad heavier, the hair shorter. Not tied in braids anymore. She looked prettier this way. She was with a little girl – talking and smiling indulgently at her.

Belinda put on her shades and looked the other way. Had she seen her? She didn't think so. There were two rows of passengers between them and the girl was keeping her busy.

Seeing her suddenly, after all these years, took Belinda back to their boarding school. She was in class twelve. Their school was perched atop a hill, right next to the boys' school. That day Belinda stood near the fence pretending to look for something. It was the common fence between the girls' playing field and the boys' football field.

Ashley kicked the ball hard. Belinda looked surreptitiously at the ball as it bounced off the fence and then at Ashley who was running towards it. As his feet shuffled the ball around, he slipped a note into her hand before kicking the ball back to his team.

Belinda looked around carefully and heaved a sigh of relief. No one had noticed. The girls were busy playing. Sister Anne was engrossed in a conversation with two of her classmates. Belinda crumpled the piece of paper in her moist palm after reading it. She was frightened. If the nuns found it, she would surely get the strap. But she was also in love.

She caught hold of Shirley after dinner and pulled her to a corner. "Ashley wants to meet me by the lake at ten tonight," she whispered.

"Tell him it's out of the question..." Shirley paused and stared incredulously at her friend.

Belinda returned her gaze arrogantly.

"NO!" Shirley hissed. "Surely you aren't... You can't. You'll be thrown out of school if you get caught."

"I won't," Belinda replied and walked off. She didn't care. All that mattered was Ashley.

Later Belinda approached Shirley as she brushed her teeth. "Can I borrow your red purse?"

Shirley stopped brushing and stared at her for a long moment, her lips covered in white foam. Belinda fiddled with the piping on her dressing gown. She knew Shirley had noticed. She had her red t-shirt and jeans on underneath the gown. Belinda waited patiently as Shirley rinsed, wiped her mouth and walked over to her locker. Wordlessly she handed her the purse.

At exactly nine o'clock Sister Anne came and said the night prayers. By 9.15 the entire school was plunged in darkness. At 9.30, only snores could be heard. Belinda slid out of the back door of the toilet and ran across the lower field, on to the dirt track. She did not stop until she had reached the edge of the lake.

"Ashley?" Belinda's heart thudded loudly as her panic-stricken eyes searched in the darkness. He was there all right, right next to the weeping willows. Belinda ran into his arms. Ashley smiled. And then he kissed her. Belinda had never been kissed before. She felt herself melt as his rough, chapped lips explored the softness of her mouth.

Belinda was glad it was a moonless night. The two of them rowed across the lake. The reflection of the lights of nearby houses shimmered beneath the oars. It was perfect. Until after they said goodbye.

Belinda started at the sudden announcement. She picked her handbag and boarded the plane. As she sank into her seat, she remembered how hard she had been breathing as she ran back up the hill. She stopped to catch her breath as she neared the dormitory. Just then a small light started moving towards her. She gasped and ran inside.

The next morning Mother Fernandez, the principal strode into the year 12 classroom. Belinda turned deathly white. She saw Shirley glance at her and looked away. There was a sudden murmur in the classroom. Mother clapped her hands loudly. The murmuring died away instantly. "The night watchman saw someone sneak out from your dormitory last night." Mother looked around the class before continuing. "Whoever it was had better own up. Else I will have to suspend the entire class." There was a look of shock on everyone's face as Mother left the classroom.

Belinda shuddered. Even after all these years, whenever she thought of that day, a shiver ran down her spine. She wiped her brow and touched the television screen in front of her.

"Oh my God, Belinda, is that really you?" It was Shirley, bending over her, a warm smile on her lips.

Belinda straightened and stole a look at Shirley.

"So good to see you after all these years," Shirley gushed as she clasped Belinda's hands. "What have you been up to?"

"I...I just finished my Ph. D.," replied Belinda, avoiding eye contact. "What about you?"

"Well, you know what happened. I couldn't possibly get admission in any college after that....But wait till I tell papa. He remembers you. He'll be so proud. He always wanted me to go to college."

Belinda licked her lips. "It wasn't my fault. The watchman found your purse and gave it to Mother. She asked me if I knew who it belonged to. I told her it was yours. That's all I said."

"I know," Shirley replied.

"Why didn't you tell her the truth?"

"You were intelligent. You were my best friend...I was going to drop out after school anyway."

"I didn't mean to....I was scared...." Belinda blabbered incoherently.

"Of course you were. We were just kids, Belinda." She put a hand reassuringly on Belinda's arm.

She had forgiven her - just like that. Belinda looked at her smile, mesmerised. When she smiled, she looked just like the angel in the painting that hung in the school office. It was a smile that reached her eyes and made them twinkle like two glittering orbs. Funny, despite all her degrees and accolades, Belinda had never been able to smile like that.

God said no

Kylie Neal

Texas, USA

Rain droplets hit my face lightly as we walked through the woods. James and I were headed towards our safe-haven; at least, that's what we liked to call it. It was really only a secluded area in the woods that had a couch left in it. It was a brown couch, which I think was once bright white. It smelt of cat piss and mold, and felt like bristles against your bare skin. We simply adored it.

It was late one Tuesday evening in October, so the weather was misty and cool. The air smelled of dried leaves and dead trees. After fifteen minutes of walking over rocks, tree roots, and sticks we finally made it to the couch. Something was odd about this evening, I thought. The couch had a light purple sheet covering it, hiding its unpleasant texture. The sheet smelled of lilac and a hint of cigarettes, which somehow covered up the scent of cat piss. I turned to James and asked, "Why is there a sheet covering this? Do you think someone has been here?" He didn't turn to look at me, simply said, "Nah."

I didn't press the subject; I didn't really care. James wandered off behind some old oak trees and I plopped on the couch. He re-entered holding a bottle of strawberry flavored, white zinfandel, and a picnic basket full of food. "What's this for?" I smiled lightly, since I already knew. "Our anniversary, boo. Didn't think I'd forget, did you?" Sweetly, I smiled back, grabbed the bottle and took a large gulp. I could feel the liquid burn as it went down my throat and hit my stomach. We didn't get around to eating the food he brought. We sat talking, and in the span of ten minutes we had engulfed the entire bottle.

From what I could remember, I woke up sometime around three a.m. to my phone ringing. "We need to talk, get home!! Where are you?! Do you have any idea what time it is?!" my mother screeched. "Obviously late", I mumbled to myself. She ordered me to come home right this instant, so I tried to find my clothes – they were hidden beneath a pile of leaves with stems mixed in. I put them on in complete darkness, woke James up and made my long journey home.

We reached my street faster than I wanted to. I walked up my tulip-lined sidewalk and into the wooden door which would lead me straight to hell. I didn't go in right away; I stood outside saying good-bye to James. Through the window I could see my mother sitting in her chair, as usual, arms crossed, legs twitching, waiting for my arrival. I could feel her anger as soon as I opened the door and walked into the hallway. To my surprise she didn't ask me where I was; all she said was, "When were you going to tell me?" I looked at her and uttered, "Tell you what?" still feeling the effects of the alcohol, and from lack of sleep. "Don't play dumb with me. When were you planning on telling me about the baby?" She hissed at me. I guess I forgot to mention to anyone I was pregnant. "I'm not keeping it, so I didn't plan on telling you ever." I said as I walked off. I didn't wait to hear what else she had to say, I know it would have been along the lines of how immature and irresponsible I was, coming from Ms. Teen-mom herself.

I didn't want the baby. I knew I wasn't going to keep it. I just couldn't find the courage in me to tell James. I know he would be terribly happy; he would want me to keep it and move in with him so we could be a family. I just wanted more than that. I know if I kept this baby, I'd be stuck in small town USA, forever. I didn't want to end up like my mother.

My mind was restless now. I tossed and turned in bed, with all these emotions and thoughts in my head. I walked down the stairs and out the door at seven a.m. and headed to school. Contemplating telling James or not. What would I tell him? 'Hey James, I'm pregnant with your child, but don't worry because I plan on killing it?'

It was killing me. I took a detour from school to the woods, my woods, my safe-haven, my couch. My mother would be thrilled to know her only daughter had turned into a delinquent. I got to the couch and cried, not a sad cry, but a loud, hysterical, and (if anyone would have heard), obnoxious cry.

I thought about everything: James, the baby, school, my life. I have never really been religious, but maybe this is what God has planned for me. He did this so I could be completely happy, and finally complete. I sat on that couch crying, asking if this is what he had planned. I begged for an answer. A pain struck my side; I looked down to see blood trickle down my leg like a crimson tide as God said no.

Hello?

Aparna Mukhedkar

Hyderabad, India

It was a dark moonless night. Ainee was reading a novel on her single bed with a shawl covering only her legs. Her eyes felt heavy and drunk with sleep, yet, she fought to stay awake to finish the chapter. She was reading Sidney Sheldon's *"The Other Side Of Midnight,"* and after reading the rather graphic and racy scenes in the novel, her imagination was vivid and alive. She stirred from dozing off as she heard raspy, throaty sounds coming from the far corner of the room. On another cot lay a young woman whose back was turned to her.

It was her cousin Farni, who was in town for the state varsity volleyball tournament and was fast asleep. Her thin shawl covered only her torso revealing a slender waist and shapely arms with a black mole prominently visible on the lower side of her elbow. A soothsayer had once remarked how "lucky" she was to have a mole on that very spot of her body. "The elbow and the chin are the two best places," he had declared with the characteristic finality of someone who possessed a mastery over the subject.

Ainee returned to her book and was again enthralled by the exploits of the characters. "I wish I could write like this," she thought to herself. However, the words were starting to blur and sleep was slowly but certainly overwhelming her. Finally, she gave in. She snapped the book shut and switched off the bed side lamp. Somewhere in the large house, she heard the clock strike midnight. She caught the chimes at 6-7-8-9-10-11-12. She rolled over on her stomach and her eyes drooped to a close. Moments later, she heard a ringing in her ears. Then a whisper.... "Huh!" she blurted, her eyes still closed.

She was puzzled by the sounds in her ear and later realized it was the phone in the other room. "What the...who could be calling at this hour?" she cried, visibly irritated. She clambered out of bed, the white sheet still clinging to her right foot. She adjusted her night dress and tottered to the adjacent room which was the upstairs living room of their five bedroom mansion in Banjara Hills, Hyderabad.

At first, she was unable to locate the cordless phone. She started to fling the cushions on the sofa all over the place in sheer frustration at not finding the phone. She muttered a curse under her breath and directed her ire at Farni and her reckless habit at leaving the phone anywhere she pleased. "Bah! This girl..." she whimpered in exasperation. It was only the other day when Farni had first arrived that she had misplaced her hair brush that they later found in one of the kitchen cabinets. Then, suddenly, she spotted the phone on the window sill. She ran towards it and grabbed the receiver and hurriedly hissed a "Hello!"

"Er ...Is Rajin there?" asked a male voice.

"Who?"

“Rajin!”

“No! There is no one by that name here,” she barked with annoyance.

She pressed the tone button on the receiver really hard and gritted her teeth in irritation. “Bah! Bah! Bah! Waking me up from my sleep to ask me about ...Rajin! Is that even a name?” she wondered aloud. As she was about to throw the receiver onto the sofa the phone rang again. “Oh! Gawd!” she exclaimed in anger and bellowed into the phone.

“Hello!”

“Yes...Is Rajin...?”

Hello

“For the love of God! There is no one....this is a wrong number!”

“What is this number?” the voice demanded in a gentle tone.

“Well! You called didn’t you? Should you not know what number you dialed....?”

“I pressed redial.” he interrupted.

“Press “no-dial” and don’t call this number again. It’s past midnight and you are...”

“I am looking for my friend.”

I am not your friend!” she snarled. “Besides, if you have a friend by that name how come you don’t know his real number?” Silence ensued for a moment.

“Hello! What happened? Cat got your tongue?” she mocked as the silence at the other end continued. “Do not call this number again or I will report you to the police!” she warned. As she was about to disconnect, the male voice pleaded with her not to hang up.

“Please let me say sorry. I know I should not have called you at this hour. But, it is such a great night. I was hoping that er...my friend... and I could spend the evening chatting. There is such a beautiful moon outside,” he went on before he was rudely interrupted.

“There is no moon today!” she roared in to the receiver. “Plus I thought you were looking for a Rajin?”

“I know and maybe you can help me. How long have you had this number? Maybe it’s an old number that...”

“No!” she said emphatically. “Do not think I don’t know the tricks you boys play. Trying to pretend you are looking for someone and then worm out all the information and try to harm young girls. I am on to you and if you continue to call, I will report you for harassment.”

Click.

The phone went off line. Ainee waited there in the dark for a few seconds biting her lips. She was unsure whether he would call back or if she should even wait for a call back.

Ring ring. The phone vibrated in the palm of her hand. She debated for several minutes whether to pick up the phone. She let it ring and suddenly it stopped. “Hmm”! she mused. “Maybe my threats worked!” she thought and began to walk towards her bedroom when the phone rang again. This time she clicked the on button and spoke quickly.

“The authorities are tracing this call you know and very soon they will know who you are and arrest you and lock you up in prison.”

Silence.

Many moments passed. All she could hear was breathing at the other end. There was complete silence everywhere. A chill passed through her when she realized that she was standing in a cold living room with the drapes open and no lights in the house, except for those on the street that were streaming through the windows. It was eerily calm. She was alerted to the sounds of the night with the crickets running riot in the garden and the wind swishing the tall Ashoka trees against the porch. To top it all, she was spooked by the scratchy, static sound of the caller’s breathing. The hair on the nape of her neck stood up as her imagination began playing tricks on her. She walked slowly towards her room and as she approached it she broke out into a sprint as fast as she could, bolted the door and dove into her bed. She was panting for breath and still clutching the phone tightly. She threw a cursory glance at Farni who had not moved an inch. She was still sleeping in the very same position as she was. After a considerable amount of time passed and she was visibly

calm, Ainee slowly began to settle down. It seemed as though the caller sensed her growing comfort with continuing the interaction.

“Are you okay?” the voice asked in a tone of concern. “I hope I didn’t scare you?”

“Why would I be scared of you? All I can hear is your voice and that doesn’t scare me,” she lied. Her voice was quivering and yet she managed to keep up her composure.

“Listen to me...whoever you are. There is no point in calling here since your friend does not live at this number...”

“Who says my friend doesn’t live at this number? I just found a friend. Well! Hello, friend.”

“Oh! No no no no no! We are NOT friends! Far from it! Oh! Clever! Don’t play those games with me! I am not one of those hapless girls that falls for a cheapo that calls people up in the middle of the night to strike up a conversation with a total stranger.”

“But, isn’t that the point of life?” he implored urgently. “To be daring, taking risks and meeting new people during the course of your journey through life?”

“JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE, huh? Oh! I know your kind. First, tiptoe around and discuss generalites, then slowly wean your way in by finding out my name, where I live, what I wear and then suddenly you are at my door asking to see me to go on a date! I know your kind. I also know how to take care of people like you!”

“How?” he asked in his somber tone of voice.

She was shaken for a bit. She was not prepared to be challenged so boldly. Her mind raced really fast so she could offer a quick retort. Failing to find one, she chose to break the conversation yet again.

“You know what? There is no point in this! I will just call the police and report you for harassment. The laws in India are getting very strict nowadays and you can be locked up for years. Plus, my dad is a big shot. I am not going to tell you who he is so you cannot trace me,” she said very proud of her clever remarks.

“Why do you think I am calling with some sort of evil intention? For all you know I am a lonely young man who just needs some companionship tonight.”

“Well then find one of your own sort. Why are you wasting my time?”

“As I can see you are still holding on to this conversation as much as I am,” he said, quite pleased with his witty retort.

She was stung by that remark which completely threw her off balance. ‘He is right’, she thought with a grimace. ‘I have to get him off this phone whichever way I can,’ she thought. Despite the exigency of the situation rising with each moment, she tried to control herself and, in a calm, collected tone tried to shrug him off once again.

“Look whoever you are I am still talking to you because I am trying to persuade you not to call me again.”

“Well! Do you have a sister with whom I could speak? You know, just to pass the time till the morning.”

“Oh really! Now you want to speak to my sister? For your kind information, I don't have one and if I did I would forbid her from talking to a complete stranger!”

“Why is it ok for you to talk to a ‘stranger’ but not for her? Isn't that a double standard?”

“I am older and more mature, that is why.”

“I thought you said you didn't have a sister?”

I don't. This is just...hypothetically speaking....”

Hypothetically then...let's see would she be fair...like you?”

“How do you know I am fair? Who is this? Is it Sanjay? Siddharth? Hey! Don't play games. I am going to get the both of you if this is a prank of some sort.”

“Why do you think it is someone fooling you? I was only speaking, er...hypothetically of your sister...”

“The one I don't have? Great!”

“Does she go to a college? I presume you are receiving an education?”

“If you think I am going to disclose the name of my college, you think wrong!” she said sharply and pulled her knees closer to her body.

“No, that will not be necessary. We are simply trying to caricature a sister that you don't possess and having some fun with that....”

“This is not fun! It is a complete waste of my time. I could be sleeping or reading my book.

“What are you reading?”

She paused for a moment before replying. “John Grisham's *“Runaway Jury,”* she lied. She did not want anyone to know that she was reading a trashy novel. No – not even this stranger at the other end.

“You must read *“Anil's Ghost”* by Michael Ondaatje.”

“Who?”

“The author who wrote *“The English Patient”*. It was made into a movie which won many Oscars. Did you see it?

“Aaargh!” she cried with a shrill disdain. “I hated every bit of that movie. It was dull, boring, crappy and a waste of my time and money.”

“You seem to waste a lot of time from what you are telling me.”

“I do not! With the exception of that horrid movie and ...of course this totally nonsensical conversation I am having with someone whose name I don’t even know.”

“Would you like to know my name?” he asked his voice as even and mellow as it had been from the beginning. For the first time she noted the smooth texture and the sonorous pitch of his voice. He sounded like he was some sort of divine, mystical

being that was imparting some other worldly knowledge and wisdom to his human subjects.

“What’s next? You will want to know my name, address, telephone number...oh but that you already have....then how many brothers and sisters I have, what my father does and my mother and what the name of my dog is and what car I drive and what is its color?”

“Well! It’s alright if you don’t disclose your name if you don’t wish to. However, permit me to introduce myself to you. My name is Ananda.”

“Ananda! Hmmm! I know there is a resort up in the Himalayas called Ananda.”

“Well! I was apparently conceived there and so my parents named me after the place where they seemed to have had the best time of their lives.”

“Abject? Hmmm! What a curious word to use with the word happiness. They are totally opposite words, the antithesis of the other.”

“The essence of life! There can be no happiness without misery and sorrow and vice versa.”

“I can’t believe I am discussing the truths about “life” in the middle of the night,” she exclaimed her voice ringing with irony.

He laughed. It was a wholesome, complete, genuine laugh, one that came from the bottom of his diaphragm.

“When do you normally talk about life and its beautiful offerings?” he asked.

“Whenever I think life is good,” she shot back.

“Isn’t it always?”

“No! Not really!” she stated in a matter-of-fact tone. “Sometimes it sucks! Earlier you asked me why I was still continuing this conversation with you...it’s because...I am bored. I am miserable and alone and just...I just want to scream. Let me tell you about what goes on in junior colleges these days. It’s totally depressing and utterly pathetic! Like yesterday at my college....oh...no...I don’t know you....why am I even talking to you? I am going to keep this phone down...right now....do you hear me? Keep the phone down.”

“Why? We have been making such headway in getting to know each other!” His voice continued in its even tone. He revealed no emotions or feelings. He only expressed joy as if that were the only emotion he knew.

“No we haven’t!” she snapped. I have not told you anything about me. And, I won’t either. So I think you are wasting your time getting to know me.”

“Hardly. I think I know a lot more about you now than I did when I first called.”

She heard the clock chime once again and she heard only one ring.

“My God! I have been talking for over an hour with you. I don’t even know what I have been saying.”

“Sometimes saying little says everything,” he claimed in his merry tone.

“Huh! I don’t understand.”

“You will. Think back on everything you said to me. In fact, you said very little, yet I feel I know quite a bit about you.”

“I feel like we’ve been going round in circles talking about the same things or nothing at all really,” she said feeling quite pleased with her remark.

“Exactly! It’s nothing at all. Life is about everything and about nothing. So enjoy both while you can,” he noted in a philosophical tone.

She thought for a minute. Then she asked in all seriousness: “How did you get this number?”

“Truthfully, I just dialed a number and it happened to be yours.”

“Is this a nightly exercise for you?”

“I like to know people and find out about their lives.”

“That did not answer my question!” she challenged raising her voice a bit.

“No! It isn’t. I just happened to dial and you just happened to come on and I did not want to lose the opportunity to know you....”

“Well! Sorry to disappoint you but I don’t think you will EVER know anything about me.” she said her lips pursed as she defiantly shrugged her drooping shoulders.

“Hmmm!” he said without saying exactly how he felt.

“Are you not in the least bit curious about me?” he asked as he felt her shifting positions.

He waited for an answer. There was a chilly silence at the other end.

“Hello!” he said his voice cracking a tad. “Are you comfortable yet?”

“NO!” she fired back angrily.

“No....what? No, I am not comfortable yet or no I am not interested in knowing...”

Both!” she said sharply.

“Well then in that case let’s talk about you. Let’s start with your name.”

“How about we don’t talk at all?” she said harshly and banged the phone down.

She cradled the receiver in her hands knowing that he would call back. She scowled and murmured a curse under her breath and crawled out of bed to fetch some water when the phone rang again. She clicked the on button and immediately disconnected the phone. She stood transfixed to her spot, fuming. She looked at the phone receiver which had not rung for some time. She clicked the on button to make sure the phone was working and was relieved to hear the dial tone. After a full five minutes had passed, she began to wonder if he would call back. ‘Perhaps I should have got his number and harassed the daylight out of him,’ she thought defiantly. She kept staring at the phone which was still quiet. She sat there in the dark, her

impatience level rising by the moment. Her brows darkened and her eyes roamed rapidly about the room when saw Farni who was still asleep in the very same

position. “Bah! Like he thinks I have all night for this...” she cried with vehemence when the phone went ‘ring- ring’.

“What?” she asked irritably.

“Why? Why? Why...you ask? Why?” her voice boomed with outrage.

Yes. Can you tell me? I don’t understand.” he asked sounding confused yet maintaining the calm tone of his voice. “

“Well! Let’s see...you call me – a perfect stranger in the middle of the night and elicit all sorts of personal information out of me and make me feel very uncomfortable about those questions and you ask why?”

“I have not asked you anything that you did not want to already tell me.”

“Like what?”

“Like how old you are...that you don’t have a sister and you go to a college to get an education, you are fearless, your father is an important man and you also like to talk with people to socialize....”

She went silent. She felt like she was hit by a truck full of bricks. ‘Gosh! He knows way too much about me already. I HAVE to get him off the phone. Find some excuse before he finds out who I am,’ she thought with considerable alarm as she felt that creepy tinge of fear enveloping her. She blinked her eyes several times as she broke out of her reverie and in a cool, collected voice continued the conversation by posing a direct question.

“You are very social and I bet you have a charming smile.”

That softened her a bit.

Hello

“Ya...people do tell me that. Although, I do need to go to a dentist more often. Do you like dentists?” She walked over to the mirror and opened her mouth to reveal her smashing white teeth and firm gums and waited for Ananda to reply

“Mmmm.” He exclaimed ponderously. “I don’t know if I like them in general. But, the one I go to, Dr. Mody...I like him a lot. He does make me feel very comfortable and his procedures are less painful, mercifully.”

“Dr. Mody? You mean Russell Mody? My dad goes to him too. His daughter Shahnaz and I are very good friends. In fact, we went to the same school – ya....Grammar school in Abid’s. She now goes to Vanita and I go to St Fr....” she spoke excitedly before she bit her lip knowing she had led on a lot more information about her than she had liked. However, Ananda seemed to continue to talk of the Mody’s.

“Really?” You know Shahnaz? What a small world.”

“Isn’t it?” she said. “Have you seen her? She is gorgeous. She has such a great smile and her teeth are always sparkling. I suppose her dad takes care of that for her.” They both laughed. For the first time, they had both felt mirthful. “You know when we were in school, people thought we were twins. We looked pretty alike in those days, but, we look different now. She is much plumper and I have lost so much weight, all that puppy fat, all GONE! Thank the good Lord and my efforts at the gym, of course!”

There was a pause in the conversation. He could feel her becoming cold and frigid again. He was sure that the next thing out of her mouth was going to be something that was going to cut the conversation short. But, he was surprised by her amiable demeanor. In fact, it was her turn to pose a question.

“So what do you do for a living? Or are you also not going to tell me because I didn’t tell you?”

Hello

“Well! That is being assumptive. I have nothing to hide, so I will tell you. I am an entrepreneur. I sell books. I have a quaint, old bookstore at the corner of Abid’s. Mostly old classics and I also restore old works of art. I also...”

“Isn’t that boring? I mean dealing in books? There are so many things you could be selling that helps make you a quick buck?”

“Ya. But, this is what I want to do. I have a neat book store and a lot of people visit and buy the books and I make a good income. I am happy. Why don’t you visit the store sometime? I think you will be quite surprised and impressed by what I have achieved.”

“Do you even have a college degree?” she asked skeptically. Her tone of voice was laced with a touch of arrogance and sounded as though she was talking to a person who was beneath her.

He laughed. He could sense the disappointment in her voice. He stayed calm and continued to talk in his even tone.

“Yes!” he replied confidently. “I have a double masters and a Ph.d. “

“In what?” she asked stunned with his academic credentials.

“In English, Psychology and my doctorate is in Philosophy, Eastern philosophy.”

“Wow!” she replied after a slight pause. “Here I am struggling with my B.A. and you have so many degrees! Are they all displayed in your shop?”

“Bookstore!” he corrected. “No. They are somewhere in the attic, I believe.

My wife knows where they are. She normally takes care of all....”

“WIFE? WIFE! YOU ARE MARRIED?” she asked as her voice thundered with rage.

“Yes. I have a one year old daughter, Purvi.”

“I CANNOT BELIEVE IT! HOW DARE YOU?”

“I don’t understand!”

“You have the cheek...the gall to talk to me even though you have a wife and child?” she was irate, her anger just bubbling over uncontrollably. “How dare you cheat on her?”

“Cheat? I am only befriending you. I am not cheating....”

“Why did you not tell me that you were married?” she demanded.

“I do not believe that it was or is relevant to our conversation. When you picked up the phone, I sensed you were forlorn and depressed so I thought I would help you feel a bit better tonight,” he continued in an assuring tone, but, alas in vain –

Ainee was furious.

“Shut up! Shut up! Just shut up!” she yelled into the phone and continued hurling her accusations at him. “You deceived me, insulted me and have deeply offended me.”

“No! I did not!” he replied calmly. “I only want to become your friend. Do you not have friends that are married?”

“No! Not like this! You were trying to pick me up! You were trying to find more information on me so you could worm your way into my life and take me to bed. Is your wife in town?”

”No! She has gone to visit her mother with the baby.”

“HAH! SEE! You just proved my point. You are like all other men. You were trying to be all philosopher and intellectual and all the while you were trying to see if I would be more amenable to your advances. No! I will not bite and in fact I am going to put the phone down and call the phone company to trace this call and report you to the police. GOODBYE!”

“No! Wait! You have it all wrong! I don’t want you in the way you think. I was only attempting to get to know you so we could become friends and if you needed help getting over your depression or sadness, I could be there for you.”

“No Thank you! I can take care of myself and I am not interested in having deceiving friends like you. I have had enough...”

“No! Don’t put the phone down. If you do, I will still hang on all night long and not give up. Why don’t we just be open to each other and tell each other everything about ourselves so the air is clear and we can be friends.”

“I AM NOT INTERESTED!” she said and banged the phone down.

She was hopping mad! “Aarrgh!” she shrieked. She threw the phone on the floor and walked to the bathroom in a huff. She sat on the potty for several minutes literally pulling her

hair out. She cursed Ananda several times and Farni too while she was at it. She then walked to her bed and lay down staring into the darkness visibly shaken and angry. A half hour later, she slipped into deep slumber.

The following morning, she saw Farni had already awakened. She looked at the alarm clock which showed it was ten o'clock. She woke up yawning and moments later, her eyes fell on the phone that was lying on the floor. She looked at it quizzically and then recalled the events of the previous night. She remembered the last part of the conversation. Ananda had sworn he would not disconnect the line and would hold on. She looked at the phone several times, her lips pursed in annoyance. She bent forward and picked up the phone and was torn whether to switch the phone on and find out whether he was still holding on. While she was still debating it over in her head, her forefinger accidentally pushed the on button and she heard Ananda's voice saying:

“Hello?”

Eighteen Wheels and Another Mouth to Feed

Linda Leschak

Texas, USA

Larry hit the brakes hard and the trailer started to fishtail, a slow side to side motion that quickly built into a full scale jackknife. The speed of his truck and the weight of his load swung the trailer up toward the cab where he could see it coming in the driver's side mirror. Steering into the skid, he glanced at the mirror on the passenger's side checking for traffic behind him and was grateful for a clear road. The trailer started to right itself but then had a change of heart and continued its sideways crawl until it was at a ninety degree angle from the cab sliding along beside him. He heard it groan like the dying moan of a sinking ship. The tires screamed their protest as they skidded sideways along the road, their black smoke filling the air, the smell of burnt rubber choking him. There was a grating sound like metal on metal and Larry figured it must have been the corner of the trailer gouging into the back of the sleeper.

His cab was being pulled into the oncoming lane by the weight of the trailer as it listed to the side like a whale trying to beach itself. The back tires dropped off the side of the road into the sand and started dragging the whole rig with it. He saw trees rushing past on the left and felt the trailer buckle and slow as it hit one of them. But he was too heavy and too fast to be stopped by a single tree. The trailer sheered off a second one before wrapping itself cleanly around a third. It bent around the tree with an agonizing roar. The sudden change in motion twisted the rigging and flipped the cab over onto its side where it lay in a cloud of dust and smoke, still on the road but not going anywhere.

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That's the way Larry told it to us over and over again until we knew it by heart, until we felt like we were right there with him in the cab of his truck, sliding along the freeway in front of our house. It happened one early morning in June, right between the end of school and the beginning of harvest. Dad was already up, sitting over his first cup of coffee and planning out the day's work. The rest of us were still in bed and didn't see a thing. But we all heard it. And we felt it rip us out of our dreams and into the strange reality of something bad happening, something like a freight train driven through our house. By the time we piled into our clothes and ran outside, Dad was already there, up on the side of the cab and reaching a hand into the overturned truck to help the driver climb out through the passenger window. Later we'd hear Larry's story, how he'd slammed on his brakes to keep from hitting our neighbor's dog, Jasper, as it ran out onto the highway. How he hadn't noticed the small blue Buick that was coming from the opposite direction and was swallowed up by the trailer, drug through the orchard and then pinned between the tires and that third almond tree. In fact, it was a while before any of us noticed that little blue car.

Larry had been carrying palletized boxes filled with cans of hydraulic fluid. Each box held four five-gallon cans; each pallet held sixteen boxes. Some of the pallets had stayed put, anchored down by thick bands of steel, still strapped to the tattered trailer bed. But several of the pallets hadn't held their load and now boxes and cans lay sprawled across the highway fifty or so

yards in each direction. Scattered cans were crushed or ripped open spilling out thick, red oil that looked just like blood as it ran over the surface of the road and soaked into the sand around the trees. A few of the unspoiled cans were still in motion, moving east as if nothing had interrupted their trip.

“You OK?” I heard Dad ask as he helped Larry out of the truck. Course we didn’t know him as Larry yet. That was to come later.

“Yeah... yeah, I think so.” He jumped down onto the road and stood dusting himself off. “But hot damn, that was a hell of a ride! Did ya see the way she just rolled over like a whore in heat?” He didn’t seem to notice us kids standing around gawking but when he caught sight of us, his face changed a few colors and he started stammering. “Oh, man. I’m sorry, Sir,” and he looked around all sheepish like.

We all thought it was cute the way he apologized real nice to Dad for saying things we’d already heard.

“Name’s Larry, Larry Merritt, Sir.” He reached out his hand, “and I’m awful sorry about the language.”

Dad gave him a cockeyed look. “I’m Bill,” he said, finally, “Bill Carver and my sons Billy, Bobby and this is my little girl, Linda.”

We each nodded at the appropriate times and Larry said he was pleased to meet us. Then Dad said it didn’t seem so, given how he’d just plowed our orchard with his big rig.

We all watched Larry to see if he could tell Dad was joking. He was real good at it, could do it with his face stone cold. But Larry didn’t know that. He just stood staring and then his eyes sorta jumped around all wild like. I thought he looked like that jackrabbit I’d chased down and cornered against the back fence last summer. He took a slow step backward.

“C’mon now, Larry, I’m just givin’ you a hard time!” Then Dad grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down, rumbling that deep laugh he used when he knew he’d got someone.

The dust hadn’t even settled on the road yet and Dad was taking charge, “Billy, run and get eight flares out’a my service truck and light ‘em up in each direction. Bobby, start moving that traffic through the vineyard ‘long side the road.”

My brothers ran off to do his bidding while I stood waiting for my orders. I could feel the wet sand squeeze up between my toes and I looked down to see red oil flowing over my bare feet. “AAhhhh, Daddy, I’m bleeding!” I hollered. The two men looked over at me and then followed my gaze to my feet, now covered with thick, red ooze.

There was a momentary flash of panic on Larry’s face but Dad didn’t miss a beat. “Little girl, this isn’t the time; we got work to do.” He ruffled the hair on my head and walked away. But Larry just stood looking at me with an odd question on his face. ‘Gotcha again,’ I thought.

I tagged along behind while they looked over the damage and started talking cleanup plans. Larry's truck was still smoking and making sounds like an oven does when it cools off, those odd ticking noises that don't seem to fit with what's going on. Although the trailer was off the road, the cab was completely blocking the west bound lane. Bobby had started steering the traffic into the eastbound lane and diverting the oncoming traffic through the vineyard opposite our house. A few of the early morning commuters had decided to stop and see what they could do, or at least see what they could see and then talk about later. Their cars were lined up alongside the road in either direction.

Among the half dozen people who stopped to gawk, there was one guy who didn't quite mix right. He was wearing black slacks that were streaked with sand and grease and all tore up on one leg. His left shirt sleeve hung off his arm in shreds and he was wearing only one shoe. A jagged tear ran along his forehead and bled steadily into his left eye. He paced back and forth in front of the wreck, his eyes never leaving the place where the trailer had met the last tree. Other than an occasional swipe with his remaining sleeve, he seemed to not notice the blood running down his face or the debris he kept tripping over while he paced.

"Gawd damn! Gawd damn!" was all he said, over and over.

"You alright, son?" Dad put a hand on the guys shoulder, got him to look away from the wreck.

"I'm alive, aint I?" Then he pointed to a hunk of wrinkled blue metal under the second axel. We all hunkered down to take a look under the trailer where we could see the thing was a car, or used to be at least. About that time Larry lost it, staggering off into the orchard, leaning hard against one of the trees. We all watched as he puked into the sand.

"What's wrong with that boy?" This from the bloody guy who seemed to be doing better than Larry at the time. Later we talked about how he must have been in shock to stay so level-headed after being drug under the trailer and almost squashed like a gnat.

"Awe, that's just Larry's way of showing how happy he is," I said and the guy looked over at me, a crooked grin on his face. "You know, happy he didn't turn you into compost." Dad was giving me that look that meant he'd had enough. "Guess I'll go fetch that first aide kit," I suggested before he could suggest it for me. And I ran off toward the house.

Mom was coming out as I went in. She'd been changing Timmy when the wreck happened and was just now making it out front to join us. Timmy was perched on her hip, held there by Mom's right-handed death grip we all knew so well. He had his chubby legs wrapped around her narrow waist, latched on like one of those monkeys that spend the first part of its life clinging to its mother like a leach. Timmy had just learned to hold his own bottle and had it poked into his mouth, angled up to keep from sucking air. This freed up Mom's left hand for doing other things, like carrying Dad's coffee out to him. "You otta see that guy's car, Ma!" I hollered as I headed into the house after the bandages and Neosporin. "Larry just turned it into train rubble!"

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Seemed we were a whole day cleaning up. It was Dad and the boys who got it all organized while Larry made a bunch of phone calls trying to get his trucking company to pony up another rig so he could salvage whatever part of his load was still intact. While he was doing that, Dad got the boys to hook up the tractor and we all watched as he used it to upright the cab and limp it off the road to get traffic moving again. This was after he'd gotten out his Polaroid and took a bunch of pictures for the insurance company. And after the police had scribbled their report, gotten back in their black and white car and were gone.

Tony, the guy in the blue car, got hauled off to the hospital in spite of his protests. "It's my car needs help more than me," he argued as they pushed him into the back of the ambulance and drove away.

Once things got underway, it went pretty smooth. Billy fetched the wire cutters from the barn and cut loose the few pallets that were still hanging off the bed of the upturned trailer. Then we all sorted them out, some for firewood, some for stacking. The good ones got lined up against the wall of the house then we spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon throwing cans of oil. We formed a brigade; a line of men, boys and one thirteen year old girl and we threw each can down the line until it got to the person closest to the pallet. That person would stack it on the clean pallet and then swivel around to catch the next can. We kept rotating positions so each of us had a time in the middle of the line, a time at the head and a time as the stacker. The line kept moving around the truck, directing itself to where the unspoiled cans were. And it kept wading through gobs of red ooze that leaked from the punctured cans that lay strewn around, bleeding into to the sand. Later Dad would settle with Larry's insurance company over the four or five trees that sucked up enough hydraulic fluid to kill their harvest for the next few years. And of course the two trees Larry sheered off during his wild slide into the orchard. Plus the one with the blue car impaled in its bark.

The cans weighed about nine pounds each and we worked for hours, pitching each one down the line as the July sun drug itself higher and higher overhead. Finally I got tired.

"I need a break," I said and I sat down on the pallet we'd been stacking. I wiggled my bottom between a couple rows of cans and reached for the jug of water that was getting passed around.

Larry collapsed in the shade of a tree, panting and sweating like he'd run a marathon or something. He kept wiping a sleeve across his beet red face. "I was wondering when you were gonna say that. I couldn't very well let a little girl outwork me." And then he looked over at Dad. "Bill" he said all joking like, "if I wasn't already married and your girl was few years older . . ." he shook his head and grinned, "well, we just might be talking right now."

"Wouldn't be talking to me," I heard Dad answer.

It seemed he was trying to keep from looking at me but I caught it anyway. It was a look in my daddy's eyes, raw and real and shining with a pride bigger'n I'd seen either of my brothers

put there. And it was right then when I felt something inside me swell to almost bursting, just before Dad took hold of the water jug, drank deeply and then eased himself up from sitting. “Time to get back to it,” he said.

Larry got himself a new rig after that and sometimes his route would swing him by our place. He always stopped, and Mom would set an extra plate when she’d see his rig pull up out front. He’d laugh and tell us how many people he’d bragged to about the little farm girl who worked circles around him. Fact is though, it wasn’t nothing to me, just another day’s work on the farm. Farming did you like that, made you into something outside folks had a hard time understanding. It got into your blood and stayed there. No matter that I’m a few decades and a thousand miles from it now, it’s still there, bubbling up through the sand, thick and viscous and red.