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***Interconnections and Tensions Between  
Postcolonialism and Feminism  
in South Asian Women Poets:  
the case of Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Imtiaz  
Dharker***

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## PREFACE

This work attempts to examine the intersections – or the “contact zones” (Pratt [1992]2008, 8), as Mary Louise Pratt called them – of postcolonialism with a field of study that continually overlaps it, but that has been traditionally studied as if it were in isolation from it: feminism<sup>1</sup>. While the connection between postcolonial theory and feminist concerns might seem obvious, with many studies tackling from a theoretical point of view what Holst Petersen and Rutherford have called the “double colonization of women” (1986), this study intends to bring into focus the actual outcome in literature of what it means to write from the complex positionalities of postcolonial women by analysing the work of three women writers stemming from the Indian subcontinent.

The methodology followed in this work is hybrid by definition, because it makes use of both feminist and postcolonial theory, with a preference for texts and theorists at their junction. Postcolonial feminism, sometimes referred to with the term “Third World feminism”, practised by Indian theorists Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty among others, offers a valid counterpoint to both hegemonic Western feminism, and to the masculinization of some postcolonial theory (Mills 1998)<sup>2</sup>. Far from discarding postcolonial theory and Western feminism,

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1 In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt speaks of a “contact zone” with regards to the place of colonial encounters between colonizer and colonized. Pratt uses the term to indicate “an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect” ([1992]2008, 8). It needs to be specified that the feminism that I want to deal with in this work is the one produced by Western or Western-influenced theorists, rather than the much-more pragmatic one adopted independently by Indian women like Rita Banerjee or Vandana Shiva.

2 The critique is addressed for instance at Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha. Said certainly inspired “Third World” feminists to speak out, but his book *Orientalism*, not unlike

to find productive elements in both theories is essential for the postcolonial feminist project, and for every work that attempts to pay attention to what Anne McClintock calls “articulated categories”, which include markers like gender, race, class, sexuality and so on (1995, 5)<sup>3</sup>. Other reference points in my methodology are black feminism and transnational feminism. The former developed mainly in the United States and its core argument that sexism and racism are intrinsically bound together is considerably close to postcolonial feminists' concerns. Transnational feminism of the kind practised by Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan and Ella Shohat will also come

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Fanon's work, has been considered guilty of representing a “potentially unified, and paradigmatically male, colonial subject” (Lewis 2004, 3). See Pathak, Sengupta and Purkayastha 1991; Lewis 2004; Mani and Frankenberg 1985; Miller 1990. Frantz Fanon did some work on women, for example in the context of Algerian nationalism, but, according to McClintock (1995), he failed to make of his insights a more specific theory of gender. Furthermore, he emphasized dichotomies such as colonizer/colonized, leaving women in an unclear position. See Fuss 1995; Mowitt 1992; McClintock 1995. Finally, Homi Bhabha's theories have been sometimes considered inapplicable for women. Bhabha's mimicry, for example, seems to essentialize race, eliding gender and class in the process (McClintock 1995; Busia 1989-90, 97-9). Moreover, the gender divide cuts across the colonizer/colonized dichotomy, making the subversive modes of “mimicry” difficult, if not impossible, to practice for women (Weedon 2007). In spite of that, some feminists such as Judith Butler have found in Bhabha an inspiration to form ideas of gender as masquerade.

- 3 At the same time, one needs to pay attention to the dangers of writing what Susan Gubar defines “depressingly knee-jerk essays rejecting out-of-hand the speculations of a given literary or theoretical work simply because it neglects to discuss x (fill in the blank – bisexual Anglo-Pakistani mothers; the heterosexual, working-class Jew-for-Jesus community of Nashville, and so forth). Too often, each text becomes grist for a mill that proves the same intellectually vapid – though politically appalling – point that racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia reign supreme” (1998, 890-1). Spivak, in her “Translator's Preface” to *Imaginary Maps*, a collection of stories by Mahasweta Devi, calls the ethical encounter with the singularity of the subaltern an “experience of the impossible” (1995, xxv), because it is constantly at risk of falling prey to some of the hegemonies it is trying to dismantle.

into the picture. Finally, lesbian and black lesbian feminism, with its challenge of the heteronormativity of most feminist and anti-racist discourse, will also be useful, thanks to the path-breaking work of intellectuals and poets such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. It is this complex and heterogeneous theoretical framework that will be presented in the first section of this work. Coupled with an attention to the evolution of feminist and postcolonial theory, the first section will explain that a focus on the Indian subcontinent offers the possibility of specificity, while at the same time demonstrating the unequivocal heterogeneity and complexity of discussing women writers, even within the same region of the world and the same time frame. This happens also because the Indian subcontinent is in itself a heterogeneous “contact zone”. As a matter of fact, the authors chosen come from different backgrounds and different parts of the Indian subcontinent, they were raised within different religions, speak different languages, have had divergent stories of migration, were influenced by different philosophies and authors, currently live in different parts of the world, and have different sexual orientations. This results in substantial differences of style, influences, forms employed and political stances. This work is, in other words, an attempt to focus on the distinction between “Woman” and “women”: the former, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty asserts, “a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.)” (1991, 53), while the latter constituting the real historical and cultural-specific subjects<sup>4</sup>. Far from theorizing women as an already-constituted oppressed category, a trap into which Mohanty warns us not to fall, this work tries to pay attention to specificity, difference and

4 See also de Laurentis (1984), acknowledged by Mohanty in a note to her influential article “Under Western Eyes” as an inspiration for this concept (Mohanty 1991, 75n). The essay quoted here, the highly influential “Under Western Eyes”, was published in different versions, the first appearing in *boundary 2* in 1984. In my work the references are from the version published in Mohanty, Russo and Torres (1991).

complexity by avoiding to locate women as powerless victims of patriarchy, and by trying instead to cautiously move away from binary oppositions of marginality/centrality, oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/colonized and so on.

While I was researching Indian women writers and trying to decide which ones to study and analyse for my exploration of postcolonialism and feminism in South Asian women's writing, I settled on three poets, and therefore the choice to work on poetry was initially not deliberate. Yet, while reflecting on the reasons that made me choose poetry over fiction, I realized that the intrinsic ambiguity and the flexibility of poetical language is particularly well-suited to describe the often unexpressed conflicts of writing from fragmented and shifting positionalities.

It can be argued that my study does not analyse the postcolonial woman question, but the questions asked by postcolonial – South Asian, in this case – women poets, as Adrienne Rich writes in an essay included in *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1986, 216), establishing a practice that she considers a successful way to talk about women and feminism<sup>5</sup>. This study does not intend to be an exhaustive analysis of the relationship between postcolonialism and feminism in Indian writing in English, as this would be too large a task, even for a doctoral thesis. Many other women writers would have been interesting to explore, among them Anita Desai, Jean Arasanayagam, Shashi Deshpande, Sara Suleri, not to mention Mahasweta Devi among those who do not write in English. Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Imtiaz Dharker explore the connections between postcolonialism and feminism in rich ways. Through the analysis of their work I intend to explore the complexities of the shifting subject positions of postcolonial women poets stemming from the Indian subcontinent, but without aiming at definite answers and without pretending that

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5 I use the adjective “South Asian” – or the expression “the Indian subcontinent” – whenever possible, seen that one of the poets I analyse was born in Pakistan, married an Indian man, and currently lives for six months a year in Bombay.



these are the positions of all South Asian women writers.

Furthermore, I would like to make clear that I do not intend to impose the label of “feminist writer”, “lesbian writer”, “postcolonial writer”, or any combination of those, on any of the authors I analyse. I have no doubts that feminism, as well as the postcolonial condition they all share, and subsequently the postcolonial theory they may have read, not to mention lesbianism in the case of Suniti Namjoshi, have all had an impact on their lives and on their writing. To “give a tag”, or a designation, to a writer is however a different thing. The writers analysed in this work all have their own opinions on the matter, and accept or deny the terminology when applied to themselves. The different stances on these topics will become evident in the course of my study. For the moment, it is safer to say that the three writers analysed advocate feminism and are part of the postcolonial world.

A last reflection needs to be made before starting with the methodological framework. While I was writing this work, I sometimes asked myself the following question: what to make of a white woman studying South Asian women writers, and reading the corpus of women writers of colour?<sup>6</sup> Here the words of Gloria Anzaldúa,

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6 In the United States, the expression “people of color” is currently preferred when it is necessary to group together non-white people on the basis of common experiences of discrimination or marginalization. It ought not to be confused with the term “coloured people”, which is instead considered derogatory. Instinctively, the term “people of colour” would seem to suggest a normativity of the white “colour” over all other “colours”, thus it is not devoid of problems of applicability. Unlike the term “non-white people”, which describes what one is not rather than what one is, however, the term “people of colour” allows a strategic alliance – similar to Spivak’s “strategic essentialism” (1987, 205) – between otherwise heterogeneous groups of people. Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, in order to defend it, write that it is “a political constituency, not a biological, or even sociological one. . . . What seems to constitute ‘women of color’ or ‘third world women’ as a viable oppositional alliance is a *common context of struggle* rather than color or racial identifications” (1991, 7). This terminology has been however criticized for being America-centric. Mohanty advises to always historicize it and situate it, thus avoiding

a critic and influential writer who straddled several kinds of differences and who offered herself as a bridge between cultures, can be helpful. In *Borderlands / La Frontera* she writes: “I think we need to allow whites to be our allies. . . . They will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead” (1999, 107). In other words, a reflection on the problematic position of women writers of colour in a world that aspires to be post-national, post-feminist, and post-racial can help us re-centre our perceptions and ideas about global and local phenomena, both inside and outside the academic world. A better awareness of the multiple, interlocked, and fluid positionalities that people the literary text can only render our understanding of cultural, social and political phenomena more complex and nuanced. The challenge in this case is to overcome what Susan Gubar has aptly called the “impossible, inhibiting dream of innocent rectitude in numerous white scholars” (1998, 891), which often forces white feminists to remain silent on racial matters for fear of being accused of veiled racism, or worse – observes Gubar – causes them to become mere ventriloquists, recurring only to those critics who, by virtue of their race, are considered entitled to speak about such matters. After all, to those white women writers who claimed they could not write about or teach black women's writing

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essentialisation. In Britain there is a similar use of the term “blackness”. See Brah 1996, 97. In *Charting the Journey*, an anthology of writings by a heterogeneous group of women published in 1988, the editors write: “this book is about an idea. An idea of 'Blackness' in contemporary Britain. . . . contradictory in its conceptualization because its linguistic expression is defined in terms of colour, yet it is an idea transcendent of colour. Contradictory in its material movements because the unity of action, conscious or otherwise, of Asians, Latin Americans and Arabs, Caribbeans and Africans, gives political expression to a common 'colour', even as the State-created fissures of ethnicity threaten to engulf and overwhelm us in islands of cultural exclusivity” (S. Grewal *et al.* 1988, 1). See also note 17 on “third world women”, which is a term often used interchangeably with “women of colour”. A note on the spelling of “women of colour”: while the American spelling is “color”, my work uses British spelling throughout, thus the spelling in the present work will be “colour”.

because their experience was so different from that of a white woman, Audre Lorde asked for how long had they been teaching Plato, Shakespeare or Proust (1993, 43-4).

After a first theoretical and methodological chapter, the work will unfold in three sections, one for each author. Starting with Meena Alexander, after a brief biographical introduction, the author is presented through a brief chapter focusing on style. The discussion of the author's work spans four chapters: the first, entitled “‘Alphabets of Flesh’: Language, Body and Violence” calls back to the eponymous poem, and investigates how Alexander's poetry deals with the relationship between memory, the body and its involvement in space, scrutinizing also some haunting images connected to violence, such as the stone-eating girl and the barbed wire. Another chapter, called “Palimpsests of Place”, is a discussion on poetry and place in Alexander's works. Here dislocation and its poetics plays a pivotal role, together with the reflections on both transnational poets and on more “canonical” poets bound to one specific place. “A 'Back Against the Wall Aesthetic': Double Binds and Conflicts”, is concerned with the ways in which Alexander, in both poems and essays, deals with tensions in a world split between discourses on tradition and modernity which inevitably involve women. The last chapter dedicated to Meena Alexander, called “‘Brown Skin, What Mask?': Theoretical Reflections” examines poems strongly connected to postcolonial and feminist theory for a demonstration of how poetry can also serve *as* theory.

The second section, presenting the work of Suniti Namjoshi, mirrors the first, with a short biographical presentation of the author, and a short chapter introducing the author. This is followed by four chapters analysing and commenting clusters of poems, fables or longer fiction. A first chapter examines Namjoshi's early poetry, showing her path from timid verse writing that tries to understand how to break conventions to a real lesbian feminist consciousness. The next chapter, entitled “Blue Donkeys and One-eyed Monkeys: Animals and the Politics of Difference”, will focus

on how animals are used by the author to speak about difference. Another chapter is instead dedicated to Namjoshi's feminist revisionist mythmaking, of the kind also practised by Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood or Christa Wolf, but with its own peculiarities and idiosyncrasies. Finally, the last chapter devoted to Namjoshi analyses two sequences of poems: “Snapshots of Caliban” and “Sycorax”, which reinscribe Shakespeare's *Tempest*, allowing space for fluid – but also problematic – positionalities.

A last section discusses the work of Imtiaz Dharker. Unlike Alexander and Namjoshi, Dharker writes poetry only, but she is also a documentarist and a visual artist. A first chapter looks at the connections between body, religion and nation in her work, while another chapter examines the tropes of layers, lines, and fingerprints in her poems, without forgetting the evolution of her poetry from somewhat eerie articulations of strangeness, to an opening to more familiar landscapes. A last chapter on Imtiaz Dharker is devoted to poems that display an attention for movement and transition, explaining why it is so important for Dharker's poetics.

## 1. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

### 1.1 Why Women Writers?

*“Voler, c’est le geste de la femme. Voler dans la langue, la faire voler” – Hélène Cixous*

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is undoubtedly one of the benchmarks of early feminist thought: it anticipated many topics that would be later developed by both first-wave and second-wave feminists. In the last chapter of her book, the narrator is musing on the separate culture of women and on the repercussions on the way they write, when she sees from her window a young man and a girl meeting at the corner of a road and getting a taxi cab together<sup>7</sup>. Suddenly, the genius of Virginia Woolf grasps what might perhaps be compared to the liminal, interstitial space of women in culture, a sort of feminist version of Homi Bhabha's theory of the third space. Woolf cleverly writes:

if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives. ([1929]1974, 146)

The “splitting off of consciousness” that Woolf refers to is the awareness that women feel part of a specific culture, say English culture or Indian culture, however essentialistic this notion may be, and yet there are moments when their own thoughts

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<sup>7</sup> Woolf's idea of a man and a woman meeting at the corner of the road and taking a taxi together is curiously reminiscent of Carol Boyce Davies's expression “going a piece of the way with them”, used in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (but originally coined by Zora Neale Hurston), which refers to the relationship between white people and black people.

and values might feel distant from it. Woolf felt that women do not have a physical place where you can walk and feel immersed into your own artistic, cultural or scientific achievements. Women do not have a Whitehall, Woolf seems to tell us. Nonetheless, to cut off the ties with the “old world” of masculine culture seemed to Virginia Woolf ludicrous and absurd. This is why, as Elaine Showalter argued in her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, written fifty years after Woolf’s text but insisting on the same topics, “women writers are not . . . *inside* and *outside* of the male tradition; they are inside two traditions simultaneously” (1981, 202, italics in the text).

Historically, the access to knowledge and literature has been denied to women in many parts of the world. Even though anthropology teaches us that matriarchal societies do exist, or existed, in several regions of the world, including parts of India, patriarchy has been the predominant framework in most societies. In her groundbreaking text *Woman, Native, Other*, Vietnamese-born critic and film maker Trinh T. Minh-ha states that “learned women have always been described in terms one might use in describing a thief. Being able to read and write, a learned woman robs a man of his creativity, his activity, his culture, his language” (1989, 19)<sup>8</sup>. Trinh calls this process “she who steals language” (ibid., 15). Trinh also speaks of “woman in exile with herself” (ibid., 20), somebody who steals a language that will always be the

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8 Trinh’s work is not without faults. Sara Suleri, in her essay “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition”, sharply criticizes her for her somehow monolithic understanding of the “Third-World woman”, for her expansive use of the concept of postcolonialism, and for her recurrence to personal experiences. Trinh is nonetheless self-critical, asking first of all to herself and then to other women writers: “How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind? Without indulging in a marketable romanticism or a naïve whining about your conditions? . . . Between the twin chasms of navel-gazing and navel-erasing, the ground is narrow and slippery. None of us can proud ourselves on being sure-footed there” (1989, 28). Reversing a famous slogan, Aida Hurtado maintains that in the case of women of colour “the public is *personally* political” (1989, 849, italics in the text).

Other's language. This perception of stealing someone else's tool is not uncommon: many women writers have come to the same conclusions, while reflecting on the act of writing. Among them Hélène Cixous, who in “Le Rire de la Méduse” argues: “*Voler, c'est le geste de la femme. Voler dans la langue, la faire voler. Du vol, nous avons toutes appris l'art aux maintes techniques, depuis des siècles que nous n'avons accès au savoir qu'en volant*” (1975, 49, italics in the text)<sup>9</sup>. Audre Lorde evokes this dilemma in her essay “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House”: how is it possible to build something new while the only tools we have at hand are the ones the theories we want to dismantle were built with? It is a question that is destined to be without an answer, and indeed question marks will be returning rather often in my analysis.

In an essay called “On Being a 'Woman Writer': Paradoxes and Dilemmas”, Margaret Atwood speaks of what she has come to think of as the Lady Painter Syndrome. The great Canadian writer recalls a conversation with a male painter who said that if a female painter was good you called her simply a painter, but if she was bad you called her a lady painter. Atwood clarifies by pointing out that “this is a pattern in which good equals male, and bad equals female” ([1982]1984, 197). On the concept that writing has been for many centuries men's prerogative, and that it is sometimes still perceived as inherently masculine, so much that V.S. Naipaul could recently claim that no woman writer can be his equal, several feminists have written

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9 “To steal/fly is woman's gesture, to steal into language to make it fly. We have all learned flight/theft, the art with many techniques, for all the centuries we have only had access to having by stealing/flying” (Cixous 1986, 96). This is the translation by Betsy Wing of the identical sentence included by Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman*, rather than the version proposed by Keith and Paula Cohen for the English translation of “Le Rire de la Méduse”. Wing's version is preferable because it avoids explaining with a note the pun between the two meanings of the verb *voler* (“to steal” and “to fly”), which in French is very effective and immediate.

and debated<sup>10</sup>. Balancing metaphors of “giving birth” and of “literary paternity” as the ultimate creative writing effort, the almost humorous question asked by Gilbert and Gubar right at the beginning of *The Madwoman in the Attic* – “is pen a metaphorical penis?” (2000, 3) – is a perfect example of a disruption and “vandalization” of language, in order to break that Other's language, to bend it for one's own purposes.

The term “women's writing” can be nonetheless controversial. Categorizing literature on the basis of gender can be considered a form of ghettoisation. If there were no discrimination, we would speak of “men's writing” and “women's writing”. It is counterproductive to look at the difference per se in women's writing compared to men's writing, because women are a heterogeneous group, a conundrum of complex intertwined categories such as class, race, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political stances and so on. Yet Elaine Showalter reminds us that

a few years ago feminist critics thought we were on a pilgrimage to the promised land in which gender would lose its power, in which all texts would be sexless and equal, like angels. . . The land promised to us is not the serenely undifferentiated universality of texts but the tumultuous and intriguing wilderness of difference itself. (1981, 205)

It is impossible to deny that differences of class, race, nationality or sexual orientation are as important as gender in defining, and thus theorizing about, differences and similarities among writers. Nonetheless, there is a thread, Showalter thinks, a “collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women

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10 In an interview with the Royal Geographic Society, Nobel Prize laureate V.S. Naipaul provocatively asserted that no woman writer could ever be his equal, claiming that he is in fact capable of recognizing a work of literature written by a woman within the first couple of paragraphs. Women's view of the world, according to Naipaul, is sentimental, and bears the signs of not being the master of one's own house, which pays its toll in the way they write (Fallon 2011, n. pag.).



writers to each other over time and space” (ibid., 197). Thus, if on one hand women's writing seems to be a rather indefinite category, whose boundaries and commonalities are hard to determine, on the other hand a common thread connects women *across*, rather than *in spite of* difference. As Mohanty posits, women's “common differences” (2003, 503) form the basis for female solidarity across cultures.

## 1.2 Why women writers of colour?

*“but being alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical  
dilemma  
i haven’t conquered yet” – Ntozake Shange*

Historically, sexism and racism have been seen as two separated entities. Virginia Woolf wrote – in that same essay that foregrounded many ideas about women's culture and their aspirations to independence and literary worth – a sentence that is a punch in the face for all black women who read it: “it is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her” (1929 [1974], 76). Woolf acknowledged that there is a connection between racism and sexism, seeing – perhaps before many others – that they are both forms of discrimination. She wrongly assumed nonetheless that colonialism is primarily a masculine instinct, because it recurs to metaphors of penetration, ownership, and the virginity of the land, concepts familiar to Victorian explorers and their rhetoric<sup>11</sup>. It is true, as Marilyn French states, that “if we transpose the descriptions of colonized and colonizer to women and men, they fit at almost every point” (1985, 130), but being subordinated and sometimes discriminated about does not avoid being blind to other kinds of discriminations. In this controversial

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<sup>11</sup> While it is true that sometimes English women were passively used as justifications for imperial purposes – for example their supposed vulnerability being exploited in order to justify the harsh repressions following the Indian Great Mutiny of 1857 (Childs and Williams 1997) – women were, if not involved directly in explorations and even less so in the ruling of the conquered lands, sometimes complicit with imperialism. The writings of female explorers, such as Mary Kingsley, or of Indian *memsahibs* certainly contributed to form certain representations and ideas about the people subjected to British rule. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that women also showed some examples of resistance to British imperialism. Recent scholarship has tried to analyse the complexity of their positions (Mills 1991; N. Chaudhuri and Strobel 1992; Jayawardena 1995).

sentence, Woolf unconsciously denies womanhood to black women<sup>12</sup>. As African American feminist critic bell hooks would say, retrieving a sentence uttered by former slave and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth, “Aint' I a woman?”<sup>13</sup>.

For postcolonial or “Third World” feminists, feminism must also take into account issues of race, class, nation and sexuality, because women's consciousness of themselves also includes these variables (Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991, 12). Postcolonial feminists have criticized those second-wave feminists who, influenced by philosophies of liberal humanism, attempted to group together all female experiences, resorting to assumptions of a “global sisterhood” that does not take into account differences among women (Spivak 1981; Mohanty 1991)<sup>14</sup>. Even when they included “Third World” women in their studies, European and North American feminists were often keeping their Western parameters and assumptions intact, asking self-centred questions about their own identity as Westerners, therefore using “Third World” women passively as a mirror to look at themselves from a different

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12 For a discussion of this sentence see Eagleton (1986, 42-3). Similarly, Woolf left working-class women out of the picture, writing that “genius of [Shakespeare's] sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working class” ([1929]1974, 73-4). I concur that to acknowledge this is important, but also that to dismiss Virginia Woolf, and all those feminists whose assumptions of inclusiveness unconsciously left out some women, is unfair and counterproductive. See also note 3.

13 Sojourner Truth was reported to have uttered that famous sentence, later used by bell hooks as the title of one of her most famous collections of essays, during her speech at Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851. A former slave and an abolitionist, Sojourner Truth was protesting against the white women who dominated the women's rights movement, and who denied her those same rights they were asking for themselves. Born into slavery, she escaped with her infant daughter, and later won a case against her former master, the first black woman to achieve this.

14 For an example of the construction of global sisterhood by Western feminists see Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, criticized by Mohanty in “Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience”.

perspective<sup>15</sup>. In particular, in the 1980s Gayatri Spivak criticized Julia Kristeva's book *About Chinese Women* in her article “French Feminism in an International Frame”, while Chandra Talpade Mohanty in “Under Western Eyes” analysed the efforts of several books, in a series on “Third World” women published by Zed Books, and exposed the Eurocentrism and the essentializing attitudes of several of them<sup>16</sup>. For both theorists the answer is not to forbid Western women from studying and writing about “Third World” women, since both Mohanty and Spivak are themselves located in the First World as academics, but to urge for more attention to the cultural, political or historical specificity of women's issues. Elaine Showalter's previously mentioned argument that women are inside two traditions simultaneously can therefore be reconsidered at the light of Mohanty and Spivak's work: women may be in fact inside more than two traditions simultaneously, as an awareness of multiple, flexible identities can teach us.

According to Mohanty, the definition of “Third World Woman” is useful so long as it is not intended simply as following:

sexually constrained, . . . ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious,

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15 In her influential and often quoted essay “French Feminism in an International Frame”, as an example of challenge to Western parameters performed by a “Third World” woman writer Gayatri Spivak quotes Mahasweta Devi's short story “Breast-Giver”. According to her interpretation, Devi's story of an Indian wet-nurse whose body appears exploited because of her consuming work challenges the primarily-Western assumption that reproduction, childbirth and actions associated to it, such as breast-giving, are necessarily unwaged domestic labour.

16 In feminist and anti-racist theory, essentialism has been seen negatively since the 1980s, because it assigns fixed properties to categories like gender or race, basing its assumptions on biological explanations. Subsequently, feminists like Judith Butler and literary critics like Henry Louis Gates have developed theories that recognize gender, sexuality or even race as social constructs, rather than considering them as simply based on biology, thus allowing for the formulation of more flexible positionalities (Morton 2003, 73).

domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc. This . . . is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (Mohanty 1991, 56)<sup>17</sup>

What postcolonial feminists give prominence to is the urgency to avoid formulations

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17 Trinh asserts that the term “Third World”, and therefore also “Third World Woman”, can have positive connotations, as a “subversive, 'non-aligned' force” (1989, 97). She explains that the term is often rejected not for its hierarchical implications, but because it presents a threat to the Western world. “Third World” countries are a heterogeneous group of nations, somehow bundled together by the West. Terms like “Third World” are categories of convenience. However, even though concepts of a First and Second world are crumbling, the term “Third World” evokes a refusal of binary oppositions, and calls to mind another fundamental concept of postcolonialism: the Third Space theorized by Homi Bhabha. The term “Third World”, born during the Cold War to define those countries that were not aligned with either capitalism or communism, is hardly applicable to the contemporary world, where not only the political map has become more complex and nuanced, but there are pockets of poverty in the developed world, as well as areas of outstanding innovation and general wealth in developing countries. Mohanty, Russo and Torres defend the use of the term, stating “while the term *third world* is a much maligned and contested one, we use it deliberately, preferring it to *postcolonial* or *developing countries*. *Third world* refers to the colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries . . . whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process, and to black, Asian, Latino, and indigenous people in North America, Europe, and Australia” (1991, ix, italics in the text). The editors of the text encourage the use of the term “third world” (which they write without capital letters) as “a form of self-empowerment” (ibid., x). It needs to be stressed that these two texts (Trinh’s *Woman, Native, Other*, and Mohanty, Russo and Torres’ *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*) were written in 1989 and 1991 respectively, in a period of great political changes, but of a still strong influence of the Cold War opposition between capitalism and communism. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* does however acknowledge that the category is extremely heterogeneous, but also recognizes that it can be useful for political purposes. In her revision of “Under Western Eyes”, published in 2003, Mohanty prefers the term “Two-Thirds World”, and has other suggestions, such as “North/South”, or

of a “universality” of gendered oppression, shifting the focus from the sexual differences between men and women to cultural differences between women, located along different axes of geography, society or sexuality. As Audre Lorde has put it, “we came to realize that our place was the real house of difference, rather than the security of any one particular difference” (1993, 226). The hope that the Other be heard without covering his/her voice, even though this might reveal to be an impossible task, comes as a consequence of specificity. Intercultural alliances are possible and advisable, as Spivak's theory of “strategic essentialism” (1987, 205) proves, but those attempts must also avoid generalizations, and be used for political purposes only. In other words, there is in postcolonial feminism a tendency to allow strategic alliances on one hand, and a propensity on the other hand to maintain a certain restraint and scepticism about the monolithic idea of a “Third World”/postcolonial woman, which constitutes what Spivak calls a “catachresis”, the awareness that these “masterwords . . . have no literal referents” (Spivak in Spivak and Harasym 1990, 104).

A last consideration on textual analysis in both postcolonial and feminist literary criticism is needed here. Harold Bloom, in his reactionary text *The Western Canon*, complains that contemporary academia often excludes aesthetic criteria “in the name of social harmony and the remedying of historical injustice” (1995, 7). He claims that the writers who are being taught nowadays are not the best writers who happen to be women or African, but merely some “who offer little but the resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity” (ibidem). He calls this attitude the School of Resentment. It is certainly true that text analysis in postcolonial and feminist studies always needs to tackle the aesthetic value of the

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“Western/non-Western”, nonetheless emphasizing how “we are still working with a very imprecise and inadequate analytical language” (2003, 506).

text, and go beyond its mere political or social value<sup>18</sup>. To judge writers with a western, canonical, patriarchal paradigm is nevertheless a form of “epistemic violence”, using an expression made famous by Gayatri Spivak. Aesthetic criteria differ, because literary traditions differ around the world and across different axes. What may be considered relevant by a lesbian writer located in Vietnam could be ignored, misunderstood or under-appreciated by somebody else, and vice versa. A recent example comes from a diatribe over the unresolved problem of the canon. Quite recently, prominent African American poet Rita Dove was forced to defend her choices in editing an anthology of twentieth-century American poetry from the accusation, formulated by a renowned literary critic, of favouring lesser-known black poets whose vocabulary was described as “restricted”, using representative rather than aesthetic criteria (Vendler 2011, n. pag.). Dove answered with an article, published in *The New York Review of Books*, arguing that Vendler's use of the term “restricted vocabulary” to describe a deliberate poetic choice by some non-white poets hides a blatant racism (Dove 2011, n. pag.).

This leads to what cultural critic Kobena Mercer calls the “burden of representation” (1994, 233) of marginalized communities, in which they are expected to speak for and represent their people. What needs to be stressed for the purpose of this work is that the burden of representation of black women writers is manifold. The problem is, as Trinh T. Minh-ha considers, a triple bind, a dilemma that the writer will never find an answer to<sup>19</sup>. She writes:

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18 See Seamus Heaney's essay “The Redress of Poetry” for a discussion of the relationship between poetry's “immediate practical ineffectiveness” (1995, 4), and its capacity to “disobey the force of gravity” (ibidem), which is what Simone Weil called “to add weight to the lighter scale” (qtd. in Heaney 1995, 3) of our unbalanced society.

19 The double bind is a concept initially developed in the 1950s by Gregory Bateson and his colleagues as a way to explain schizophrenia. It has revealed useful in many fields of study, such as psychology, anthropology and even cybernetics, but it is nowadays considered as a valuable way to

Neither black/red/yellow nor woman but poet or writer. For many of us, the question of priorities remains a crucial issue. Being merely "a writer" without doubt ensures one a status of far greater weight than being "a woman of color who writes" ever does. Imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievements of non-mainstream women writers. She who "happens to be" a (non-white) Third World member, a woman, and a writer is bound to go through the ordeal of exposing her work to the abuse of praises and criticisms that either ignore, dispense with, or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes. (1989, 6)

Trinh goes on:

Yet the time has passed when she can confidently identify herself with a profession or artistic vocation without questioning and relating it to her color-woman condition. [...] On the one hand, no matter what position she decides to take, she will sooner or later find herself driven into situations where she is made to feel she must choose from among three conflicting identities. Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first? Where does she place her loyalties? (ibidem)

The impossibility to find a hierarchy between different positionalities, and the consciousness that one's race and one's gender are inextricably linked, that they characterize so much of one's writing in both conscious and unconscious ways forms the core of Trinh's arguments.

Yet, the colour-woman duality is only the most obvious of dilemmas black/"Third World" women writers must tackle. Other marks of difference may also

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explain the complexities of communication. A double bind is a situation in which a victim receives two or more conflicting messages where one negates the other, leading to a distressing dilemma and to the inability to solve the conflict. Unlike simple no-win situations, double binds involve simple demands as well as higher and more abstract systems.



be present, such as class, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and so on. Black/postcolonial/“Third World” lesbian writers such as Suniti Namjoshi, Gloria Anzaldúa or Audre Lorde inquire about the junctures of an androcentric, heterosexist, and Eurocentric world that influences literature to the point that their own writing is sometimes fraught with the anxiety of feeling alien to everybody<sup>20</sup>. For them writing becomes a challenge, almost a pioneering experience, as there are no established conventions for black lesbian writers.

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20 As Linda Garber explains in the introduction to her work on the lesbian-feminist roots of queer theory, lesbian feminist criticism has been “taken over” and ridiculed by queer theory, the latter labelling lesbian feminism essentialist, a word that Garber defines as “an academic code word for unsophisticated if not stupid” (2001, 1). Garber finds the diatribe unproductive, and proposes the term “identity poetics” to take into account fluid positionalities.

### 1.3 Why transnational women writers?

*“Wherever I hang me knickers – that’s my home” – Grace Nichols*

The epigraph above is a verse by Guyanese poet Grace Nichols, who is herself a transnational writer, having lived in England for more than thirty years and conjuring up both English and Guyanese cultures and landscapes in her poetry. The verse epitomizes much of what I want to express in this chapter. Grace Nichols does not simply seem to state that she feels at home everywhere in the world, but rather that home is for her the place where she is in one precise moment of her life. Thus, the poet opens herself to a process of identity creation that is necessarily precarious, hanging from that same string from which her knickers are. The opposition between “*me knickers*” and “*my home*” (emphasis mine), the former a non-standard form that calls back to the poet's origins in the Caribbean, while the second perhaps representing her present location in England, is a form of code-switching characteristic of postcolonial poetry and particularly of Caribbean poetry, where the creolization of language boldly enters the text<sup>21</sup>. This is not everything this epigraph suggests, however. The knickers referenced by Nichols are a feminine garment: Grace Nichols seems to imply that her perception of home is also intrinsically linked to her identity as a woman. Identity, for Grace Nichols, is also the experience of being a woman.

Looking for the word “dislocation” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one can read:

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21 The codeswitching practised by Grace Nichols in this verse could also more simply represent the multifarious language systems of her native Caribbean, where standard and non-standard forms of English are used, thus emphasizing how she feels “at home” in both variations.

Dislocation: [mass noun] disturbance from a proper, original, or usual place or state: *social dislocation and uncertainty do not necessarily make people turn to God* / [count noun] *massive dislocations accompany the rise of a new political force.*

■ injury or disability caused when the normal position of a joint or other part of the body is disturbed: *congenital dislocation of the hip* / [count noun] *dealing with fractures and dislocations.* ■ [count noun] Crystallography a displacement of part of a crystal lattice structure.

A dislocation therefore has several bad connotations: it involves being in a place which is not one's natural. The word calls to mind injuries, disabilities and, in general, a sense of being uncomfortable in a certain place. It is in this sense that dislocation is “fraught with tensions; it has the potential to lock the subject away in isolation and despair as well as the potential for critical innovation and particular strengths” (Kaplan 1987, 187). The physical body is not disentangled from questions of belonging and dislocation, therefore the female body becomes a crucial theme in the negotiation of complex identities.

Dislocated and transnational people move between cultures, languages and structures of power, just like women, forced as they are to read and write in the interstices of masculinity, always mediating between the dominant language and their own experiences of marginalization (Kaplan 1987). One could argue that the clashing of tectonic plates, the vase fragments of Derek Walcott's Nobel Lecture, is more intense because of the clashing of patriarchal society and of its yoke on women<sup>22</sup>. What needs to be done is a re-articulation of difference by the part of women trapped in the postcolonial conundrum. What better solution for dislocated women than re-articulation? To articulate means also “to have joints or joined

<sup>22</sup> In his Nobel Lecture, Derek Walcott explained his Caribbean identity with the metaphor of a broken vase, whose fragments are carefully recomposed in order to give a sense to the puzzles of dislocation and history. Poetry, according to Walcott, is built with the same painful process, its fragments being slowly reassembled bit by bit by glue.

segments”, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Rather than relocating, thus replacing their poetics in another tradition, by re-articulating their difference, women are free to place their differences across different axes, for example not outside patriarchy but in the interstitial spaces (Bhabha 1994). In other words, the paradigm is to re-articulate, rather than reconstruct, what has been lost due to colonization, slavery and epistemic violence.

A strategy possible for women writers who are conscious that in order to move in the interstices they need to “[stretch] the language somewhat out of its major shape” (Kaplan 1987, 190) is the following:

[...] your authentic space does not have words. [...] But perhaps – and here was the breakthrough – perhaps our job was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to find words for our space-lessness. [...] Instead of pushing against the grain of an external, uncharged language, perhaps we should finally come to writing *with* that grain. (Lee 163; qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989, 142-143)

This quotation does not come from a feminist writer, but from a white Canadian male poet, Dennis Lee. It is in fact quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's fundamental postcolonial text *The Empire Writes Back*, which does not deal with gender issues specifically<sup>23</sup>. This quotation makes clear that postcolonial/dislocated people and women – two categories that can easily overlap – can make use of similar approaches.

Yet, the re-articulation to be taken on by dislocated women is complicated by gendered power structures. For Chandra Talpade Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander (1997), hailing from India and Trinidad and Tobago respectively, in the situation of women of colour coming from other countries than the USA, the urgency to create an

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<sup>23</sup> The book Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin quote from is *Body Music*, first published in 1972, where Dennis Lee muses on the postcolonial condition.

alliance with, or a separation from, black feminists within the USA causes a constant anxiety. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, who are considered the founders of transnational feminism, root for a transnational practice, as opposed to an international one, that allows “multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions rather than to construct a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender” (1994, 17).

#### 1.4 Why South Asian women writers?

*“What happened to the elephant / the one whose head Shiva’s stole /  
to bring his son Ganesh / back to life?” - Sujata Bhatt*

Dozens of studies on South Asian women writers have recently appeared, especially on contemporary women who write exclusively in English. As Nigerian anthropologist Ifi Amadiume asked about African women in her book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society* (1987), why has so much interest on this issue arisen after decades of indifference? In other words, what is so special about South Asian women writers that needs to be articulated and studied in dozens of books? In the years straddling the 1970s and 1980s, when bell hooks decided to write *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, people simply laughed at her, questioning the assumption that something of importance needed to be studied about African American women (qtd. in hooks 2007, n. pag.). With the same twisted compliance, when, roughly during the same period, Grace Nichols tried to publish *i is a long memoried woman*, which is a collection of poems on the female experience of slavery, the first responses were that Kamau Brathwaite, the great Barbadian poet, had done that already, when in fact he did not focus on the specificity of women's experience, somehow relying on the malenormativity of the subjects at stake (qtd. in deCaires Narain 2002, 182).

In the feminist and postcolonial project, attention to historical, geographical and cultural specificity is needed, even though these categories are being complicated, sometimes even eroded, because of the increasing globalization of the world we live in. The works of black feminists such as bell hooks and Alice Walker are addressed specifically to African American women, and they often reference specific practices or traditions within their community, for example quilting or

gardening (A. Walker [1983]1984 and 1984). Feminism in the Indian subcontinent is not derivative; it is on the contrary responsive to culture-specific problems (Narayan 1997). South Asian postcolonial feminists and critics often concentrate on very specific topics regarding women from the subcontinent, such as the discourse on *sati*, the immolation of widows on their husband's funeral pyres banned by the British (Spivak 1985b and 1988b; Narayan 1997), the Muslim laws in Pakistan and how they affect women (Suleri 1992), the struggles of peasant and tribal women (Mohanty 2003; Spivak 1988a), the dowry deaths (Narayan 1997), and so on<sup>24</sup>.

In the Indian subcontinent, as in many other parts of the “Third World”, the struggles for women's emancipation are linked to the movements for independence (Heng 1997; Katrak 1992; Jayawardena 1986). Much of what women stand for today in Indian society and how they are perceived and portrayed in the media, links back to the process of decolonization, which started in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, as Geraldine Heng emphasizes, “nationalist movements have historically supported women's issues as part of a process of social inclusion, in order to yoke the mass energy of as many community groups as possible to the nationalist cause” (1997, 31). Ketu H. Katrak speaks of a “familiar pattern of mobilizing and then subordinating women” (1992, 395). In spite of his “invisibility” (Young 2001, 337) in

24 The topic of *sati* (sometimes spelled *suttee* in the anglicized form) has attracted a lot of attention.

Apart from being included in Spivak's disquisition of the gendered subaltern in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, it features in many studies on postcolonialism and/or feminism, by both Indian and Western scholars. Uma Narayan (1997), in particular, has commented on the work of Mary Daly, who devotes a chapter to *sati* in her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Methaethics of Radical Feminism* (1979). Narayan denounces how Daly replicates a colonialist stance on the topic, because she refuses to place *sati* in her right and complex historical and geographical context. The term *sati* has its roots in the verb *sat*, meaning “virtuous”, or “good”, and it was applied to those widows who proved their devotion to their husbands by deciding to self-immolating on their funeral pyres. As Narayan explains in her study, the practice was not wide-spread: it was restricted to certain castes, to certain parts of India, and to certain time periods.

postcolonial studies, Gandhi is fundamental in the discussion of feminism and postcolonialism with regards to the Indian subcontinent. Gandhi's mobilization of women in the struggle for independence gave them political roles, but did not change the patriarchal traditions that oppressed women within the home<sup>25</sup>. Gandhi was close to those sections of society that suffered because of social injustices, namely Dalits – the so-called untouchables – and women. He was against child marriage, having been himself in one since the age of eleven, he deplored *purdah* (the seclusion of women), and the dowry system, which he considered degrading<sup>26</sup>. He nonetheless believed in the sexual division of labour, considering the kitchen and the domestic chores a woman's primary task. He incurred in several contradictions, as he also encouraged women to enter the spheres of political activity. He kept on asking himself if it was possible to conciliate domestic life with political commitment. He cited the sixteenth-century bhakti poet Mirabai as an example of rebellion to her

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25 A good account of Gandhi's ideas about women and their role in the anti-colonial struggle is given in *India of my Dreams*, a book compiled by R.K. Prabhu and containing a series of talks and speeches by the *mahatma*.

26 *Purdah*, which literally means “curtain”, is the concealment of women from the sight of men, accompanied by an avoidance of public appearance. *Purdah* is a division between female and male spheres, through the use of a piece of cloth or a curtain. It is practised, especially in some rural areas of Northern India and in Pakistan, among both Hindus and Muslims, although for the latter the rules are more strict. Practices related to *purdah* include the covering of one's head with the end of the sari or with a *dupatta* (scarf), or with the *burqa* or the *niqab* for Muslim women. Among recent reflections on the topic, the volume *Purdah: An Anthology* (2004), edited by Eunice de Souza, collects personal accounts, poetry, fiction, essays and more on *purdah*. De Souza uses the expression *purdah* to mean “not just the the burqa of whatever design worn by some Muslim women, or the face covered by the end of the sari, but the elaborate codes of seclusion and feminine modesty used to protect and control the lives of women” (de Souza 2004, xi). Concerning *purdah* Gandhi considered that “chastity . . . must be a very poor thing [if] it cannot stand the gaze of men” (qtd. in Kishwar 1985, 1756).



family, in an attempt to encourage women to join the nationalist movement, but at the same time he argued that political commitment should not interfere with the care-taking of the family<sup>27</sup>.

Gandhi came to the idea of passive resistance by observing the everyday behaviour of his mother and his wife, as fasts, penances and prayers were often the only means available to women in order to oppose patriarchy (Sethi 1999). He therefore saw women as the embodiment of endurance, self-effacement, chastity, purity and respect for traditions. Women, idealized in Gandhi's rhetoric and philosophy in a way that influenced later developments of Indian society, were considered the natural repository of true Indian values, in opposition to the values of the colonizers. This is why the idea of the Indian woman as anchored to traditions, a source of inspiration and a model of behaviour is still so strong<sup>28</sup>. Non-Western women had already been appropriated by the British colonizers, who used them to reinforce the idea that they needed to be saved from “backward and barbaric” men.

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27 Mirabai (also spelled Meera, “bai” being an epithet given to girls and women in Rajasthan) was a singer-writer of mystical poems, and a devotee of Krishna, who lived between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century. She was a Rajput princess by birth, and even though her family and in-laws disapproved of her overflowing love for the god, she followed her passion, and left for a constant pilgrimage in the villages of India. She was discriminated because of her gender, but she kept on dancing in ecstasy from place to place, ultimately assuming the status of a legendary figure in Indian popular culture. Her poems, composed in a dialect of Hindi, are still sung throughout India, especially in Rajasthan and Gujarat.

28 Another important thing to discuss regarding women and nationalism in India is the image of Mother India, introduced into the nationalist discourse by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, a Bengali writer who composed India's national song, “Vande Mataram”, which showed India as a mother goddess to venerate. The image has been exploited to the point that *Mother India* is also the title of a classic Indian film of the 1950s, where the female protagonist struggles to survive and raise her sons in absence of a husband. The film creates an ideal-like woman, and a model to be followed by Indian women.

They used this as a justification for colonialism, and the rhetoric of nationalism offered a counterpoint to this, and therefore used women as a symbol of resistance to the West, now perceived as corrupt. Women therefore became the site of struggles between Western and non-Western cultures (Narayan 1997). Gandhi also used symbols like the *charkha* (the spinning-wheel) and the *khadi* (home-spun cloth), often associated to the work of women, to the point that he ended up performing what some of his critics considered a feminization of the nationalist struggle (Katrak 1992). *Swadeshi* (self-sufficiency), a political strategy aimed at diminishing the economical power of the colonizing country, was only possible with the help of women, because it included the boycott of British products which women would buy for their families, and the spinning of cotton in order to produce home-made clothes.

Furthermore, he found in the mythological figures of Sita and Draupadi an example of the endurance and modesty of women<sup>29</sup>. He equated sexual abstinence –

29 Sita, the ever-suffering female protagonist of the Hindu epic poem *The Ramayana*, is the wife of Rama, always loyal and faithful to him in spite of numerous temptations. After she has been abducted by Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, she is liberated by Rama, with the help of Hanuman, the chief of a magical ape-like tribe of demigods. Only after her chastity is confirmed, through *agni pariksha*, a trial by fire, Rama and Sita are reunited. Unfortunately, he is forced to leave her because some of his subjects still doubt her. After having lived in exile in the forest with Rama's twin sons for a few years, she meets Rama by coincidence. At the end of the epic poem, she finally asks the earth, her mother, to split open and let her in, putting an end to her life. She is a much revered, as well as a much debated figure of Indian mythology. Numerous books and movies use the figure of Sita as either the embodiment of an ideal wife, or as a representation of the enduring power, sacrifice and sufferings of women. Among them, Deepa Mehta's films *Fire* and *Heaven on Earth*, highly controversial for the denunciation of injustices against women in contemporary Indian society. Draupadi is instead the heroine of another epic poem, *The Mahabharata*: wife of the five Pandava brothers, she asks for Krishna's help when one of her husbands sells her during a game of dice. As her husband's enemy pulls her sari, Krishna stops her from appearing naked in front of him. She is sometimes seen as an example of devotion, compassion, and strength, but in more recent interpretations she also represents the stereotype of the harmless woman.

which he practised from the age of thirty-seven – with dedication to the efforts towards home-rule, conjured up as sacrifice<sup>30</sup>. According to him, unmarried women or widows were particularly suited to serve the cause of nationalism, since they were not split between the home and the outside world. By stating that women were by nature non-violent, that they were passive in opposition to men who were active, he however essentialized and stereotyped women, reverting to binary oppositions. He recognized that in certain rural areas women took decisions as much as men, but in general he tended to offer an overdetermined representation of the women in his home country.

In opposition to Gandhi's ideas on women, Jawaharlal Nehru was more in line with the social reformists of the time. He stressed the need for women to be economically independent, and discouraged the joint family system so widespread in India. Whereas Gandhi believed that the education of women meant that they would be better mothers and house-wives, Nehru's ideas were more progressive and saw careers for women also outside the home. They both believed, however, that women were potential good *satyagrahis* (non-violent activists).

Robert J.C. Young (2001), in his historical study on the origins of postcolonialism, argues that in opposition to social reformers and pioneers of women's rights in India such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who had interpreted the problems of India as a consequence of its lack of modernity and thus formed the Brahmo Samaj in order to reform Hinduism, Gandhi attributed India's problems to the fact that Indians had been seduced by the lure of colonial modernity<sup>31</sup>. Clearly,

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<sup>30</sup> For an account of Gandhi's point of view on sexuality see Kishwar 1985.

<sup>31</sup> Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), also spelled Rammohan Roy (“raja” was a title conferred to him by the Mughal emperor Akbar II), was a Bengali social reformer who, influenced by liberal political European thinkers such as John Locke, and Jeremy Bentham, but probably also by the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, fought for the abolition of *sati*, writing pamphlets against it, arguing that *sati* was “cruel murder, under the cloak of religion” (qtd. in Jayawardena 1986, 82). His insistence that

then, the notion of “modernity” is critical when dealing with “developing”/postcolonial countries. The perception that “for many societies, modernity is an elsewhere” (Appadurai 1996, 9) is still strong: as Ashis Nandy asserts, modernity is “the second form of colonization” (1983, xi), and it hides assumptions of Western and masculine normativity. Yet, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty wrote as an update to her influential article “Under Western Eyes”, “it is no longer an issue of Western eyes, but rather how the West is inside and continually reconfigures globally, racially, and in terms of gender” (2003, 515). Whereas it is commonly assumed that the path to modernity must follow Western ways and ideologies (capitalism, technology, secularism, and democracy for example), postcolonial studies attempt to mediate, and allow a different assessment of how modernity should be intended. For Nandy (1983), in order to form a hybridized modernity, both the gender and the hybrid must be included, because they carry a good dose of transformative potential<sup>32</sup>.

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the government did something to stop this practice led to the criminalization of *sati* by the British in 1829. He also fought for the remarriage of widows, the education of women, the abolition of polygamy, and women's property rights. In 1828 he formed a reformist movement called Brahma Samaj, with the financial support of the Tagore family (Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, was a rich Bengali landowner). Brahma Samaj was aimed at cleansing the Hindu religion from practices that were considered corrupt, thus making Hinduism compatible with progress (Jayawardena 1986). Before the Brahma Samaj, missionaries were already denouncing practices which they considered dreadful such as *sati* and the *ghat* murders, where the old and sick were left dying by the bank of the river. What the “Brahmos” fought for, however, was a religious resistance to the “threat” of Christianity and other religions, with the aim to prove that these were only corruptions of the “original” Hindu customs. De Souza also notes that there were reformers who were not influenced by Western thought, such as Vidyasagar (1820-91) and Kandukuri Virasalingam Pantulu (de Souza 2004, xiii).

32 This can be a valuable solution, provided that gender and hybrid are not used merely as instruments, as in the case of the mobilization of women during nationalist liberation struggles.

Furthermore, cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai sees globalization as a process that will lead to the obsolescence of the nation-state and where new identities and allegiances are being built. Yet, we are not in a post-racist, post-national, or post-feminist world. Religious and ethnic fundamentalisms, nationalisms, and parochialisms are only some of the predicaments of our contemporary globalized world. Appadurai urges to reach the point where the nation-state becomes obsolete, because according to him it is the only way to make sense of a diasporic, transnational, globalized and interconnected world.

The fact that women are continually being used as symbols of modesty and of the respect of traditions makes it difficult for South Asian women to speak of one's identity as a woman, and of one's body without entering the political field. The relationship between body and writing – of which Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray write in theoretical terms – for many postcolonial/“Third World” women writers is often linked to violence, both epistemic and physical, in a way unknown or unfamiliar to most Western women, for whom it is often associated to sexual rights of reproduction and to issues related to sensual pleasure. Because of the appropriations by both the colonial power and the nationalist rhetoric, for South Asian women writers it is often problematic to connect with one's body in neutral terms.

India is a country where women are considered a weaker section of society by the Constitution, and therefore a category to be protected. Pakistan is equally paternalistic towards women, often linking the concept of nation with virility. The Indian subcontinent is also often in the news with ghastly stories of dowry deaths, female infanticide, and gang rapes, all at the expenses of women. Moreover, the partition of India has been played on the bodies of women and, more in general, rape has been used as a way to point out the brutality and backwardness of the opponents, for example in religious conflicts. Bodies dilapidated, breasts cut off,

religious symbols carved on the dead bodies of raped women are only some of the horrors perpetrated during Partition at the expense of women. Recent work on women and Partition has nevertheless tried to retrieve women's agency during this troubled chapter of Indian and Pakistani history (Butalia 1993; Menon and Bhasin 1998).

Yet, in a saying often attributed to English economist Joan Robinson, whatever you can rightly say about India, the opposite is also true. Thus, Indira Gandhi, a woman, has been the Prime Minister of India, and her daughter-in-law, Sonia Gandhi, is the leader of the most important party in the country, the Indian National Congress. As early as 1917, another woman, British activist Annie Besant, was elected leader of the party, and later in 1926 Sarojini Naidu became the first Indian woman to hold the position. Sixteenth-century *bhakti* poet Mirabai, who defied tradition and gender boundaries with her devotion to Krishna, deemed inappropriate for a princess, and the Rani of Jhansi, who dressed like a man and led her troops on horseback to defend her kingdom during the 1857 uprising against the British, are only two examples of Indian women who challenged the stereotype of women as ever-suffering and oppressed<sup>33</sup>. India is the country of the *kama sutra* and the erotic sculptures in Khajuraho, but also of extreme prudishness. It is a country

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33 Rani Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi, is a historical figure in Indian history, but she has acquired legendary status because of her symbolic role in the Indian rebellion of 1857. After her husband, who was the king of the princely state of Jhansi, died, the British East India Company refused to recognize the right to the throne of his adopted son, and annexed the kingdom to its possessions. When the British forces besieged Jhansi, seeing that resistance was useless, she jumped from the fort on her horse. While the horse died, she survived and hid into the night. She decided to lead her troops and join the rebellion against the East India Company that was spreading all over northern India. Dressed as a cavalry man, she joined the fight, but was unhorsed and mortally wounded near Gwalior. The story has been researched by Mahasweta Devi for her book *The Queen of Jhansi*, first published in Bangla in 1956.

where homosexuality has only recently been decriminalized and it is still a taboo, but where traditional forms of unorthodox sexuality, such as that practised by the *hijras*, the “third sex”, are an integral part of Hindu ceremonies<sup>34</sup>.

Several women writers stemming from the Indian subcontinent have reached notoriety, both inside and outside their country. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Indian women writers were mostly daughters of “enlightened” fathers who allowed them to receive an education, when most Indian women did not go to school at all. Pandita Ramabai and Toru Dutt, for instance, both came from a privileged background: their literary-inclined families and their fathers firmly believed that women had a right to education as much as men<sup>35</sup>. As the pursue of

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<sup>34</sup> *Hijras*, whose existence is recorded since ancient times, are physiological males who identify and assume female roles, thus constituting a gender-liminal figure in Indian society. *Hijras* are in large part young children repudiated by their families for their effeminate behaviours, who are accepted into a community where they grow up to become what the Western society often called transgenders. Despite living at the margins of society, they are allowed to perform at wedding and birth ceremonies. Often coming uninvited, they are thought to bring good luck and fertility with their singing and dancing.

<sup>35</sup> Toru Dutt (1856-1877) came from a literary and wealthy Bengali family. She travelled to Europe, where she learned French and attended lectures for women at Cambridge. She published, together with her family, a volume of poetry, and translated French verse at the age of twenty. Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) was a Sanskrit scholar, and even received the honorary title of “pandita” for her knowledge of the language. Her father taught her theology and the ancient scriptures. She was widowed, but she refused to conform to the tradition that required women to retire to a life of renunciations, and wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, which denounced the situation of Indian high-caste women. The book had a good reception inside and outside of India. She was highly critical of her own religion, Hinduism, and eventually converted to Christianity. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was the daughter of an educated Bengali man who was part of the Brahma Samaj. She was educated in India and at Cambridge, and later became an activist for the independence of India, and a renowned poet. She was jailed for her ideas, and in 1926 became the first Indian woman to be elected leader of the Indian National Congress.

higher education and a career became less uncommon for women, especially in middle-class families living in urban areas, more and more Indian women writers have been surfacing, reaching notoriety, winning prestigious literary prizes, and peopling library shelves around the world with their stories. Among them Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Das are only the most famous in a long list of women who have made of literature their profession, in defiance of a tradition that too often relegates them inside the kitchen, or considers that the task of rearing children and taking care of their family is too absorbing to allow them to become professional writers. In India, perhaps more than in other countries, there is still the perception that for a woman “setting pen to paper is not only a creative act, but one of defiance – a refusal to conform to a set of expectations about what it is to be a woman, about what it is to be a writer. And about what women could, should, or mustn't write about” (Anita Roy 2007, 2). These writers opened barriers and proved that there is space for women writers in the field of Indian literature written in English. A new generation of Indian women writers, either the product of the Indian diaspora or educated in India, has been following their steps. If writers like Tishani Doshi or Jhumpa Lahiri do not feel that they need to explain themselves as women writers as much as their predecessors did, and if they do not need to explain why they write in English rather than in their regional language, it is because there have been other writers before them who did it.

One could even argue that marginality is gradually becoming mainstream, with Indian women writers appearing in many literature festivals, and scholars of postcolonial feminism holding important positions within the academy. In the last fifteen years, many writers who were formerly “at the margins” have acquired more and more visibility. The obvious example here is Salman Rushdie, who is as popular and as studied as many white British or American writers. Among the authors analysed in this work, one could argue that if in the 1990s Meena Alexander was



publishing her poetry with small presses, she is now a recognized author with a teaching position at the City University of New York and her manuscripts and drafts of poems deposited at the New York Public Library archive. In spite of this, I think that at the junction of postcolonialism and feminism – or in general when intersectionality is at stake – there is more to be done in terms of understanding and studying the dynamics involved, not only within the field of Indian writing in English.

## 1.5 Why poetry?

*“It’s not about what the poem means, it’s ‘how’ the poem means” – Joy Harjo*

In an article called “What is Poetry?”, Jacques Derrida compared poetry to a hedgehog that crosses the road, with the constant risk of being run over. Small and fragile, but at the same time stubborn and spiky, poetry is described by Derrida in the following way:

le hérisson . . . roulé en boule, hérissé de piquants, vulnérable et dangereux, calculateur et inadapté (parce qu’il se met en boule, sentant le danger sur l’autoroute, il s’expose à l’accident). Pas de poème sans accident, pas de poème qui ne s’ouvre comme une blessure, mais qui ne soit aussi blessant. (1992, 306-7)<sup>36</sup>

Thus poetry, like the hedgehog conjured up by Derrida, is closed on itself, difficult to crack open, but tender inside, and more than anything vulnerable to the cars that pass by. A number of things are as dangerous as cars for the hedgehog: prose writing, the immediate language of the media, and even critique, often anxious about deciphering the meaning of poetry.

It is hard to deny that poetry in postcolonial studies has often been tossed aside in favour of prose writing. Like Derrida’s hedgehog, it is fragile, not in danger of extinction maybe, but in danger all the same. In spite of two Nobel Prizes in Literature, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney, who are mainly poets and come from the postcolonial world, the most popular and studied postcolonial authors are all

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<sup>36</sup> “The hedgehog . . . rolled up in a ball, prickly with spines, vulnerable and dangerous, calculating and ill-adapted (because it makes itself into a ball, sensing the danger on the motorway, it exposes itself to an accident). There is no poem without accident, no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding” (my translation).

novelists, or essayists at the most. Jahan Ramazani, in his study on the aesthetics of postcolonial and transnational poetry, argues that “postcolonial criticism is largely grounded in mimetic presuppositions about literature” (2001, 4), perhaps implying that poetry is not mimetic enough<sup>37</sup>. According to him, because “poetry mediates experience through a language of exceptional figural and formal density, it is a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies” (ibidem). In other words, postcolonial studies have used literature produced in postcolonial countries such as India or the Caribbean as a somewhat improper means to study and understand the history and society of those countries. In his recent study on transnational poetics, Ramazani resumes the predicament of postcolonial poetry and writes that “poetry typically offers less transparent access to other cultural worlds” (2009, 53) than fiction or cinema does. According to him, in poetry – at least in what he defines as “traveling poems”, as opposed to “travel poems” – the access to other cultural worlds happens at what he calls the micro-level: “swift territorial shifts by line, trope, sound or stanza that result in flickering movements and juxtapositions” (ibidem)<sup>38</sup>. Traveling poetry, he argues,

proceeds more quickly and abruptly, through translocational juxtapositions, which by their rapidity and lyric compression typically prevent us from believing that we are

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37 Beside being one of the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, Jahan Ramazani is the author of two books on postcolonial poetry and its hybrid aesthetics: *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* and *A Transnational Poetics*. While academic studies on single postcolonial poets or on the poetic production in a particular area of the postcolonial world abound, the possibility of a common aesthetics of postcolonial or transnational poetry has not been investigated as widely.

38 The distinction Ramazani makes is between poetry that travels at the macro-level, together with its travelling author or speaker (“travel poetry”), and poetry that also involves a “distinctively compressed form of imaginative displacement” (2009, 53), as well as forms of physical displacement (“traveling poetry”).

entering an alternative space and, instead, foreground the negotiations, and fabrications of imaginative travel. (ibid., 54).

Because of its compressed forms of travelling between cultures, it can be argued, poetry – and postcolonial poetry especially – runs the risk of being run over while crossing the road.

One should listen to what Édouard Glissant – one of the most influential among literary critics in postcolonial studies, and himself a poet – has to say about poetry in the contemporary world. He starts from Plato, who in *The Republic* expels poets from his ideal city on the grounds that, unlike philosophers, they divert us from rational thinking. In *Poetics of Relation* Glissant writes:

Some critical minds, more given to talk than to analysis, proclaim or prophesy the obsolescence of poetry as no longer corresponding to the conditions of contemporary life and somehow outmoded in relation to the violence and haste abundant in modernity. This traditional debate has been going on ever since reason, in the Western sense, apparently dissociated poetic creation (deemed useless in the city-state) and scientific knowledge (strictly inscribed in the drama of its own evolution). The question remains the same, in the same context: What's the use of poetry? Modern works have already given their answer from Rimbaud to Claudel or Aimé Césaire: Poetry is not an amusement or a display of beautiful things. It also imparts form to a knowledge that could never be stricken by obsolescence. (1997, 81)

For those who write it, and for the society who reads it, poetry is therefore essential. All the more so for women. As Audre Lorde asserts,

for women, . . . poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.

Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (1993, 37)

This is the reason why women often engage in revisionist mythmaking, in the attempt to practice what Adrienne Rich calls the “re-vision”, which is nothing other than “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text with a new critical direction – [that] is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (1972, 18). For Audre Lorde this is the beginning of social activism; and in a similar manner, Meena Alexander has the feeling that “we have poetry // so we do not die of history” (“Question Time”, n. pag.)<sup>39</sup>. Writing poetry, for women writers, and especially for those pertaining to minorities, is therefore not a whim or a passing fancy. Poetry better expresses conflicts and unexpressed thoughts, and for women writing from a gendered and postcolonial perspective exploring the intertwined and inextricable markers of gender, race, class and sexuality is particularly important. Audre Lorde, in “Poetry is Not A Luxury”, trying to explain why poetry is relevant and essential for women writers of colour, writes: “I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems” (1993, 37). The other element, in Derrida's sentence about poetry at the beginning of this chapter, is the wound caused by poetry, and it is this “wounding/wounded” quality of poetry that the authors in my work address in many of their poems.

Yet, two out of the three authors I decided to focus on do not write poetry exclusively, also engaging with prose pieces, while Imtiaz Dharker is also an illustrator and a documentarist. Even when they do not use the poetic form, Alexander's and Namjoshi's writing work more on associations than logic or cause-effect clauses. Furthermore, Dharker's drawings can be associated to poems. Meena

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39 “Question Time” will be included in Alexander's most recent collection of poems, *Birthplace with Buried Stones*.

Alexander's essays can be described as “lyrical”, because they investigate the writer's personal feelings and thoughts in a language close enough to poetry, and they often include a poem that illuminates the concept of the essay in a different, yet complementary way (Basu and Leenerts 2009). Namjoshi is an excellent fabulist, but her primary influence is poetry, and her first works were in that form. Namjoshi's *The Blue Donkey Fables*, for instance, is a collection of short pieces that passes from fables to poetry almost indiscriminately, and so is Alexander's *The Shock of Arrival*. Poetry, in a broader sense, as an alternative way of working with language, forms the core of their work. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, who was an inspiration for both Alexander and Namjoshi, says that according to her one way of thinking about things is “step by step”, logical and based on cause-effect clauses. Lorde's own way of thinking, however, as she explains in the interview, even as a child, was the opposite: “in bubbles up from chaos that you had to anchor with words” (Lorde and Rich 1981, 83). I consider this to be also Alexander's, Namjoshi's, and Dharker's way of thinking, a “poetic imagination” that also influences the other genres they sometimes employ. I do not mean to confound poetry and prose as genres, of course, as I am aware that they are very distinct forms, even taking into consideration the notion of a continuum of poetry that can sometimes merge with prose, and vice versa<sup>40</sup>. In a dialogue with Tamil poet Salma for *The Hindu's* literary review section, Meena Alexander for example says that, according to her, the crucial difference is that “in fiction or prose narrative, you have a sequence. But poetry is like a burst or explosion of meaning, feeling and sound – everything comes together to approximate the conditions of music” (Alexander in Santhanam 2009, n. pag.).

40 On the distinction between poetry and prose, Kamala Das, commenting on her autobiography *My Story*, says: “I like to call this poetry even if my words lose their music when, after raising in my innards a beautiful liquid turbulence, they come to surface in the relatively solid contours of prose. I had always longed for the strength necessary to write this. But poetry does not grow ripe for us, we have to grow ripe enough for poetry” (qtd. in Satchidanandan 1988, viii).

Another point I would like to investigate is the fact that there is a certain tendency to consider poetry only as activism in the case of women writers of colour, for example in the case of Audre Lorde or Gloria Anzaldúa, as if the aesthetic value of these writers were of secondary importance in the face of their political commitment with anti-racist and anti-chauvinist struggles. Furthermore, black women writers, especially African American women writers in the United States, are perceived as story-tellers who do not engage in theory. Barbara Christian contends with this presupposition grounded in Western assumptions about literature, writing:

people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing . . . is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddle and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. . . . My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory – though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative. (1988, 68)

Even though in this passage she tends to essentialize black women writers assuming that they all must be, or must not be, a race for theory, Barbara Christian introduces a concept that is worth considering, and it certainly works if applied to the authors I will be dealing with. Though they seldom engage with pure theoretical criticism of the kind Homi K. Bhabha or Gayatri Spivak produce, the women writers I will be considering here have a sense for theory and cultural criticism in the way described by Barbara Christian.

Linda Garber (2001) criticizes the hierarchical placing of theory above poetry in the lesbian feminist and queer movement, and wishes for the recognition of poetry *as* theory. She laments that Anzaldúa's *Bordelands / La Frontera* is often valued for its contribution to poststructuralist queer theory, even though it contains more poetry

than prose, and Anzaldúa herself prefers to be called a poet. Outside the lesbian feminist movement, it is arguable that a certain kind of poetry has a theoretical quality, especially if the authors are also professors of literature and creative writing.

In the lesbian feminist literary environment the importance of poets-theorists – Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich being the most obvious names here – is beyond dispute. Suniti Namjoshi's work is indebted to both writers, and therefore it is influenced by both poetry and theory, even when she writes fables or longer fiction. Suniti Namjoshi considers herself a fabulist and a revisionist mythmaker, as throughout the years she found this form congenial to her.

Paula Bennett (1995)'s assumption that poetry has been prevalent over prose in lesbian feminist writing because of the supposed institutionalized heterosexuality of the novel, with its marriage plot, is arguably a weak theory: poetry is equally challenging and problematic for a lesbian writer, and more so for a lesbian writer of colour, who has to balance not a triple but at least a quadruple or quintuple bind, a labyrinth of conflicting and juxtaposing identities that render poetry naturally layered. If novel writing can be considered to be prevalently heteronormative in conception and rules, poetry is not devoid of stringencies, seen that it has been for centuries a highly codified form of writing, written by male poets and often dedicated to passive objects, women, but destined to be read by other men. Even Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* notes that women in the early nineteenth century have written a lot of fiction and little poetry, probably because the latter requires more concentration, which women often do not have because of distractions: chores, family and the absence of privacy. My work intends to examine this predicament of women's poetry, to see how this situation is changing, in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere, and in which ways and with which results women manage to write poetry.



## 2. MEENA ALEXANDER

*“The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed”  
– Salman Rushdie*

*“If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills  
– then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory” - Virginia Woolf*

### 2.1 Biographical Introduction

Meena Alexander was born in 1951 in Allahabad, India, where her father was working at the time, but her Syrian Christian family originates from Kerala, on the south-western coast of India. At the age of five, Meena moved to Karthoum, Sudan, where her father had accepted a job as a meteorologist. As a consequence, she had to learn English for education purposes, but there were many languages around her: Malayalam, the language spoken by her family, Hindi, the dominant language in India, and Arabic, the official language in the Sudan.

She was educated in Khartoum, and her first poems appeared in Arabic translation. Every year she travelled with her mother back to her ancestral home in Tiruvella, Kerala, where she used to spend long periods of time. She graduated in English and French literature from Khartoum University in 1969 and pursued a PhD at Nottingham University, in England. After finishing her studies, she decided to go back to India, and taught at the university in Delhi and Hyderabad. In 1979, soon after her marriage to a Jewish American historian of modern India, she moved to New York City, where her two children were born, and where she has been living ever since. Meena Alexander is currently Distinguished Professor of English and Women's Studies at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

She has published many volumes of poetry. While she was teaching in India,

she published her first collections – *The Bird’s Bright Ring* (1976), *I Root My Name* (1977), and *Without Place* (1977) – while *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988) was her first poetry book published in the United States. It was followed by *The Storm* (1989), and *Night-Scene, the Garden* (1989), *River and Bridge* (1995), *Illiterate Heart* (2002), *Raw Silk* (2004), *Quickly Changing River* (2008) and *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013)<sup>41</sup>.

Of her most important collections of poetry, *Illiterate Heart*, written in the memory of her father to whom many poems are addressed, is in the words of a reviewer “a journey through languages, rivers and memory” (Sharma 2002, 9), while *Raw Silk* was written after 9/11, and it is concerned with violence in different parts of the world, from the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002, to the aftermath of 9/11. As Nalyin Iyer has written about it, *Raw Silk* “has emerged as an early literary work that seriously grapples with 9/11 and its global impact” (2009, 148). A sense of belonging to and at the same time of detachment from New York City pervades the work. Her next collection of poetry, *Quickly Changing River* is a much more personal work if compared to *Raw Silk*, as there are a lot of poems on the difficult relationship with her ageing mother, and others on the sexual abuse by her grandfather, a traumatic event that she has only been able to remember thanks to therapy.

Her memoir *Fault Lines*, first published in 1993, was enriched for its tenth-year edition with a coda written after 9/11 that also addresses the delicate issue of the surfacing of her abuse as a child in Kerala. The volume also features a preface by celebrated Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o. *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996) is a collection of both lyrical essays and poems, dealing with her reaction to the last of her migrations, that to New York City, but also with the experience of being a South Asian woman living and working in North America. The same hybrid style that combines poems and essays in an original way is used for

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<sup>41</sup> *Birthplace With Buries Stones* was published in September 2013 when this section of the thesis had already been completed, therefore it will not be included in the analysis.

another recent publication, *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009), which examines how dislocation and a painful fragmentation of the self characterizes the writing of many of the writers Alexander cherishes, from Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali to British champion of feminism Virginia Woolf. As May Joseph summarizes, the effort put in this book “offers an alternative genealogy for the New American poet whose roots lie in a poetics of dislocation” (2009, 263).

Meena Alexander has also written two novels, *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997), two books on Romanticism (one dedicated to Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley, and another one trying to discern a phenomenology of romanticism), in addition to many lyrical essays and introductions to anthologies of women's writing and of Indian poetry. Among these, two need to be mentioned: the introduction to Lalithambika Antherjanam's collection of short stories *Cast Me Out If You Will* and the preface to a collection of women's writings about war called *Blood Into Ink*.

In 2002 her collection of poems *Illiterate Heart* won the PEN/Open Book Award and her memoir *Fault Lines* was chosen by *Publisher's Weekly* among the best books of 1993.

## 2.2 Stylistic and Thematic Presentation

In the preface to the tenth-anniversary edition of her memoir *Fault Lines* Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes:

among the numerous global allusions that litter the pages of *Fault Lines* is Walt Whitman. Like him, [Meena Alexander] is a poet who contains multitudes and, not surprisingly, the word multitude is among the most potent of those that frequent these pages. (Ngugi in Alexander 2003, xi)<sup>42</sup>

This is a fitting introduction to Meena Alexander's poetry, as her work features continuing references to a conflicting multiplicity, sometimes cast as invigorating but sometimes also overwhelming.

Indian women poets have often been considered within the tradition of “confessional poetry”, a mode that has been attributed for example to Kamala Das, one of the most important and influential twentieth-century women poets in the Indian subcontinent, and one who incidentally came from Kerala like Alexander. Meena Alexander has certainly been influenced by Kamala Das, and especially by her determination not to avoid the self-disclosures needed to write autobiographical material (Bahri and Vasudeva 1996a, 37). It can be argued that the confessional mode is almost inevitable when one writes within the field of feminism or, in a different way, postcolonialism, where personal experience plays such an important role. This is likely to be enhanced when the awareness of the wounds of patriarchal society and of a postcolonial-yet-not-postracial world intersect. The material Meena Alexander works with is extremely personal, but it also reaches out to a wider audience, not

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42 All quotations from *Fault Lines* are from the 2003 edition published by The Feminist Press, which includes a coda called “The Book of Childhood”.

only made up of South Asian women or people from countries that have been formerly colonized, but of people interested in the value of art in a world fraught with violence, or interested in any form of marginality and dislocation.

Another feature that needs to be stressed is that in her poetry and essays there are more questions than answers. Physical objects and places, rather than abstract images, are often at the core of Alexander's poems: the house in Tiruvella with its well and the barbed-wire around it, the island of Manhattan with its apartment blocks and the Hudson river, the stone-eating girl, and so on. This is not by chance: Alexander's poetry needs physicality in order to make sense of a self that is perceived as fragmentary and inconsistent. In order to make up memory, in other words, one needs something to anchor it to.

In Alexander's poetry a lyrical tone is balanced with instances where it is perfectly possible to discuss more worldly matters. As noted by Wendy Anne Kopisch, there are instances where she is able to juxtapose “unlyrical phenomena” (2009, 183) – she makes the example of instant messaging in “Green Parasol” (Alexander 2004, 31-3) – with highly charged images, where “that act of crystallizing the emotion through the image actually has its own peculiar grace” (Basu and Alexander 2002, 32). Even with the insertion of these more pragmatical elements, Kopisch affirms, the musicality of the poetry is maintained.

From time to time Alexander's poems are linked one another. The device used is the recovery of images and metaphors from other poems, a feature that allows the poet to scrutinize them once again and work on them from a slightly different and innovative perspective. It happens thus that certain semantic fields or images recur in her poems: stitching and seaming, fault lines and fissures, the barbed wire which she sees as a symbol for wars and divisions, a bit of raw silk from her grandmother's sari, or the well in the backyard of her ancestral house are all elements that appear in several poems, and have always new and rich associations. Sometimes she even

rephrases and reworks on a poem. In “Gandhi's Bicycle (My Muse Comes to Me)”, for instance, she reworks on a poem published in the same collection, “Ancestors”, where she envisioned her grandparents bicycling around Ground Zero. In the newer poem she juxtaposes that image with one of Gandhi and his bicycle, implicitly putting the violence in North America next to the carnage in Gujarat<sup>43</sup>.

The recurring image of fragments, fissures and fault lines is something that she shares with other postcolonial authors. In his Nobel lecture, Derek Walcott speaks of a fragmented vase whose junctures are visible, in order to explain how he envisions Caribbean identity, made of different pieces from a broken vase joined together so that the glue will show. He speaks of identity as “this cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars” (Walcott 1992, n. pag.) and compares it with the process of poetic composition. Salman Rushdie resorts to a similar image when he makes the protagonist of his novel *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, assert that he feels he is “cracking all over like an old jug” (1980, 37). Korean-American poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's broken syntax in *Dictée* (1982) and film-maker Trinh T. Minh-ha's subtitling and naming strategies in her documentary *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989) are only two more examples of how diasporic and exilic artists have used continuous references to fragmentation in order to express their own existential situation. In order to better explain why postcolonial writers feel the need

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43 The sequence “Letters to Gandhi”, which includes “Gandhi's Bicycle (My Muse Comes to Me)”, was written after in 2002 Alexander visited relief camps in Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat. The 2002 carnage in Gujarat was triggered when a train with some Hindu activists coming from Ayodhya, a place of worship believed to be the birthplace of Rama, was attacked by a group of Muslim people who killed fifty-eight people. Following the attack, communal riots spread in the region and lasted for several days, with hundreds of people, both Hindu and Muslim, being killed, while women were raped, and looting and destruction of property became widespread. During the following weeks, about 150,000 people were moved into relief camps. Meena Alexander also writes about this experience in the third section of the essay “Fragile Places” (2009, 169-71).

to show the seams of their labour, in a published interview Meena Alexander recurs to the example of the gap between the sex worker and the academic, both hailing from India and both living in the same city in the Western world. This, according to her, represents “the postcolonial dilemma” (Alexander in Bahri and Vasudeva 1996a, 36; Alexander 2009, 81). She recalls a line by W.B. Yeats from “Adam’s Curse” – “a line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught” – and denies it (qtd. in Bahri and Vasudeva 1996a, 36)<sup>44</sup>. For postcolonial or displaced authors, she believes, the seams need to show very well, in order to make sense of one’s fragmented positionalities as a writer. In other words, Alexander builds what Salman Rushdie calls “imaginary homelands” (1991a), places that no longer exist, if not in one’s own memory. At the beginning of her book on poetry and dislocation, Meena Alexander reports how she was once asked what shape would her house be if it were made with paper. The poet recurs to the image of a paper boat to explain how movement and precariousness – a “restlessness I am hard put to name”, as she called it in her own words (Alexander 2009, x) – are essential to her understanding of home (ibid., ix-xi).

Meena Alexander believes in poetry as political activism: her poetry often deals with conflicts and unrest, cities at the edge of war, episodes of discrimination, and so on. In an interview with Ruth Maxey, the poet admits that history conspires against the writing of poetry (Alexander 2009, 190). Many American poets have tried to do away with history, and to break the chains that still linked them to tradition, and to the old canon of British poetry. Alexander mentions Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose notion of self-reliance, which she interprets as reinvention of the self, “exhilarated” her (2009, 3)<sup>45</sup>. In a poem from the sequence “Letters to Gandhi”, while

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44 W.B. Yeats’ “Adam’s Curse” is a poem included in the 1904 collection *In the Seven Woods*, where the poet remembers an evening spent with his beloved discussing poetry (Yeats and Holdeman 2002).

45 The American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the foremost American intellectuals

wandering through Bengali Market in New Delhi, the narrator hears the voice of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, and how in “Instead of a Preface” from her ten-poem cycle *Requiem* she reports that she was asked if as a poet she could describe things like injustice, prejudice, fear and desolation. Akhmatova answered that indeed she could, and as a proof she has the rest of the poems in the sequence, which deal with Stalinist terror<sup>46</sup>. With regards to violence, Alexander intends to say, it is perhaps difficult to write poetry, but it is indeed possible. It is the duty of the poet, according to her, even a necessity, to find a way to bear witness to what cannot be conveyed in any other way. In *Poetics of Dislocation*, while discussing the poetry of Natasha Trethewey and her struggles with race, Alexander writes: “history is a wound, almost unbearable, and beauty becomes the bright reversion, what permits us to bear witness, to endure, to turn again as we must to the necessary earth” (2009, 31)<sup>47</sup>. Like

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of the nineteenth century, developed the notion of “self-reliance”, which involved refusing to recognize the power that society had on the individual. According to Emerson, one should always rely on his own judgement, rather than behave according to what social pressure dictates.

46 The prose poem “Instead of a Preface”, which opens Akhmatova’s cycle *Requiem* on the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, reads like this: “In the dreadful years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day someone ‘identified’ me. Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman, with blue lips. She had, of course, never heard of me; but she suddenly came out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): ‘Can you describe this?’ And I said: ‘Yes, I can’ and then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face” (Akhmatova 1976, 87). In this short anecdote, Akhmatova problematizes not only the value of poetry in the contemporary world, but also the predicament of the gendered subaltern. The woman, her lips blue with cold, has of course never heard of the poet, as she is not an intellectual, and is therefore sceptical about the usefulness of poetry in situations like the one that they are experiencing together. In spite of this, the poet is able to bring a smile to this poor woman’s face, and comfort her in some way.

47 Natasha Trethewey, a Pulitzer price winner, was born in Mississippi in 1966, the daughter of a black mother and a white father when interracial marriages were still illegal. “Race” writes Alexander about Trethewey, “is precisely what makes her up and tears her apart” (2009, 31). Her



Audre Lorde, whose remarks about poetry not being a luxury for women are famous, Alexander says that according to her poetry “is the music of survival” (ibid., 116), what Carolyn Forché (1981) – and later Czeslaw Milosz (1983) – called “a poetry of witness”<sup>48</sup>. The “bright reversion” of beauty necessary to counteract the brutal facts of history is, according to Alexander, the key to write poetry of witness. In the essay “Fragile Places”, where she remembers how she came to write about the relief camps she visited in Gujarat, she writes: “the poem can take a tiny jolt of the horror but evoke grief, restore tenderness so that we are not thrust back into an abject silence. As if we have heard and seen nothing” (2009, 172). As she puts it somewhere else, poetry is “a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist” (ibid., 189), a way to reconcile us to the horrors of our world and to the violence of history. Her point of view is also expressed in “Aftermath”, a poem from *Raw Silk* that deals with the dilemma of writing poetry in New York after 9/11. She writes:

I want to write of the linden tree  
That stoops at the edge of the river

But its leaves are filled with insects

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mother's abusive death by the hands of her second husband boldly enters her poetry, and her perception that her own land, Mississippi, made her a crime and will be the death of her, in spite of her attachment to it, pervades her work.

48 In 1981 American poet and professor Carolyn Forché published an article called “El Salvador – An Aide Mémoire” on *The American Poetry Review*, where she introduced the concept of poetry of witness, with regards to her experiences in war-ravaged El Salvador. A couple of years later, Czeslaw Milosz published a book of essays called *The Witness of Poetry*, establishing the term in the literary jargon. For Milosz, poets who come from corners of the world where unspeakable violence has happened are immersed in history, and the relationship between internal life and external events is what gives life to poetry. It is this idea of a “poetry of witness” that Meena Alexander is interested in.

With wings the color of dry blood. (2004, 9)

Writing about New York City has changed in the aftermath of the events of 9/11, Meena Alexander seems to explain in this poem, and when writing about things like the landscape, one needs to be aware of the horrors that the city has seen<sup>49</sup>. As she writes in “Civil Strife” – echoing Wallace Stevens who in “Mozart, 1935” encouraged the poet to “remain seated at the piano” without giving away the aesthetic qualities of poetry – “birdsong / in a partitioned land / is birdsong still” (2002, 31)<sup>50</sup>.

Meena Alexander's essays are often defined as lyrical, based on personal experiences and impressions, rather than on theory or analysis. Alexander relates her use of highly charged prose with the Indian tradition of *kavya*, a Sanskrit literary style used by court poets from the seventh century onwards (Alexander 2009, 191). Furthermore, her essays seem to work their way *around* a topic, rather than in a cause-effect movement<sup>51</sup>. In writing these short essays she often starts from

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49 For a discussion of nature poetry and Meena Alexander's point of view on the subject also see Kopisch (2009).

50 Meena Alexander also asks herself what is the use of poetry in “Question Time”, a poem that includes the memorable lines: “We have poetry // So we do not die of history”. The poem is available in Meena Alexander's personal website, and in her latest collection of poetry *Birthplace with Buried Stones*. In “News of the World” (1995, 6-7), moreover, she draws inspiration from William Carlos Williams who in “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower” writes: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there” (Williams 1962, 161-2). *What is Found There* is incidentally also the title of the a book written by Adrienne Rich, a collection of reflections on poetry and its meaning in our contemporary world. In the introduction Adrienne Rich writes: “I have never believed that poetry is an escape from history, and I do not think it is more, or less, necessary than food, shelter, health, education, decent working conditions. It is as necessary” (1993, xiv). Meena Alexander shares this opinion with Adrienne Rich, to whom by the way she dedicated the poem “Illiterate Heart”. The poem “Mozart, 1935” was included in Wallace Stevens' collection *Ideas of Order*, first published in 1936.

51 About *Fault Lines* Kazim Ali writes “the connections made are poetic connections, not the

something very personal, and then broadens the topic in order to bring out a more complex set of problems. According to Rustomji, this is reminiscent of a *mandala*, which in regards to Meena Alexander's poetry she defines as “an intense self-reflection” at the core, and “an extraordinary expansion of concern for other people” departing from that centre (Rustomji 2009, 90)<sup>52</sup>. In an interview with Lavina Shankar she confirms that “the only way I could write something about things in the world is by going inward” (Alexander in Shankar and Alexander 2008, 42-3). Discussing the sometimes blurred distinction between personal and public poems, she also affirms that “there have to be those two elements, like waves” (ibid., 43). Interestingly, her essays are often followed by one or two poems that illustrate the topic discussed, as if she were approaching the subject from two different angles. Conscious of this, Meena Alexander says that:

what the prose essay or fiction allows me to do is almost like a clearing of the underbrush, going ahead as if you're on uncharted territory, filled with vines, underbrush, wild grass, and rocks, and clearing a space. Then once you've cleared the space, you can do the poem there. (Alexander 2009, 191)

Meena Alexander is a poet that in all her writing career has been haunted by one big question, or by a couple of interrelated topics, what she calls, quoting

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delineation of a memoirist who perhaps might be more interested in clearer view of 'cause' and 'effect'. In one passage, Alexander juxtaposes sentence by sentence, and sometimes within a single sentence, a dinner she is having with writer in Manhattan with a conversation she had with her father a decade earlier in India” (2009, 58).

52 A mandala is a symbol, in both Hinduism and Buddhism, representing the universe, and it is used to reach concentration in meditation, or balance. It is usually a square enclosing a circle with a centre point. There is also a section from *River and Bridge* called “Mandala” (1995, 34-56), so the pattern must not be unfamiliar to Alexander.

Wordsworth, “obstinate questionings” (Alexander 2009, 121)<sup>53</sup>. Her main concern is the exceedingly complicated relationship between place and memory: how is memory possible for a dislocated person, with a fragmented and unstable consciousness of time and space? How can memory be recollected and reassembled in these conditions? Sometimes the structure of her poems – the succession of the couplets or triplets, the carefully-constructed stanzas and the distinct compression of the sonnet she sometimes uses – gives stability to Alexander's fragmentary self and to her multifarious literary influences<sup>54</sup>. This is particularly true for her more recent poetry, with *Quickly Changing River* being the perfect example of that.

Criticism on Meena Alexander focuses mostly on her memoir, on her many essays and on her two novels, in spite of the fact that she is primarily a poet. In *Passage to Manhattan*, the first monographic study on Alexander, there are three essays, out of a total of fifteen, dedicated to her poetry, and only a few passing references to her poems in the other ones, which focus on everything Alexander has written, from her early studies on phenomenology and Romanticism to her reflections on the postcolonial experience in *The Shock of Arrival*. In spite of this, there are many published interviews with the author, and the fact that she is a writer who already reflects a lot on her own writing has helped shaping my analysis, which tends to readjust the balance towards her poetry.

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53 “Obstinate questionings” is an expression that Wordsworth uses in his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality”.

54 The sonnets composed by Meena Alexander – there are five in *Quickly Changing River* – are “modern sonnets”, fourteen-line, non-rhyming lyric poems written in free verse.

## 2.3 “Alphabets of Flesh”: Language, Body and Violence

*“1,950 mile-long open wound  
dividing a pueblo, a culture,  
running down the length of my body,  
staking fence rods in my flesh,  
splits me splits me  
me raja me raja  
This is my home  
this thin edge of  
barbwire.”  
– Gloria Anzaldúa*

### 2.3.1. Body, Memory and Space

At the beginning of her memoir *Fault Lines*, Meena Alexander observes:

That's all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing. Her words are all askew. And so I tormented myself on summer nights, . . . till my mind slipped back to my mother – amma – she who gave birth to me, and to amma's amma, my veliammechi, grandmother Kunju, drawing me back into the darkness of the Tiruvella house with its cool bedrooms and coiled verandas: the shelter of memory. (2003, 2-3)

It is interesting to see how the author chooses two elements to sustain herself and make sense of her multiple migrations: her connection with her ancestral house in Kerala, and her lineage reconstructed on the female side of the family, through her mother and her mother's mother. Her grandfather Ilya, so present in her childhood memories of Kerala, is not included, but her maternal grandmother Kunju, whom she never met, is indeed part of her reconstruction of self<sup>55</sup>. Whether consciously or

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<sup>55</sup> In “Book of Childhood”, the coda added after realizing that she had been abused by her beloved

not, her identity is entrusted to the fact of being a woman and to her geographical affiliation with the Tiruvella house, on the south-western coast of India<sup>56</sup>. Yet, the author affirms, even this “house of memory is fragile, . . . precariously reconstructed” (2003, 3). Her consciousness of body, and of space – of being born into a female body and of being constantly in motion between continents – is closely intertwined and inextricable, so that at one time when she is asked on the phone what she is writing about in a given period of time she conflates two strands of her identity that for her are inexplicably conjoined, saying that she is writing “‘about being born into a female body; about the difficulty of living in space’” (ibidem). Those first pages from her memoir are full of memories of her mother, from dreams she has about her, to what she has been told about her own birth in Allahabad. She also speculates about her mother's mother: what would she make of her, a woman without a home, who has escaped the routine of marriage inside the community, and has taken up a job in New York City?<sup>57</sup> Aptly, the chapter ends with the description of some objects lying

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grandfather, the author reflects on how in the period when she was dealing with her childhood trauma by the hands of her beloved grandfather Ilya she was obsessed with recollecting the figure of her grandmother Kunju, her maternal grandfather's wife who died before she was born. Furthermore, when recollecting what happened inside her grandfather's library, she remembers how her mother became her only escape from the pain and fear provoked by the episode: “I wanted to hide inside your sari, amma, let the soft pleats drape about me, make me vanish. Deep inside your sari, no one could touch me” (2003, 302). She also clings to trees, as a way to anchor herself to reality and to gain solidity and reassurance.

56 Later on in the memoir, the author confesses that when she looked backwards to her grandmothers she had in mind “Blood”, a poem by Kamala Das where the author evokes her great grandmother and the house where she lived as a child (2003, 75).

57 In “Gold Horizon”, the poet imagines a woman who could be one of her grandmothers standing by a river, and questioning her about her new life in North America: “So you have entered a new world. / Her voice is low, growling even. / There was nothing humble in her voice. // Sometimes the dead behave in that know- all way, / ploughing the ruts of disaster” (2002, 47).

around her in her new American apartment: overboiled baby bottles, an old diaphragm, and a wedding ring identify her as a mother, a woman, and a wife, while other objects, such as a fragment of her grandmother's sari, and a silver box pertaining to her mother's mother's mother's mother call back to her lineage through the female line. In addition, the author mentions applications for visas and her green card, which are a reminder of her constant moving from one continent to the other.

The next chapter of her memoir opens up with a recollection of how the author envisions memories, “in two opposing ways of being towards the past” (2003, 29). One way is described by Alexander in the following way:

a life embedded in a life, and that in another life, another and another. Rooms within rooms, each filled with its own scent. . . . I come from there. That conch shell, that seashore, those bellies, that dung, those dried leaves holding a cure for the aching mind, all know me. The rooms, enfolded each within the other, the distant houses all have held me. (ibidem)

Either consciously or not, these images recall a series of wombs, each of them containing life, mirroring how the author felt about coming from her mother, and her mother's mother before that. The comfort comes from knowing that, as she explains in an interview, “these boundaries of flesh have been there, well before my consciousness” (Rustomji 2009, 88). This is conflated with images pertaining to her homeland, a coastal region: the place where she comes from, the author tries to explain through images, is both her mother's womb, and her ancestral roots in Kerala, her house in Tiruvella in particular. The problem is that in her dreams the rooms are dark, and she cannot escape the house, as she cannot escape her roots (2003, 30). The other way in which she sees memories is rather opposite: “flat, filled with the burning present, cut by existential choices” (ibidem). She imagines being able to make a garment out of the many places she has lived in, but she soon realizes

that she has no home. She connects this with her own unquestionably female body: “sure, everything else looks fine. She has two hands, two feet, a head of long black hair, a belly, breasts. But it is clear she is a nowhere creature” (ibidem). Bewildered and appalled, the author asks herself: “is America this terrible multiplicity at the heart?” (ibid., 201).

Yet, this strategy of looking back to one's female ancestors in order to find an anchor for the present stops working, when she realizes the precarious present of her life in America:

It worked for a while and quite beautifully. It was a usable past for me in poetry. It was a sure thing when it worked, an ethnicity evoked, a past that took the form of an ancestor, a grandmother figure as in all those poems in my book *House of a Thousand Doors*. She came to me in image after image, a female power allowing my mouth to open, allowing me to be in North America. But then – it was like getting stuck on the train and almost being cut down the middle – I realized with a brutal shock the real place I am in. I wanted to tear myself free from that past. It had sucked me back in a vortex I could no longer support. (2003, 200-1)

In other words, at a certain point in her career, Alexander felt that she needed a past in order to reclaim the present, but without being nostalgic about her childhood years in Kerala. In other words, she needed to reclaim a past that “stands in vibrant relation to the present” (1996, 127), and she achieved this thanks to the connection with the art of other hyphenated Americans, learning something from each of them. This is why her essays and poems are filled with quotations and references to other American poets of various origins, from Korean American Theresa Hak Kyung Cha to Kashmiri American Agha Shahid Ali. In this way, she confesses in “A Durable Past”, her art is capable of “refract[ing] these lines of sense, these multiple anchorages” (1996, 128). She thinks that these connections, which she calls “lateral



holdings” (ibidem), are a substitute for a more canonical tradition. In other words, by refusing to revert to singularity, and by celebrating difference, she manages to make sense of her fragmented geography. According to her, the liberating power of American poetry is connected to “its rich genealogies” (Alexander 2009, xi), as if American poetry were “a living fabric connected by affective threads to other geographies, other histories, other languages, other ways of naming the sun and the moon” (ibidem). This “vital mesh of filiation” (ibid., 4) described by Meena Alexander is very reminiscent of what Édouard Glissant theorizes in his book *Poetics of Relation*: the “lateral holdings” Alexander speaks of seem to be very close in concept to the rhizomatic thought developed by Deleuze and Guattari, which Glissant describes as not predatory, nor “totalitarian [or] intolerant” (Glissant 1997, 11), and which is a constant of Caribbean and postcolonial identities<sup>58</sup>. According to

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58 The title of Alexander's book *Poetics of Dislocation* is likely to be a homage to Glissant's influential book *Poetics of Relation*, which is a reflection on Caribbean identity, among other things. Alexander makes the connection at the beginning of the book, when she is trying to explain the “lateral holdings” of American contemporary poetry, quoting the passage where Glissant speaks of “the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally an alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. . . . The land-beyond turned into land-in-itself” (Glissant 1997, 7-8), something that echoes for Alexander with regards to her new country, the United States of America. Furthermore, *Poetics of Relation* begins with a section called “The Open Boat” which is reminiscent of Alexander's preface to *Poetics of Dislocation*, called “Paper Boat”. For Édouard Glissant, the open boat is a three-fold abyss: first, the belly of the boat during the Middle Passage, which he calls a “womb abyss” (ibid., 6), then the depths of the sea where so many slaves were thrown overboard, and finally the new land, where the abyss meant “feeling a language vanish, the word of the gods vanish, and the sealed image of even the most everyday object, of even the most familiar animal, vanish” (ibid., 7). Out of the abyss, nonetheless, a new form of identity, directly related to a different understanding of the concepts of roots, is born. In Meena Alexander's preface, the author recalls the presentation of one of her books, where, prompted by a question from the audience, she claimed that if she was permitted to make a house out of the papers on her desk, she would make a boat, “the kind of boat that's like a tent” (2009, ix). Both objects, the boat and the

Glissant, the Western notion of roots kills everything around it, and, always according to the Martinican theoretician, it strictly works on dualities: either you are a citizen, or you are a foreigner, conqueror or conquered. In other words, Glissant argues that from a historical point of view the West has posited the concept of rootedness as ubiquitous with the idea of nation, also imposed by Europe on the rest of the world. Alexander understands this very well, writing that she finds it hard to fit into “the watertight notions of selfhood and cultural belonging that nationalism seeks to enforce” (2009, xi). The rhizome, which Glissant calls “Relation”, is a new kind of open trajectory that denies traditional filiation and allows for new alliances and connections, which Alexander also links to Zygmunt Bauman's concept of “liquid modernity” (2009, 5)<sup>59</sup>.

Moreover there is, according to her, something in the very structure and morphology of the city of New York that allows memories to be released. It is the presence and the awareness of the passing of so many immigrants, but also “something in the way space works with remembrance, letting loose these breakable rhythms, rhythms of breath, rhythms of meaning, rhythms of bodily sense cut from continuity, redispersed in the dense living spaces of a metropolis” (1996, 142). It is, in other words, the urban landscape of the city that allows her memories to fall into the fissures between buildings, chopped by the apparently chaotic and random

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tent, recall Alexander's dislocation experiences, and of course Glissant's theories on nomadism (*errantry*). According to Glissant, *errantry* is a form of nomadism that includes “sacred motivation” (Glissant 1997, 211n), what Alexander terms a “restlessness I am hard put to name” (2009, x).

59 To give an example of “Relation” Glissant speaks of Frantz Fanon and of his path from Martinique to Algeria, through a connection that he describes as “from periphery to periphery” (1997, 29). This particular kind of trajectory, he clarifies “makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery” (*ibidem*). The perfect example of “Relation” is according to him the Caribbean, but he also claims that American writers such as Faulkner, Henry James or Whitman already offered this kind of structure.

alternation of apartment blocks, historical buildings, parks, and shopping malls, all cut through by the underground and the buses, where the author likes to write, always in transit, in a moving space. About her conceptualization of memory in New York City, she writes: “I think of memory sliced in slabs, remade, inventing what was lost. City blocks chopping up memory, the subway tearing through it, speed releasing the amnesiac bolt that locks in so much of life spent in multiple places” (ibidem). New York City, which is a new city if compared to most European or even Indian cities, also allows her to invent memory, which is something essential for a black woman, who, Alexander writes, “has no ready shape” (1996, 145). In an interview with Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva for a book on South Asian people and their relationship with postcoloniality, Meena Alexander reflects on how many South Asian women working in the art and literature fields feel the need to define themselves, and are willing to use material that is extremely personal. She says that “the whole issue of self-disclosure as it plays into postcolonial culture is a difficult one, but it may be more attractive to women because of the possibilities it offers of inventing a space for oneself. That may not be quite as necessary for men” (Alexander in Bahri and Vasudeva 1996a, 47).

Space and the female body are also connected when the author reflects on the fact of being uprooted, and on its relation with her physical body:

sometimes, though, I wonder if such mimic motion rivaling that of the angels and apsaras, covering continents held in a child's soul, hasn't left me with a fear of walking, of covering ground. I think of it as a feminine fear, because, had I been a male child, brought up between two lands, surely I would have been able to read maps, figure out the crossroads of the world. (2003, 73)

When she arrived in New York City, newly married, the feelings of uneasiness are conveyed in her memoir with sentences like “I felt more and more distanced from

my own life, swollen out of recognition, my body grotesque in the new world” (2003, 161), or “I knew I was one of those women, mouths taped over, choking on her own flesh” (ibidem). These sentences connect the feeling of being uprooted with one's own body, which has suddenly become alien and strange. In the poem “Gold Horizon” from her collection *Illiterate Heart*, Alexander also envisions an ancestor, a woman standing by a river, but her image is made disquieting by the fact that the woman has her feet cut off at the ankles, and that she laughs at someone else, being antagonistic about her present life in North America<sup>60</sup>. The younger woman, an alter ego for the poet, wrestles with the old woman, whom the narrator identifies as her muse by the third stanza, in an image reminiscent of Jacob wrestling with the angel in the Biblical tale<sup>61</sup>. The struggle is that between two landscapes, India and North America, suggested through references to both paddy fields and city blocks, bridges and asphalt, but it is also the tension between two literary traditions, two lifestyles, and two lives. The physicality of the whole composition – the woman leaning against a mango tree, her stumps shoving against the eyes of the younger woman, and the wrestling scene in the mud – are hard to ignore. Some kind of resolution is given by an apparent “melting to the quick migrancy” (2002, 51), with once again a prevalence of rough physicality, portrayed through the touching of “raw bones, the skull's

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60 The drafts of “Gold Horizon” were included in *Black Lightning: Poetry-in-Progress*, a collection displaying the work-in-progress of fourteen Asian American poets, including Meena Alexander. The book, edited by Eileen Tabios, aims at “illustrating the polysemous nature of poetry”, as poet Arthur Sze explains in the introduction (Tabios 1998, 1), and it is a unique achievement among texts on Asian American poetry.

61 By muse the poet does not intend a person who inspires her, but a much more abstract element that draws her to the writing of poetry: “what my words can barely mark, . . . that invisible space where meaning is made and unmade” (2009, 141). In “Gold Horizon” she sees it as an old scary woman, but in other instances she envisions it as a schoolgirl (in “Muse” from *Illiterate Heart*), or as a grown woman (in another poem also called “Muse”, included in *River and Bridge*).

precise asymmetry” (ibidem). In other words, one can say that “the poem's landscape is . . . reconciled through an attempt at the body's intimate and often visceral exploration” of oneself and of the other, melting one into the other thanks to the process of migration (Wilson 2009, 195). Playing with life and death, Alexander ends the poem with the latter, but the voices of children bring a conclusion to the troubled composition, revealing that the woman in the poem is an angel rather than a scary and intimidating ghost. The old ancestor needs in other words to be dead, in order for the children to begin their chant, to reassure the poet about the nature of the conflict. As Prageeta Sharma writes about Alexander's exploration of the self, “unlike Frankenstein, she does not create the monster, she confronts it. And in doing so, she creates an angel of mercy” (2002, 9).

In “Poem by the Wellside”, there is a similar, and equally grotesque grandmother figure, with bitter herbs in her teeth making “a necklace of grief” (1996, 41). In the middle of the night the scary old woman calls for the poet: “Meena! / Meena, my daughter” (ibidem). The well in the poem is a reminder of the suffering of Indian women, as the author as a child was told that young women who had become pregnant out of wedlock would jump, or be pushed, into the wells (Alexander 1996, 205)<sup>62</sup>. In her memoir, and in *The Shock of Arrival* (2006), the author also evokes a line of women, from whom she is descended and whom she calls “well-jumped women” (2003, 107), who jumped over the well, instead of falling into it. The old woman in the poem, described as an “old hag” (40), threatens her in a sense, and

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<sup>62</sup> The image of a woman jumping into the well is used to speak of the predicament of women in traditional societies by other women writers, both in and outside of the Indian subcontinent: it is present in Nayantara Sahgal's novel *Rich Like Us* (1985), where a British woman married to a powerful Indian businessman struggles to understand her role in her new adopted country and ends up at the bottom of the well in the backyard, and at the beginning of Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir *The Warrior Woman: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), which is a reflection on the intersection of gender and ethnicity for the daughter of Chinese immigrants to the United States.

Meena is determined not to surrender: “I will not turn to her / I will not perish” (ibidem). The author needs to reassure herself by clarifying that “my poem made in a cold country / is not about death” (ibidem), nonetheless beginning the next stanza with a “but”, and commenting about the bitterness of heliotrope and rue, some herbs that might be calling back to induced abortion. Meena wonders if something good will come out of this haunting image of the well: “will water pour from the well? / Will a stream of water take root, / make a table, a pitcher, a bowl, bread?” (ibid., 41). In other words, will something positive come out of this image linked to violence and death? Towards the end of the poem, the old woman explains to Meena that:

by the wellside,  
our dreams  
drop their clothes  
and flee. (ibid., 42)

Here the author seems to reflect on the life of Indian women, on how their dreams are sometimes unfulfilled, and on how only by the wellside they could be free from the constrictions of tradition. The well that seems to claim her and attract her is threatening because sheltering oneself in tradition, in one's past and one's origins, is for the poet a life-threatening situation that makes her unaware of the present. As she explains in *The Shock of Arrival*, as a child the well fascinated her, and she would try to see the face of a fallen woman in the water, but all she could see was her own reflection. The author describes this ambiguous poem, and the presence of the old woman, as “a darkness in the soul, glimpsed through water” (ibid., 38), which is something not entirely negative, but not a peaceful and serene vision all the same. Looking at herself into the dark waters of the well therefore equals searching for her own self, her own uncertain and fragmented identity. As she describes in *Fault Lines*,

this revolving to one's roots, can turn you into a woman who chokes on her own flesh (2003, 161). The grotesque body that Alexander referred to in *Fault Lines* is also present in this poem, right at the beginning where she writes: “body, you're a stranger here / I dare not touch the scars / of stippled flesh” (1996, 40), where 'here' could of course be interpreted as North America, which is her present location. This poem perhaps also shows the differences the author feels towards older generations of Indian women, who did not have a choice apart from jumping into the well or dreaming of other lives. As a matter of fact, it is not so much her real grandmother who calls for her in that poem, but a more general grandmother figure. Further on in an essay called “Erupting Words”, Meena Alexander writes that in that poem: “to reach the grandmother figure, I had to lose body, touch death” (1996, 48). In another poem, “Boating”, she imagines that the boat in which she is making a trip with her family tips over, and her grandmother clings to her, stopping her from drowning (ibid., 43-5). As they come out of the water together, as in a sort of rebirth, they cannot come unstuck. As Alexander comments in *The Shock of Arrival*, what connects her to her grandmother – and therefore to her ancestors and to her homeland – is her mother tongue, Malayalam, in spite of all the differences she might feel with older generations of Indian women (ibid., 38). In order to have a resolution, nonetheless, it seems that the author has to pass through some form of rebirth, that she has to give away notions of a fixed past and build herself anew.

The connection between trauma, violence, and memory is for the author always through the body. In an interview given in 2001 she talks about recovering memories and one's past, reflecting on the fact that: “when a body is broken into pieces you can't really necessarily pick up all the parts because bits would have gone into decomposition, or there are parts that you simply can't tolerate remembering” (Alexander in Poddar and Alexander 2001, n. pag.). As a matter of fact, the connection between memory and the body for Meena Alexander is haunted by the

facts related to her sexual abuse by the hand of her grandfather Ilya, which surfaced in therapy in 1997 and are displayed in several poems and in the coda of her memoir. In the collection *Quickly Changing River*, the recurring concept of anamnesis is to be interpreted in this sense, as a painful recovery of a lost traumatic past, “the bodily condition as remembered” (Shankar and Alexander 2008, 41). The subsequent healing is what the writer is attempting to do through poetry.

### 2.3.2 Violence and the Body

At the end of the “Book of Childhood”, a coda added to *Fault Lines*, the author explains how what one is, including painful memories of violence and of one's traumatic life experiences, are all directly connected to one's body, especially a woman's body. She does that by evoking the story of the Rani of Kodamangalam, who rode to war with a sari on which the names of the saints and holy women who could protect her were inscribed. When the queen passed through fire her sari melted into her skin, so that the names became embedded into her body. Alexander writes about it: “what allowed her to live out her life, made her what she was, was graphed in curving syllables over her woman's body” (2003, 316). In this sense we must understand the alphabets of flesh she speaks of in her poetry. The passage is particularly important because the author goes on explaining that it was impossible to read that script, and that “to be haunted by the illegible is the fate of those who have passed through fire and children who have been hurt beyond visible measure” (ibid., 317). As a matter of fact, many of her poems evoke scripts verging on the illegible: in “Indigo” someone observes: “*no one can read your handwriting*”, and the answer given in the next verses is “I almost wanted it that way / then came memory” (2002, 34, italics in the text), while in “Glyphs” the poet speaks of “ice-age inscriptions, ... / tumult of glyphs, zone of grace”, where – it is rather important to



note – “I need not fend for myself anymore” (ibid., 38). In “Map”, a poem from the same collection, the poet gives directions for “no place in particular” (ibid., 28), as if that map she is conjuring up were impossible to read, written in an alien script or with indecipherable symbols. In the aforementioned poem “Gold Horizon”, instead, the author conjures up the image of a metal bowl dented by a woman's blows:

bits of spelling lessons,  
shards of script  
struck from a past locked into privacy  
.....  
dropped, pounding as rice grains might. (ibid., 48).

It is important to note that the image of a bowl is linked to gender, as a bowl is an object often used by a woman, but in the poem it is battered and consumed by the rage and tensions of migrancy. As a matter of fact, there is often a tension between past and present in Alexander's poems, which is a reminder of memory and how it is always fragile in our everyday life<sup>63</sup>.

In “Art of Pariahs” the poet evokes the dowry deaths that afflict India, giving birth to a poem that is highly charged with elements of both violence and reconciliation, via the multitudes addressed to by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and reminiscent of Walt Whitman. The poem uses a mythological character, Draupadi, in order to show how discrimination works and what kind of problems dislocation triggers. In the poem, Draupadi is recast as a young immigrant in North America, and is coupled with two other women: the Queen of Nubia and the Rani of Jhansi<sup>64</sup>.

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63 In her memoir Meena Alexander observes how her adolescent years in the Sudan now feel distant to her, and how she needs to learn to remember them.

64 In an essay dedicated to British Asian artist Chila Kumari Burman, Meena Alexander writes of how the Amar Chitra Katha comics so popular among children in India, and in particular one called

Draupadi herself was a queen, the wife of five brothers in the epic poem, and like contemporary immigrants, she lived in exile in a foreign land<sup>65</sup>. As a matter of fact, Draupadi, the powerful but suffering woman of the epic poem, is conjured up as a housewife, with her “back against the kitchen stove” (1996, 8). This image brings to mind several, conflicting thoughts: for some women the kitchen is a shelter, a place where they feel protected and have the power to decide, but it can become a prison for those women who are not allowed to go outside of its four walls. In the poem, Draupadi is singing a sad song, the words – “In my head Beirut still burns” (ibidem) – a writing the poet saw on a wall in the East Village. They express violence apparently happening in a distant place, a Middle-Eastern city in a country famous for its problematic borders and the communal riots among believers of different faiths. Soon after that, Alexander calls to mind other two mythological or historical characters, powerful queens who did not yield to their opponents. They all represent parts of the poet’s self: her roots in the ancient myths and traditions of India, her diasporic self expressed through the reference to an African queen, and her modern Indian roots represented by one of the most famous heroines of the struggle for independence. These three powerful women ultimately match the common woman, a contemporary Draupadi who is a simple housewife rather than a queen, and stands

*Tales of Valiant Queens*, are “a surefire way to learn of figures from history, the Rani of Jhansi set side by side with Draupadi, the literal past and the mythological past commingled as it enters into the child’s imagination” (Alexander 2009, 109). For the Queen of Jhansi see note 33. The queen of Nubia is probably a reference to the legendary figure of Candace of Meroë, a Nubian queen who is said to have defeated Alexander the Great, who had tried to conquer her lands, situated to the south of Egypt. The Queen of Nubia is also mentioned here because of her link to the Sudan, the country where the author spent many years of her childhood and adolescence.

65 I acknowledge that “exile” and “diaspora” are very different things. In spite of this, Agha Shahid Ali, an expatriate from Kashmir to the United States, often uses the word “exile” in his poetry. In an interview released for *The Kashmir Walla*, he says that he does so because he likes the word and its resonance (Kaul 2011).

in her kitchen rather than in a battlefield or in a luxurious palace. The three women “make an art of pariahs” (ibidem), therefore setting a contrast between their royal status and their unprivileged situation as women or outsiders, as each of these famous women can be considered as such for different reasons. From the ninth verse the subject of the poem becomes clear: the poet describes episodes of racism, starting from “two black children spray painted white, / their eyes burning”, and then passing on to describe how every ethnicity is affected: “a white child raped in a car / for her pale skin’s sake” (ibidem). The author expresses how race is constructed and based on conjectures and preconceptions: “an Indian child stoned by a bus shelter, / they thought her white in twilight” (ibidem), the stoning also recalling the Middle-Eastern cities previously mentioned. The young Indian woman who is standing by the kitchen stove, a new immigrant in North America, is fighting not to let someone or something enter into her house and one can assume she is fighting against the same preconceptions that haunt her (she could be the victim, of course, but also a potential tormentor). The iconic image of the Rani of Jhansi brandishing her sword, not yielding to the colonizers, is juxtaposed to Nubia’s elephants and to the young immigrant in the kitchen, fighting not to let racism enter her door. She is fighting to survive, her skin almost screaming at her, in this new racialized country, “till tongues of fire wrap a tender blue, / a second skin, a solace to our children” (ibid., 9). This is a turning point in the poem. The fire, which is supposed to be a destructive element, is gradually becoming benign, as in the case of Sita’s trial by ordeal, where she steps into the fire to prove her purity and comes out unharmed. That same fire burning in Beirut is now enveloping Draupadi and her future children in North America. The violence that took place long ago in a distant troubled city is also a presence in Draupadi’s adopted city in America and in her kitchen. Sita, inexplicably absent in the poem, is perhaps evoked in the image of an enveloping fire that turns out to be harmless. Draupadi could also stand for the infamous bride burnings or even for the

*sati* of Hindu widows. The fire now being benign, Draupadi has finally won her battle: she has defeated the man knocking at the door. One could envision a final victory on all kinds of discriminations and forms of violence, including those against women which in the past led to abominable practises such as the burning of widows in their husband's funeral pyre and that nowadays brings to equally ghastly occurrences, for instance the false accidents where young brides are set on fire using the same kitchen stoves mentioned earlier in the poem. The title is of paramount importance: Draupadi can only make sense of her life as a diasporic subject, a member of a visible minority dislocated from her community of origin, through art and perhaps public activism<sup>66</sup>. Alexander therefore equals gender discrimination – perhaps what the Draupadi from the famous epic might experience in her everyday life with five husbands and with her strict mother-in-law – with racism. The intertexts of the last three verses are many: the underground railroad is a clear-cut reference to African American culture, whereas New York's mixed rivers gloriously rising against all odds are a homage to Walt Whitman's poetry and his praise of the heterogeneous composition of the inhabitants of his country (and of New York in particular). The poem gives equal weight to two cultural and literary traditions: a white American one, represented by Whitman, and a black (and thus transnational) one, represented by the underground railroad. It is therefore poetry, the music of many different poets in New York City, writing in English or Spanish, in free verse or with rhymes, about violence or about the beauty of the urban landscape, that allows difficult topics to be spoken of, in the form of the benign fire of the last verses.

Racism enters Alexander's poetry numerous times: in “Central Park”, the second poem from the cycle “Rumors for an Immigrant”, the author imagines Gandhi – a symbol for peace and non-violence – entering Central Park, his charka

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66 In her novel *Manhattan Music*, Alexander depicts three women who find themselves through either art or social activism. One of them is called Draupadi like the woman in “Art of Pariahs”.

raised as if he were surrendering, while Allen Ginsberg holds hands with Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant to New York City who was mistakenly killed by the police and thus “turned into a star” (2004, 38), as Alexander writes. In that poem people gather in Central Park to protest against racism, with “pots and pans lashed to bicycle rickshaws”, finally united against injustices in the urgency of the moment: “there is no homeland anymore / all nations are abolished, a young man cries” (ibidem). Interestingly, the poem is also imbued with imagery from Indian colonial past, as in the first verse indigo burning is mentioned. As a matter of fact, the cultivation of indigo is inextricably linked to colonization, as indigo factories in India provided the dye for the booming cloth industry, to the point that indigo cultivation, forced upon the Indian farmers, was one of the major profits of the East India Company in India, especially in Bengal. Cynthia Leenerts also notes that Alexander mentions indigo several times when she speaks of the impact of colonialism on her life and identity (2009, 206). The Guinean immigrant “shot forty-one times by police as he stood in his own doorway” (Alexander 2004, 38), and Gandhi “with smoke in his palms” (ibidem) can be interpreted as a clue that something wrong is going on in the poem. This idea is also supported by Kopisch (2009, 184-5). There is an ambiguity underlying the poem, a conflict between images of peace – Ginsberg holding hands with Diallo, and Gandhi with a dove fluttering out of his dhoti – and more disquieting images of shootings mirroring the one that killed Gandhi. What Alexander wants to express is perhaps the impossibility to just cancel differences of nationality, religion and gender, an awareness that demonstrations for peace are always haunted by violence, and that to just wish to abolish the notions of nationality, religion and cultural background is naïve and even absurd, certainly impossible in our contemporary world. In “An Intimate Violence”, Meena Alexander tries to explain this belief in the following way: “the music of poetry . . . , allows the thoughts, the 'facts' if you will – the terror, the violence – to be raised up, so that even

as we see them imprinted in consciousness, there is hairbreadth that allows release, allows for the transcendence poetry seeks” (2009, 90-1).

In the fourth part of the cycle “San Andreas Fault”, in a poem called “Package of Dreams”, Meena Alexander uses once again a “quite metamorphic” (1996, 149) female figure, who is at the same time Draupadi, “born of flame betrayed by five brothers / Stripped of silks in the banquet hall of shame” (ibidem), the goddesses Kali and Durga, representing different aspects of the supreme goddess and therefore of women, but also contemporary unnamed men and women suffering in Sarajevo, Germany, Sudan and India, victims of episodes of racism, extremism or nationalism<sup>67</sup>. All of these women are conjured up and included in the poet's persona who, “hair loosed to the glow of traffic lights” like a contemporary Kali with her unkempt long hair, slits the author's neat “package of dreams” (ibidem).

The reason why the poetry of Walt Whitman is so highly praised by Meena Alexander and by other postcolonial writers based in the United States is explained very well by Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston in one of her interviews. She says about him:

I like the rhythm of his language and the freedom and the wildness of it. It's so American. And also his vision of a new kind of human being that was going to be formed in this country – although he never specifically said Chinese – ethnic Chinese also – I'd like to think he meant all kinds of people. And also I *love* that throughout 'Leaves of Grass' he always says 'men and women', 'male and female'. He's so different from other writers of his time, and even of this time. Even a hundred years ago he always included women and he always used [those phrases], 'men and women', 'male

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67 Durga is for Hindus the warrior aspect of the supreme goddess Mahadevi, and represents the victory of good over evil. She is often pictured with several weapons at her disposal, in the act of slashing demons with many arms. Kali is instead the goddess of time, change, and destruction, associated to empowerment (*shakti*), and usually depicted with a black or blue skin, several arms, the tongue lolling, hair dishevelled and eyes ablaze with rage.

and female'. (Hong Kingston in Fisher Fishkin and Hong Kingston 1991, 784, italics in the text)

Hong Kingston being one of Alexander's major influences, and references to Whitman being dropped here and there in Hong Kingston's *The Warrior Woman* and in *Tripmaster Monkey* (Rustomji 2009, 89), it is reasonable to think that there might be a connection between the two writers, or at least that Alexander and Hong Kingston might see Walt Whitman in the same way. To Walt Whitman Meena Alexander dedicates an essay in *Poetics of Dislocation* called “In Whitman's Country”, where she relates the importance of the great American poet in shaping her identity, which anyway she calls an “overused, much maligned word” (2009, 54). Whitman, writes Alexander, “has conceived of the self as a cluster of jutting, jostling identities and dared to make an epic out of that chaos” (ibidem). His greatness, according to her, lies right in the ability to make “such music out of self-division and then [imagine] a new, internally embattled nation as coequal to that self” (ibidem).

### 2.3.3 “Alphabets of Flesh” and Stone-eating Girls

In *Fault Lines* Meena Alexander remembers how her junior ayah Marya, with “flashy amber eyes, and large breasts that tilted upwards under her tight chatta “ (40), was always particularly aware of the stares of men in the village. She goes on explaining that:

whether it was her eyes or not, no cobra was ever sighted in her vicinity. Whereas when old, wrinkled Chedthi approached to greet the schoolmistress who wanted to take a shortcut through the rubber grove, . . . the very soil shook with the little puffs of air left out by the cobras as they poked their heads out, or aired their flashing tails.

Once I saw a whole forest of cobras surround Chedthi and the light was smoky vermilion with the power of their eyes. And out of their forked tongues they spat syllables, soft curling vowel sounds, the aa – ee – oo, au – um, ahas, I was being taught by the Malayalam tutor. . . . Did Marya's flesh have a voice that Malayalam or Hindi couldn't quite match? (ibid., 41)

In her mind the child-author connects Marya's body, who continuously attracts men's attention, with language: her voluptuous body cannot be linked to any language, thus the snakes do not attack her. This is only an example of how in Alexander's work the consciousness of one's female body is often attached to the conundrums of languages, written or spoken, learned or internalized<sup>68</sup>.

The haunting image of the stone-eating girl is indicative of how the author sees herself, as a “Susikali-Rakshasi conflation” (K. Ali 2009, 56) of good and bad<sup>69</sup>. The stone-eating girl she once saw as a child was considered shameless – *perachathe* in Malayalam – by the other women of the village, because she used to show off in front of everybody by keeping stones in her mouth. It seems to the author that the price for being shameless – to have refused the life she was supposed to live, the one her mother still praises – is to have stones in her mouth which she must eject

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68 Another episode in Alexander's memoir that shows how femininity is regulated and sanctioned in the Indian society described by the author is that of Graciemol, Alexander's cousin, whose story seems quite absurd, a made-up cautionary tale about vanity, rather than a real story. Graciemol had long beautiful hair, and liked to wear voluptuous red saris. Furthermore, she had been to university and was a successful surgeon. One day, after having taken her bath, she got electrocuted when her hair got stuck in the blades of an electric fan. The author had always had the suspicion, even as a child, that it was Graciemol's brilliance who led to that incident, and that her absent-mindedness was connected to her vanity (Alexander 2003, 56).

69 Alexander tells in her memoir how her grandfather used to tell her stories with a heroine called Susikali. In one of them the girl chases a *rakshasi* – a demoness according to Hindu mythology and epic poems – and the author felt that she was both the girl and the demoness (Alexander 2003, 32).



“through the miraculous gut we call the imagination” (2003, 80), that is to say through writing. There is in this image a certain guilt of being a poet, which is somehow connected to the fact of being a woman. In a previous passage, the author also remembers how as a child, overwhelmed with confusion about her internal division between Khartoum and India, she once swallowed a pebble from her Kerala house. She confesses: “swallowing that stone gave me a sense of comfort, of power even. I felt I was a child who could accomplish certain feats, sustain something hard and solid inside her” (ibid., 78). It is this perception that permeates the image of the stone-eating girl, who in a story told by a social worker visiting her grandfather's house is a *satyagrahi* protesting with a hunger strike for having been evicted from her own house<sup>70</sup>. In order to fight hunger, the girl puts stones in her mouth, thus becoming the “creator of a stern discipline, perfecter of an art” (ibid., 85), a quality the author admires. It is the ability to endure, to “accomplish certain feats”, that Gandhi used when he emphasized what he saw as the default disposition of women, whom he wanted to emulate in his non-violent experiments leading to self-rule. This element of unordinariness, of making oneself noticed through a skill or an art, is also present in the child's fascination for fire-eating, but also – once Meena has become an author – in the memory of the stone-eating girl she evokes when she has to accomplish something difficult. When she remembers the death of her grandfather Ilya, the author also conjures up a stone that can be spat out in the form of poetry, or swallowed, transferred into one's own inner being, writing: “I turned away, my heart a soiled stone. I wrap up that stone now, in paper, in sand. It shivers in my hand, I do not have the tongue to spell it out, or the gut to swallow it up” (ibid., 88). It is not by

70 Recollecting how one version of the story about the stone-eating girl involves a woman displaced by a new clothes factory, Anindyo Roy argues that she is, among other things, “a reminder of the vulnerability of the subaltern in postcolonial India” (2009, 118). It can also be argued that the stone-eating girl is a symbol for dislocations and displacements of different kinds, all involving women, what Spivak would call “the gendered subaltern”.

chance that the stone is held inside the mouth, somehow keeping the tongue at bay<sup>71</sup>. In an interview the author explains: “I was always fascinated by what it would mean to be a body that didn't move, to have thoughts and feelings that didn't have to be cobbled into words”(Alexander in Duncan 1999, 24).

As a matter of fact, the connection between language and shame is an important and recurrent element both in Alexander's memoir and in her poems, and

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71 This is also connected to the child abuse she suffered by the hands of her grandfather, which had not yet surfaced in the first edition of *Fault Lines*. In poems written years later, Meena Alexander connects this inability to either swallow or spit out to that buried episode of her childhood, for example in the following verses from a poem called “Veil”: “I tore skins from mulberry stalks using my teeth. // I refused to swallow the wet sour stuff. / Some things you never forget” (2008, 33). The blue of the mulberries recurs in the poems from *Quickly Changing River*: in “Neela Marya”, a poem from the same collection, the pebble and the colour blue are matched once again (ibid., 37-8). The poet observes that blue is the colour of Krishna, who is sometimes simply represented as dark, and thus a continuous reminder of Alexander's skin colour in her adopted country, somehow connected to shame. Neela Marya is also a reference to the “black Madonnas” (“neela” means blue in Hindi), therefore blue is the colour of shame in these two poems. Furthermore, in “Nomadic Tutelage”, a poem dedicated to Audre Lorde who had the office next to her for a while (Alexander 2008, 120), Alexander writes: “I try to recall the color of your face. // Was it lighter than mine? / Was it the color of the East River // When the sun drops into soil / And I, a child by the well side, pack my mouth with stones?” (ibid., 48). Blue is of course also the colour of water, which is a constant element in *Quickly Changing River*. Like the pebble, water is both a positive and a negative element, able to give life and death at the same time. It is not a coincidence that another recurring colour in the collection is red: the red of the blood the old woman in “In Kochi By the Sea” dips her finger in (ibid., 12-15), drawing a quickly changing river; the carmine-streaked pebble in “What Ayah Says”, connected to shame, guilt and the well where girls who swallowed things they should not have miserably fell (ibid., 39-40); even the red of her mother's sari, the place where she wants to “let the pleats swallow [her]” after her grandfather has abused her in “Dark Door” (ibid., 42). The third colour to be evoked in the collection is the green of the torn grass in the eponymous poem “Torn Grass” and in “Song of the Red Earth”. Perhaps it is not accidental that blue, red and green are also the primary colours.

it is always linked to her female body. In *Fault Lines* the author remembers how during her teenage years she was feeling a certain anger about the limitations of being a woman in a conservative society. The conflict was between her intelligence – the things she learned at school and the inspiration she got from the life of renowned poets – and the things that were supposedly required from a woman, modesty and reticence in particular, which clashed with a writing life that inevitably exposed her private experiences (Alexander 2003, 113). Writing in fragments is, according to the author's own experience, also connected with her own female body, because, as she explains, during her teenage years she was forced to write in secret, and she had to stop abruptly when she was about to be discovered. Writing was, therefore, a guilty pleasure for the author, and one closely connected to her female body and the birth of sexual desire. It is no wonder that she specifies that she had to hide the paper under her skirt, tucking the pen into the elastic band of her knickers (ibidem). Alexander spells out that the guilty pleasure was from “writing that came out of my body” (ibid., 114), considered separate and different from the academic writing she had to produce for homework<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> Towards the end of the memoir, in the coda added for the special tenth-anniversary edition, the author recalls how *qalam*, pen, was one of the first words she learned in Arabic while she was in Khartoum, and how this word becomes connected with the *shari'a* law that was sometimes enforced, which involved cutting off the right hand of any thief as punishment. Mentioning that she sometimes dreams that her writing hand is cut off at the wrist, she connects guilt with her writing experience, and associates theft to the act of writing by women. She evokes this in her poem “Port Sudan”, where reflecting on the many languages inside her she writes “*If I forget Upper Egypt, // cut off my right hand. / Here lies memory*” (2002, 11, italics in the text). The image of a writing hand cut off at the wrist is also evoked in “Blue Lotus”, where the poet asks herself “Dark tribute or punishment, who can tell? / You kiss the stump and where the wrist // bone was, you set the stalk of a lotus” (2004, 41). The poems from the cycle “Rumors for an Immigrant” are also haunted by matching images of “a man with a hurt wrist” (ibid., 40) and of a woman who suddenly “stops writing, [and] rubs her wrist” (ibid., 39), after having reflected about the possibility of a world

The author confesses that what she had felt about writing in Khartoum, she also experienced about being forced to learn English, which was the language of education, together with Arabic, in the Sudan. “Unease, embarrassment, a fear of being exposed, a shame, finally, of being improper, not quite right, never quite right” (Alexander 2003, 114) accompanied her, and the reason is again “because of what my body made me: female, Indian, Other” (ibidem). The implicit connection between learning to use a foreign language, and “what it meant to be cast out, unhoused” (ibid., 111) is through violence, both epistemic and physical. Meena Alexander's poetry often draws on different kinds of violence that she has seen around the world: be it the barbed wire seen during a trip to Jerusalem, or the well-jumped women forced to commit suicide who haunted her during her childhood years in Kerala (ibid., 106-7). About this connection between writing and violence she writes: “my sense of poetry, even in its uttermost privacy, drew strength from struggle, from tumult” (ibid., 117). This is because of the many “fault lines” in her life, and among them the language that she uses, English, which – she says – “exerts an intimate violence” (Alexander 2009, 117). Meena Alexander perceives scripts as elements that could potentially imprison her, like barbed wire (2003, 119-20). In the poem “Muse”, she recalls how poetry came to her as a young girl, and she connects it with

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where people have no homeland. Images of a post-war partitioned Berlin, where her entire body is cut into pieces, suddenly surfaced. Furthermore, Kazim Ali also notes Alexander's references to Shakespeare's Lavinia in her memoir (K. Ali 2009, 64), where she mentions that while she was being abused by her grandfather, she would “rather cut off [her] own hand than remember what had made me pick up my grandfather Kuruvilla's scissors” (Alexander 2003, 240-1). She also dedicates a whole poem to Shakespeare's Lavinia, “Lavinia Writes” in *Quickly Changing River*. In that poem it seems that Lavinia is visiting Monet's garden and home in Giverny. Cynthia Leenerts also makes an acute observation on the significance of Lavinia as opposed to the stone-eating girl: “while the stone-eating girl copes as well as she can, doing only what a child can, unable to articulate, the adult, literate, conscious, angry Lavinia overcomes silence” (2009, 211).

fragmentation, partition and open wounds of sense, in the following way:

a jagged music pours:

gash of sense, raw covenant  
clasped still in a gold-bound booj,  
*pusthakam* pages parted. (2002, 23)

Later on in the same poem she also recalls how, many years afterwards, the muse came back in the form of “a bird shedding gold feathers / each one a quill scraping my tympanum” (ibid., 24). The subject of writing and script is therefore also involved, and the scraping sound on one's tympanum is not apparently something nice, but rather painful or annoying.

According to her, learning a new script would bring new hierarchies with it, setting women apart one from the other, and recalling distinctions between different literary traditions. In the poem “Night-Scene, the Garden”, the poet evokes the image of barbed wire, which is associated to prison cells, and a feeling of immobility and uneasiness<sup>73</sup>. Ancestors come out of the broken ground in the imagery of this poem, “out of earth's soft / and turbulent core” (2003, 130)<sup>74</sup>. Some of them are women, with

pots and pans  
and kitchen knives  
Bolts of unbleached  
cloth, embroidery needles,

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73 Barbed wire is mentioned in many other poems, for instance in “Elegy for My Father”, where the poet evokes the trauma of Partition (2002, 14), and in “Civil Strife” where the poet is unsure about borders and limits, writing “I could not tell when the threshold stopped, / where barbed wire would work its bounty” (2002, 31).

74 The poem, actually a ten-part sequence printed in a 32-page booklet, has also been reproduced in parts in Alexander's memoir *Fault Lines*.

glitter and crash in heaps. (ibid., 130-1)

In the last section of the poem the alphabets of flesh appear, and they serve as a way to claim one's heritage:

Come, ferocious alphabets of flesh  
Splinter and raze my page

That out of the dumb  
and bleeding part of me

I may claim  
my heritage.

The green tree  
battered on despair  
cast free

The green roots kindled  
to cacophony. (ibid., 131)

As the author explains in *The Shock of Arrival*, in this poem “there is a vision of ancestors dancing free of the earth, permitting the 'ferocious alphabets of flesh'” (12).

The second section of the long poem “Illiterate Heart” is also about language and script. The connection is between the uneasiness of being a woman who wants to write poetry, and also of being an Indian person learning to use a foreign language, English. Sense is overthrown when the poet imagines a string of words she had to pronounce: “a (apple) b (bat) c (cat) d (dat)” (2002, 64), where “dat” stands for the absurdity of it all, especially the English children in “starched knickerbockers / or sailor suits and caps” (ibidem), a clear clash of meaning. The connection between a

hostile context and a language that appears equally hostile and foreign to the child-author is epitomized in the stanza where the English children from her reading books are imagined in the following way:

dead all winter  
packed into icicles,  
tiny and red, frail homunculus each one  
sucking on alphabets. (ibidem)

Further on in the poem Alexander evokes a moment in her life when, because of a nervous breakdown, she was unable to read. The episode is explained in her memoir (141-3), and it is connected with the problems of being a dark-skinned woman working in a white university in England. It is interesting to note that the poet speaks of letters acquiring a sharp edge, a concept similar to the barbed wire that can torn flesh. The author explains how she started to feel because of stress:

the script started to quiver and flick.  
  
Letters grew fins and tails.  
Swords sprang from the hips of consonants,  
vowels grew ribbed and sharp. (2002, 65)

As usual, feelings about language are connected to one's body, in the following verses:

My body flew apart:  
wrist, throat, elbow, thigh,  
knee where a mole rose,  
bony scapula, blunt-cut hair. (ibid., 66)

The poem goes on describing how as a child she used Malayalam words, which she knew only phonetically, to flee from her family, and from the restrictions of English. At the same time, though, she did not want to learn to write her mother tongue: “I will never enter that house, I swore, / I’ll never be locked in a cage of script” (ibid., 67). As a matter of fact, Meena Alexander only writes in English, even though influences and words from other languages abound in her poetry. She decided to stick to the English script, and never learned how to write in Malayalam or Arabic. This was a deliberate choice, not a matter of laziness but a way to unify and give strength to her already fragmented existence. In order to explain this, in her memoir she cites Dylan Thomas, who in an attempt to describe how an elemental force works in nature speaks of “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower” (qtd. in Alexander 2003, 119). In the poem “Illiterate Heart” she describes it as follows: “the heart’s illiterate, / the map is torn” (2002, 68), perhaps suggesting that this will not help her feel entirely whole, as she is already fragmented into a cacophony of sense, but it helps her accept that there is a part of her, the most internal one, which is not haunted by languages and script. Her feelings for the English language are ambivalent, split in two like everything else in her life:

I realized the forked power in the language I had acquired: English alienated me from what I was born to; it was also the language of intimacy and bore the charged power of writing. Through it, I dared to hope, I might some day unlock the feelings that welled up within me. (2003, 116)

Salman Rushdie writes in “Imaginary Homelands” that many postcolonial and dislocated writers use the English language “perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world,



struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies” (1991a, 17). As mentioned before, Meena Alexander “[draws] strength from struggle, from tumult” (2003, 117), thus it can be argued that the use of English gives strength to her poetry because of, and not in spite of, the ambiguity it entails. As she writes elsewhere, “what grants vision also burns and consumes. . . . Creativity lies bedded in the unrest of rock and and root and tree and human soul” (2009, 16).

In “Skin Song” Meena Alexander writes of how words literally erupt from a woman's body, and she somehow connects it with childbirth and menstruation, and with the trauma of her grandfather's death, aggravated by her refusal to see him one last time before he died. She writes that she “cannot spell it out” (1996, 21), evoking once again the stones in one's mouth and this ambiguity at the core that prevents her from either swallowing or spitting. At the beginning of the poem the images are of “skin of my tongue, wrapping up / stones so sweet to suck” (ibidem), but the stones soon turn into something that needs to be expelled, not without pain:

I was speech swallowing death,  
verbs all shame stanced: *Vak, Vak, Vak*  
crouching, shitting, guts cramped in childbirth  
the wide-shouldered bullheaded child  
butting the mother-to-be. (ibid., 22)

In *Fault Lines* she writes that “in America the barbed wire is taken into the heart” (195), meaning that one has to deal with it in intimate terms. The barbed wire tears one's flesh, because in America one does not necessarily have to deal with physical threats of violence, but with psychological and epistemic violence. She writes about it:

it is our bodies that press against the actual of America, against the barbed wires and

internment camps and quotas and stereotypes of silent women with long black hair sticking flowers in neat vases. We need the truth of our bodies to reach what ethnicity means, what the imagination must work with. And to get to this real place we need the bodily self, we need a speech that acknowledges rage, a postcolonial utterance that will voice this great land. (2003, 195-6)

According to her, poetry translates from a place that she likes to call a “zone of radical illiteracy” (2003, 260) that she describes in the following way:

Zone of radical illiteracy out of which I write, translating myself through borders, recovering the chart of a given syntax, the palpable limits of place, to be rendered legible through poetry which fashions an immaterial dwelling yet leaves within itself traces of all that is nervous, stoic, edgy. The skin turned inside out. (ibidem)

Somewhere else she rephrase it as “transporting or ferrying across wordless, tangled thoughts and sensations into language” (1996, 39). In other words, poetry in order to make sense of oneself, to express something that cannot be expressed in any other way, with normal communication<sup>75</sup>. In the poem “Provenance”, the first from her collection *Illiterate Heart*, she addresses an unnamed 'you' who disrupts grammar, writing: “With you I enter a space where verbs // have little extension, where syntax smolders “ (2002, 3). In this poem the poet evokes a famous archaeological site of the Indian subcontinent, Mohenjo Daro, reminding the reader of the ancient civilizations of India, and of the author's provenance, which is indeed the title of the composition. Interestingly, Mohenjo Daro means “mound of the dead” in Sindhi, and the feeling of walking on piles and piles of ancestors is also present in the next poem of the collection, “She Hears A Gold Flute”, where a “great hill of bones” (2002, 7) is also evoked, but on a snowy landscape, where the alter-ego of the poet is wearing a coat

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<sup>75</sup> In “Port Sudan”, she writes: “now I know the truth of my tongue // starts where translations perish” (2002, 10).

and boots over her Indian sari. The feeling is that of getting to know a place she never thought she would, in a cold climate where her dark skin clashes against the white snow. Mastering and dosing the alliteration throughout the composition, Alexander writes: “I am going over stones / stumbling to a place / I never thought I’d know” (ibidem). In these two poems, both landscapes have something oppressing, the mound of dead people, that is to say their history, but there are two simple objects that seem to bring solace to the poet: in “Provenance” it is a simple bowl on a ledge whose “pallor pleases” (2002, 3), in the second poem it is of course the gold flute leading the woman to a stone house. The gold flute – an implicit reference to Krishna – is perhaps poetry that guides her through her life, or as she writes in a poem from *Raw Silk*, “flute music guiding me through the vertigo of history” (2004, 35)<sup>76</sup>. *Illiterate Heart* was dedicated by Meena Alexander to her dying father, and one of the main topics in the collection is that of the distance of a daughter who lives two oceans away from him. The two poems thus speak of two homelands: one in the Indian subcontinent, and one in North America.

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<sup>76</sup> Here the poet is also evoking the importance of the mere musical elements in the act of writing verse, that same thing Wallace Stevens praises and asks the poet to do in “Mozart, 1935”, a poem Alexander mentions in *Poetics of Dislocation* (63; 163).

## 2.4 Palimpsests of Place

*“Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox, / my home a four by six inches. /  
I always loved neatness. Now I hold / the half-inch Himalayas in my hand. /  
This is home. And this is the closest / I’ll ever be to home.”*  
- Agha Shahid Ali

*“I live in one city / but then it becomes another /  
The point where they mesh / I call it mine”*  
- Moniza Alvi

In Meena Alexander's own experience, poems become real places, and have the function of anchors, somehow stitching the author's existence, so that her life can finally make sense to her. In an interview she explains it as follows: “I have to fabricate place so that these images can exist, not as mere bits and pieces of temporality, echoing in my inwardness, but as portions of a shining symbolic space, their fluttering parts, redispersed in a poem” (Alexander in Gioseffi 2006, 48). For Meena Alexander, the concept of location in poetry and its construction in our consciousness is thus not only connected to space, but also to temporality. “Location is a temporal index”, she affirms in an interview (Alexander in Poddar and Alexander 2001, n. pag.). Having studied Husserl's *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* for her doctoral thesis on Romanticism, she came to the conclusion that “memory is spatial, and . . . location is temporal” (ibidem)<sup>77</sup>. She also traces these reflections on the sensuous experience and on its connection with time and memory to the reading of non-Western texts, for instance *Milinda Panha*, which is an ancient Buddhist text where king Menander asks questions to the sage Nagasena concerning the nature of perception and consciousness (ibidem).

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<sup>77</sup> In an interview she writes that “poetry is what breaches time, and allows for song” (Alexander in Rustomji 2009, 95).

It is not a unique place that each of her poems represents and evokes, but – as she writes in her memoir – “with all images now, in the dislocated life, landscapes superimposed each on the other, a veritable palimpsest, time's turmoil” (2003, 125). Later on in the memoir, she describes this even better by spelling out: “in all my work, place is layered on place to make a palimpsest of sense” (ibid., 284), which means that to make sense of her complicated geography and of the complications of our interconnected contemporary world, she needs this kind of multilayered poetry. In order to describe how her poetry works, in an interview Meena Alexander speaks of how her poems are about “the kinds of correspondences or associations that may exist between geographically distant places but which can cohere or fuse together in the imagination which then is attached to a place in the mind—a place that both is and isn't” (Alexander in Poddar and Alexander 2001, n. pag.). It can be argued that Meena Alexander is constantly searching and reaching out for what Seamus Heaney calls “the place of writing”, which he defines as “an outpost of poetic reality in the shape of a physical landmark”, proving that Alexander is essentially “a poet with a domineering rather than a grateful relation to place, one whose poems have created a country of the mind, rather than the other way round” (Heaney 2002, 232), which is what Seamus Heaney says of W.B. Yeats<sup>78</sup>. This splitting and seaming of place is the

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78 About the relationship between consciousness and the act of writing poetry, Alexander also writes that the poem “doubles up as place, and grants the powers of self-fashioning to a consciousness dislocated by the inexorable passage of time” (2009, 125). She also expresses this in the poem “House of Breath”, where thinking of the many houses she had as a child she evokes “a garden / Made entirely of paper” (2008, 108). The poem also evokes Indian-born artist Zarina Hashmi's works of art, portfolios of works on paper exhibited in Bombay (Alexander 2008, 121). Seamus Heaney's essay on W.B. Yeats and Thoor Ballylee is mentioned by Meena Alexander right at the beginning of *Poetics of Dislocation* (8), when she discusses the importance of place in the making of poetry .

same strategy used by other poets of the diaspora, for example by Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali, whose poetry of loss and exile connects beautifully with Alexander's work. There are many poems written by Meena Alexander where this strategy is foregrounded, but one I would like to quote here is “Acqua Alta” from *Quickly Changing River*, which has also been chosen for a project involving the arts and climate change<sup>79</sup>. In this poem, the author connects Venice and India in unexpected ways. Rushdie speaks of a “stereoscopic vision” of dislocated writers, which replaces a “whole sight” that is no longer possible, because of the fragmentation and multiplicity of the self (Rushdie 1991a, 19). In a sense, the palimpsest of place built by Meena Alexander is this stereoscopic view: in the case of “Acqua Alta”, Venice and the backwaters of Kerala juxtapose, to the point that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other, thus creating a third place, the place of the page, which is in a sense what Heaney means for “the place of writing”. In Alexander's re-vision of Venice, the Indian monsoon “floods the Ghetto” (2008, 80), and Kalidasa, the great Indian playwright who lived in the fifth century, dreams of

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79 “Acqua Alta” is a concert project aiming at raising the awareness of climate change through art.

The focus is the city of Venice, a symbol of the danger of ignoring global warming, and Meena Alexander's eponymous poem “Acqua Alta” has been chosen to be set to music by renowned Swedish composer Jan Sandstrom. The performance premiered in Sweden in February 2012. Meena Alexander has dedicated several other poems to Venice in *Quickly Changing River*, for instance “Self-Portrait in a Floating Mirror” (2008, 73-9), divided into three sections. In the essay “Why Venice?” Meena Alexander reports what she wrote in her notebook during a trip to Venice, after she was asked during a poetry reading why come to Venice at all. The passage ends with an explanation of why the city fascinated her. She writes: “what might it mean to belong . . . when the streets are filled with water?” (2009, 150). This impression is also expressed in a couplet from the poem “No Ceremony”, where Alexander writes “How could I belong to you / When all I have is cast afloat on water?” (2008, 84). As May Joseph summarizes, the “liquid cartographies” of Alexander's poetry are “penetrating analyses into the tectonic shifts of migrancy between land masses and bodies of water, between childhood and the Indian ocean” (2009, 254).

Sakuntala in a high room by the Accademia bridge. In this poem, Venice becomes a place of memory – of remembrance and forgetfulness – both reminded by the reference to the fish who has swallowed the ring of remembrance<sup>80</sup>.

Meena Alexander also writes that “to make a lyric poem I have to enter into a dream state” (2003, 284) and in this sense her poetry can be considered as verging on the oneiric. As a matter of fact, in dreams one often interconnects places and periods of time in one's past life, not to mention objects and feelings in unexpected ways. It is not by chance that in the preface to *Poetics of Dislocation* she writes that her “notion of locality edges into dream” (xi). What she means is that only in dreams places – and therefore also notions of home – make sense. Her memoir is filled with dreams that she has and that she tries to decipher, for example she once dreams of the stone-eating girl tearing apart her blood-red sari and showing her pounding heart. Meena Alexander also makes unusual connections in her prose pieces, as one would do in dreams. While she is on a writing residence in Switzerland, for example, she tries to imagine how Pierre Bonnard, the famous painter of whom she has a reproduction, would paint her grandmother Kunju, long dead. Her poems often start from an

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80 In *The Recognition of Sakuntala*, an ancient Sanskrit play written by Kalidasa and based on an episode from *The Mahabharata*, Sakuntala is cursed by the anger-ridden Durvasa, so that her new husband, king Dushyanta, forgets about her. Her only chance to make him remember that she is his wife is to show him the ring he gave her, but while she is playing near a lake the ring slips off her finger and drowns into the water. Fortunately, a fisherman finds the ring inside the belly of a fish and brings it to the king's palace. Sakuntala is nonetheless long gone, sent away by her husband who did not remember her. It is not until many years later that Dushyanta and Sakuntala are reunited. The remembrance Alexander speaks about in the poem is of course connected to the concept of anamnesis – in the philosophical rather than in the medical significance of the word – that pervades the poems in *Quickly Changing River*. Anamnesis was first introduced in the poem “Black River, Walled Garden” from *Illiterate Heart* (91-99). See Leenerts (2009) for an excellent analysis of the concept and the implications of anamnesis in *Quickly Changing River*.

image, rather than from a concept, and sometimes from a dream, to the point that the author calls “House of a Thousand Doors”, a “dream poem” (1996, 27). She often seems to have an image to start with, and from there she tries to understand what the meaning of that image could be, working on feelings, associations and juxtapositions of memories and locations.

Meena Alexander finds herself wondering about herself and her difficult relationship with dislocation, and therefore with space, when she is in transit, in airport lounges or at underground stations. In *Fault Lines* she describes the puzzlement of seeing Indian migrant workers bound to the Gulf in Bombay airport. Directed to a life of privations and frustrations away from their families, they were about to be uprooted from everything they knew. It is therefore a feeling that she can connect with. In the same way, the author explains how she can intimately bond with other immigrants, when she is in the underground stations of Manhattan. In order to give an example, the author speaks of how a beggar with dusty shoes seen by chance in the streets of New York City reminds her of somebody else she saw many years before in Asmara, while on a trip with her parents. In the poem “News of the World”, she uses the image of a newsagent to talk about poetry, also allying herself and identifying with a Cambodian immigrant who has experienced the horrors of the war and is now a common street vendor in New York City:

The playing fields of death  
are far away from me. In Cambodia I carried  
my mother's head in a sack  
and ran three days and nights  
through a rice field

Now I pick up vegetables  
from old sacking and straighten



them on crates: tomatoes  
burning plums, cabbages hard  
as bone. I work in Manhattan. (1995, 6-7; 2003, 194)

It is interesting to notice that it is a mother's head that the persona of the poem used to carry. Her identity is at risk in her new home: “The subway corrupts me / ... // I get lost underground” (ibidem). This danger is interrupted when a man with a muddy stain on his shirt seems to recognize her as an immigrant in this city. Alexander seems to imply that even though she teaches at the university she is also that Cambodian immigrant selling vegetables in the streets of New York. She therefore addresses the problems related to agency and positioning, of which many postcolonial scholars are aware. This has not always been her approach and her reaction to the chaos of the city of New York: as she relates in her memoir, when she first moved to the city she could not adjust to it. At first she perceived New York City as a scary and dangerous place, where one does not have a history. She writes about it:

it is hard to make the bits and pieces together. Things are constantly falling apart. The city is dispersing itself, jolting, jutting its parts. There is no ideal of poise in its construction, just the basting together of bits. Sometimes bits burst open, split apart, and one does not quite know how to go on. How to construct a provisional self to live by. How to make up memory. (2003, 177)

Place names recur in Alexander's poem, and they often juxtapose each other, or better – as she writes in “Gold Horizon” – they “splinter / on my tongue and flee”, and the author needs to stitch them together “into a single / coruscating geography” (2002, 49). As the author beautifully describes in “The Travellers”, the second section from a poem called “The Storm”, “names thicken and crack / as fate is cut and chopped /

into boarding passes” (1996, 107). Interestingly, here it is not only identity, but also the places the poet has been to that are splintered, not reconstructed in their entirety in the poet's memory. In *Poetics of Dislocation*, which is a volume from the series *Poets on Poetry*, Meena Alexander describes Agha Shahid Ali's jagged sense of place in poetry as “a geography of dissonance, place tearing open to reveal another place, an elsewhere the poet must claim in order to reach where he wants to go” (9). This definition works for Alexander as well, because her elaborations on place and geography are equally layered. In the aforementioned poem “Gold Horizon”, for instance, there is a reference to a torn horizon, which is a way of showing the relationship between the two landscapes of the poem: the muddy fields of Kerala and the waters of the Hudson river in New York City, her new world converging at the level of the horizon with the other one<sup>81</sup>. In *Black Lightning* she reveals that she considers the migrant experience as “a tearing which is why the horizon is torn. But it is also a birthing where something has to tear for something to come out. It is a kind of difficulty for which we don't ordinarily have words” (Alexander in Tabios 1998, 200). There is therefore a conflicting relationship with place and with the landscape, reflecting her own ambivalence regarding the migrant passage.<sup>82</sup>

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81 The torn horizon of the poem reflects what Seamus Heaney writes in “The Place of Writing”. For Heaney, W.B. Yeats's Thoor Ballylee represents what he calls “the place of writing”, a refuge the poet took from the horrors of the Irish Civil War, which is reflected in the actual act of writing poetry. Seamus Heaney writes: “one of the first functions of the poem, after all, is to satisfy a need in the poet. The achievement of a sufficient form and a fulfilling music has a justifying effect within his life. And if the horizons within which the poet lives are menacing, the need for the steady gift of finished art becomes all the more urgent. So it is in the light of just such a constant flickering horizon of violence and breakdown that we read the tower poems and much else of Yeats's work at this period” (2002, 234-5).

82 Not only does Meena Alexander conflate places in her poetry, but she also juxtaposes literary traditions, often referencing Western and non-Western poets in the same poem, thus making them interact with each other. In “Indian April”, for example, she mentions Allen Ginsberg and Mirabai,

Rather surprisingly, Alexander compares the juxtaposition of different places in her poetry with Indian goddesses with many arms, claiming an alternative representation of beauty, different from Western ideals but equally valid and powerful (Tabios 1998, 208). It is therefore an aesthetic that Meena Alexander is building when she works on her palimpsests of place.

Meena Alexander explicitly writes about the connections between gender and race in some of her essays, observing that the latter changes as one crosses borders, and it is thus connected to place. In “An Intimate Violence”, an essay first published in a journal called *Transformation* and then reprinted in *Poetics of Dislocation*, she reflects about it:

there is a painful edge to the word race. Sometimes I cannot help thinking of it as a wound, something it cannot be cleft apart from my femaleness. And yet there, at the same time, when I step back a little, there is always the sense that race is an illusion, something made up. Otherwise why would I be so different in different places – by which I mean, seen differently, treated differently, almost becoming another *I*? So it is that when crossing borders – between India and America, or even between the rich multiethnic mix of New York and the white suburbs – I feel a transitoriness in the self, the need for a febrile translation. (2009, 89)

According to her, Our perceptions of race and gender travel with us across borders, and once a border is crossed they need to be translated.

The poet perceived this when she moved from the Sudan to England in order to pursue a PhD in English literature at Nottingham University. She chose to work on Romanticism, but she felt disconnected to the male poets of her studies, in spite of the fact that they also reflected on place and body. She writes about it:

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both admirers of Krishna, thus connecting New York and India through poetry. These connotations do not come easily to her, so much that in the poem “An Honest Sentence” she asks herself: “How can I bring the Greeks and the Indians / together like this?” (2002, 52).

I clung to the clarities of a realm marked out by male poets, even though in abstract terms I was thinking about the body and how it permitted a place through which internal time could sway.

There was nothing in the refined notions I set about to elaborate (drawing on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the notions of intentionality and *corps vecu* that might be inclusive of what I was – no color there, no female flesh, no postcolonial burden. (2003, 141)

During her research for a doctoral thesis, she investigated the notion of *corps vecu*, which fascinated her. The reflections of Merleau-Ponty, nonetheless, had very little to say about the poet's own dark and female body. In spite of that, Alexander was interested in the relationship between consciousness, the writing of poetry, and the perception of time and space that is all around our living body, which according to her “is marked exquisitely, brutally by what we call history” (2009, 126-7).

In *Poetics of Dislocation* she asks herself whether a poet can incarnate the spirit of a place. Meena Alexander was influenced by Wordsworth from an early age, and she worked on Romantic poets for her doctoral thesis, which means that for a long time she reflected on the meaning and importance of place in poetry. She has written in *Poetics of Dislocation*, and has confirmed in several interviews (Bahri and Vasudeva 1996a, 37; Gioseffi 2006, 46), that when she was young she believed that in order to be a poet one had to be well-rooted in a specific place, and this is why she felt different, out of place and inappropriate for the act of writing. In *Poetics of Dislocation* she writes that “if poetry is the music of survival, place is the instrument on which that music is played, the gourd. The strings, the fret” (119). The reason is very simple: according to her, “place bears the mark of history” (ibidem).

About William Wordsworth, she has confessed: “he's an extraordinary poet, although I hate much of what he stands for” (Alexander in Bahri and Vasudeva

1996a, 46). Somewhere else she explains:

It's almost an impossible love because it's this idea of a native place, of a particular language, of a simple life – none of which is possible for someone like me – and in a sense all of which is written over the Anglican world of which he was part. The connection with Wordsworth is also a deep one because of the whole question of memory that he foregrounds. (Alexander in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 76)

The traditional canon, what she calls “the haunting elegiac mask of the Wordsworthian paradigm” (1996, 4), his being a male Western poet among male Western poets, has obviously influenced the author, but has also triggered a desire to go against common assumptions about poetry and place. In the poem “Raw Silk”, the author remembers how as a schoolgirl in Khartoum she would read Verlaine's poetry in class while there was trouble in the city, evoked by the following verses: “and the town was literally blazing: // guns, grenades, blisters of smoke / on marketplace and mosque” (2004, 34). In the poem there is a strong contrast between inside and outside: Verlaine composed the poem she quotes, “Le Ciel Est Par Dessus Le Toit”, while he was in prison, and he evokes what is outside as an oasis of peace, while inside his soul the situation might be quite different. In the same way, Alexander creates a contrast between the inside of the schoolroom, where French poetry is taught, and the gunfire and the desert one can find outside, also evoking Rimbaud who obviously fits in this African setting, with firearms and violence at the doorstep. Poetry, confirms the author, is what helps her understand and elaborate it all. The poem also deals with her mother, conjured up in the first verse : “open the door or I'll faint hearing amma's voice”, but she seems to be from “another life” (ibidem) with her stories about “raw silk / brought all the way from Varanasi”, and “grandmother coax[ing] mulberries / from monsoon soil” (ibidem). The female figures in the poem clash against the male protagonists of the poems Alexander had

to read in class: the distinction between women inside the house and rifles, adventure and war outside – all things associated to maleness – is perhaps broken by the exhortation to open the door.

Alexander feels ambivalent towards Virginia Woolf as much as she feels towards Wordsworth. Although she admits that Woolf has influenced her, that she has always cherished “her soul marked by inner motion, speed unsettling a psyche that deliberately maintained the most tenuous hold on its bodily station, all the better to underwrite a language of fraught, bejeweled sensation” (2009, 65), she also feels that the fact that she belonged to that white colonial world Gandhi was trying to work against alienates Woolf from her, a dark-skinned woman born in India just a few years after Independence. In other words, Meena Alexander feels close to Virginia Woolf – and therefore to Western feminism – because of her consciousness of having been robbed of her identity as a woman, but she feels disconnected to her because they are on opposite ends of the colonial divide<sup>83</sup>. Precarious affiliations therefore characterize Meena Alexander's connections with other writers. It is the same sort of question Trinh T. Minh-ha asks in *Woman, Native, Other* when she speaks of the many and conflicting allegiances and loyalties of the woman writer of colour.

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83 Virginia Woolf came from a family with strong connections to the empire: her mother, Julia Stephen, née Jackson, was born in Calcutta from a family who had been in the Anglo-Indian administration for generations. Her maternal grandmother Maria Pattle was one of the seven Pattle sisters, famous in all of British India for their beauty. Of the Pattle sisters, Nina Auerbach writes in her biography of the actress Ellen Terry that they “exuded the glamor of early imperial rule: together, these aggressively beautiful sisters personified British power” (1987, 85). The woman narrator of *A Room of One's Own* even asserts of having an allowance because of an aunt who died while taking the air in Bombay, which is partially true, as Woolf really had an aunt in India who left her the money that allowed her to write.

## 2.5 A “Back Against the Wall Aesthetic”: Double Binds and Conflicts

*“Vertigo is a terrible mode of travel.  
It returns you perpetually to the funnels of terror.  
I want it to stop and am furious that fear has found me here  
in the sun where people are laughing, doing ordinary things.  
I want to be ordinary, I mean, with no worry that my house will be burned  
behind me, that my grandchildren will become the enemy”  
- Joy Harjo*

In the last section of *The Shock Arrival*, dedicated to Indian women writers, Meena Alexander speaks of a strategy used by women writers, which she calls “a back against the wall aesthetic”. She tries to illustrate it, explaining that “the formal structures [a woman writer] uses may well seem crude, since they are forged with what lies close to hand, and the living body, in all its passionate instrumentality, becomes the pivot of expressive truth” (1996, 170). What she means is that sometimes women do not strictly follow the principles of style dictated by a given aesthetic, because said aesthetic might disagree with their own experience as women. They are thus forced to compromise: they need to use some instruments, but at the same time they are forced to change the rules, because the material they have at hand reaches uncharted territory. They may borrow an aesthetic, but they need to subvert it and accommodate it to their own experience and sensibility. The role of the body is crucial, and to explain this Alexander reverts to the figure of Sita, swallowed by the earth, her mother, asking: “what might it mean to be accepted by the mother's earth? Is it a longing for flight, a woman's consciousness pitched to despair? Or is this possibly a true and final vindication?” (1996, 191)<sup>84</sup>. Finally, she connects the mythical

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<sup>84</sup> Another reference to Sita being swallowed by the earth is also present in the poem “Cold Weather Trees”, where the poet evokes the conflicts between her two landscapes, the South Indian one – towards which her mother calls her “through the monsoon wind” (2008, 9) – and the North

character of Sita with her present life in a foreign land, and writes: “what bond does the body of the immigrant woman bear to the North American soil? Particularly here, in this metropolis where there is so little earth visible” (ibid., 192).

Writing about Indian women writers Alexander concludes the essay reminding us that “female identity was forced to survive what was at times an almost unbearable tension between a culturally sanctioned femininity and the claims of female imaginative power” (1996, 171). The section of *The Shock of Arrival* that includes short essays on several Indian women writers, and also on Gandhi and women, is called “In Search of Sarojini Naidu”, and it starts with an introduction to Naidu, an important figure in both political activism and women's writing in India. The title of the essay is a reference to “In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens”, which is both a book and an essay written in the 1980s by Alice Walker. In the essay Walker writes about the legacy of African American women writers, and she lingers in particular on Phillis Wheatley, who can be related to Sarojini Naidu in many ways. Alexander confronts Naidu's political career with her poetry, noticing how in her political life she managed to break free from the stereotypical image of women as passive and weak. Sarojini Naidu also started to address the issue of self-rule, giving talks about colonization and ending up leading Gandhi's Salt March. In her poetry, on the contrary, she remained rather attached to tradition, offering images of “private, pained women suffering emotional deprivation, even psychic imprisonment” (Alexander 1996, 174). She wrote exclusively in English, in spite of her efforts to end the British colonization in her country. Alexander also recalls how Sarojini Naidu described how she came to the English language: through a coercion that involved her father locking her all alone in her room because she refused to

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American one, where snails can be caught in the hem of her sari if she does not travel quickly. The reference to Sita comes in the last few lines, when Alexander writes: “So I pick my way in through the cracks / To earth's sore place, navel of dirt / Under the cover of cold weather trees” (ibidem).



speak that language. Her own means of expression, poetry, is therefore ironically haunted by images of immobility, seclusion, and imprisonment. Her poetry is influenced by Decadent writers, and in particular by the image of still, fixed women. In her literary career she could not break free from the stereotypical images of women created by male writers. This is where the connection to Phillis Wheatley is to be made. Sold into slavery at a young age, Phillis Wheatley was taught to read and write by her own master. She wrote several books of poetry, and as a result she is the first published African American woman writer, and the first African American poet. Like that of Sarojini Naidu, Wheatley's life and poetry was full of “contrary instincts” (A. Walker [1983]1984, 236), or as Alexander writes of Naidu of “agonizing conflicts” (Alexander 1996, 182). Critics believe for instance that in her poetry Phillis Wheatley was reluctant to talk about slavery, from which she was eventually freed by her master, because she had conflicting feelings about it. She praised in fact the fate that took her from her own land, Africa, to take her to America and thus to Christianity. What Alice Walker writes in her essay is that even though Wheatley's writing was fraught with stereotypical imagery (she imagines freedom as a fair maiden with golden hair) this is the legacy of African American women's writing, and it needs to be embraced. In the same way, at the end of the section on Indian women writers – after writing about Sarojini Naidu, Nalapat Balamaniamma and Lalithambika Antherjanam, and having related their struggles with survival in a world dominated by men – Alexander attests that what Lalithambika Antherjanam wrote stays with her, even in her new city, retrieving her novel *Manhattan Music* to say that it is all part of a migrant music that one needs to acknowledge as a woman<sup>85</sup>. A bridge between

85 Lalithambika Antherjanam (1905-1985) was a Malayalam writer who defied conventions and traditions with her stories of Indian women in distress. Born into the Namboodiri Brahmin caste in what was then the state of Travancore, now part of Kerala, her life was regulated by the strict rules of society, as the girls of her community were not allowed to exit the house, had to go bear-chested inside the house and on the rare occasions that they went somewhere they had to screen

what African American critic Alice Walker wrote about black women's writing in her country and what Alexander wrote about Indian women's writing is important because it opens a path for theorizing, and for new alliances.

The tension felt by Meena Alexander and associated to her female body is portrayed in the evocative and lyrical essay “Theater of Sense” through the image of a Kathakali dancer who is interpreting Draupadi. The dancer starts a dialogue with the author on the reasons why she has come to America. His face is only half painted, to which Meena reacts in the following way: “I don't paint it all up as you do. It's naked and they take me for many things – Trinidadian, Guyanan, Mexican even” (1996, 195). The fact of being Indian is only half evident in her new home city, and her identity is cast anew: “I write this as I can, naming things afresh” (ibidem). Kathakali, the classical dance-drama of Kerala, is interpreted only by men, therefore the dancer imagined by Meena Alexander is in a marginal position regarding gender, being a man who plays the female role of Draupadi, and his half-painted face points at this discrepancy, which of course mirrors Alexander's many multiplicities.

These ambiguities and uncertainties at the core of Alexander's writing are mirrored in the recurring and haunting image of the thresholds, and particularly in

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themselves with palm-leaf umbrellas and cover themselves with an unbleached cloth. A namboodiri woman, commonly called “antherjanam”, could only marry the eldest son in a namboodiri household, while the other namboodiri sons in the family had to marry women from the Nair castes. Lalithambika Antherjanam had an illuminated father who educated her, but when she decided to go to a meeting of feminist activists without carrying her umbrella she was cast out of her own community, together with her husband. She began to write short stories, even though everybody in her community disapproved of her. Nalapat Balamaniamma (1909-2004) was also a Malayalam writer, and the mother of the renowned poet Kamala Das. Even though she did not receive a formal education, Nalapat Balamaniamma was able to become a poet thanks to the teachings and the library of her maternal uncle. She has written more than 20 books, especially of poetry in Malayalam. Antherjanam and Balamaniamma were both influential figures in the development of Indian women's writing, especially in their native Kerala.

the inability to either enter a house, or to go past the doorway, of which she writes in several poems. In “Illiterate Heart” she speaks of a house that feels like a cage, recalling the years when she was forced to learn English and when she was discouraged from writing poetry. In “House of a Thousand Doors”, a newly-married woman, identified by the author as a grandmother figure in *The Shock of Arrival* (28), can enter her house no more, “a poor forked thing / ... / imploring the household gods / who will not let her in” (ibid., 30). In this poem, written by the author soon after having arrived as a married woman in North America, Meena Alexander evokes the traditional Indian belief that a married woman does no longer belong to her original family, and thus to her parents' house, but is now part of her husband's family. The poet, newly arrived in a new country after her marriage to an American man, feels the same: she is still kneeling in front of her childhood house, even though she should start thinking that now she is part of the American landscape. In retrospective, Meena Alexander can think of this poem as a portal to her new life in New York City (1996, 28), yet there is no easy resolution in the text, and the observer is bound to watch the old woman kneel in front of each door forever<sup>86</sup>.

In the summer of 1996 Meena Alexander wrote “Gold Horizon”, a poem later included in *Illiterate Heart*. In that composition, the poet is haunted by another ghost-like grandmother figure, who will be revealed as her muse in the third stanza. The woman envisioned in the poem has her feet cut off at the ankles, and subsequently she can walk and move with difficulty. Alexander explains this image by saying that “I always thought I had one foot on the ancestral threshold. I was tied to it and if I

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<sup>86</sup> Thresholds appear also in “Lago di Como”: “what floats into view / is a door I cannot go through. / But I want to go on and on until I reach you. // At the threshold of the house / I imagine fishhooks tethered to sunlight” (2004, 57). She reveals in that same poem from a section of *Raw Silk* set in Italy that “what I cannot peer through is memory” (ibidem). The poet's path is blocked, figuratively and physically: “I try to keep walking but after the storm / branches flood the path, / make me squint and crouch” (ibidem).

took a step, I'd return to it. It's like the ghost woman . . . – she had her ankle cut off and although she was allowed to leave, she couldn't move very well” (Alexander in Tabios 1998, 199). The feeling of being tied by one's roots is therefore central to the poem, and it plays its role in the refusal the old woman feels for the author's choice of leaving India and start a new life in New York City. It is that “fear of walking, of covering ground” (2003, 73) mentioned in her memoir with reference to a metaphoric fight between angels or *apsaras*, and it is always connected to the female body, in particular with a woman's supposed closeness to traditions and reluctance to leave one's home<sup>87</sup>.

Meena Alexander further develops the conflicting legacy of her roots, remembering in her poetry both her father and her mother, or her two grandmothers, so different in their upbringing, one travelling the world and writing books, the other barely able to read, and bound to her home village. “Rites of Sense” is dedicated to the author's mother, and in particular to the period when she had to nurse her dying husband, Alexander's father. While admiration for her mother's hard work is unquestionable in the poem, which starts with the author massaging her mother's tired feet, the poem ends with the reminder that her mother's also taught her, together with essential domestic skills such as cooking and stitching, how to “stitch my woman's breath / into the mute amazement / of sentences” (2002, 72). The paradox of this expression is indicative of all the conflicts regarding the mother-daughter relationship: how her mother taught her her mother tongue, Malayalam, but how she also taught her that a woman should sometimes stay silent, something the poet cannot do since she has chosen to speak up with her writing (see Ali and Rasiah 2000).

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<sup>87</sup> *Apsaras* are in Hindu mythology female creatures similar to nymphs who inhabit either the skies or the earth. They are represented as skilled dancers to the music made by Gandharvas, of whom they are often the wives. They are sometimes compared to angels.

Her father, at the age of twenty-six, is instead likened to Gandhi in “Elegy for my Father”, where the following verses evoke the young Gandhi's curious fascination for everything Western, naively conceived as modern, as one can read in his autobiography. Alexander writes:

I imagine you like young Gandhi,  
eyes fixed to a mirror,  
  
adjusting collar and tie  
wanting French lessons, dancing lessons,  
surrendering to the equipoise of knife  
and fork. (2002, 14)

Her father and her mother are therefore opposing figures, one attached to tradition and unwilling to let her daughter disclose her personal feelings, especially through poetry, the other eager to try anything new, like Gandhi did as a young man.

Uneasy with the notion of modernity and its implications, to the point that in an interview she says “a word like modern – I simply don't know what to do with it” (Alexander in Poddar and Alexander 2001, n. pag.), Meena Alexander does nonetheless deal with the conflict between tradition and modernity in her work. Remembering how for her mother modernity had negative connotations, as something alien to Indian traditions, she thinks of it as an inevitably fractured condition, which is particularly fitting for India with its many languages and faiths. The notion of modernity is very conflicting for her also because her father was a scientist, and strongly believed in progress and in the assumption that all men are equal. She connects these reflections with problematic realities and the complexities of what we like to call modernity, such as reading Fanon as a woman, or reading

Descartes as an Indian<sup>88</sup>. It is in order to shed light to these unusual encounters that in “Indian April” (2002, 54-7), for instance, she imagines that Allen Ginsberg and Mirabai meet in Rajasthan and Central Park, or in “Kabir Sings in a City of Burning Towers” she conjures up the great mystic poet while she switches from pants to a sari in the toilet of her workplace in New York City, conscious that in the period following 9/11 the former is no longer safe to wear in the streets (2004, 14)<sup>89</sup>. In this sense she considers Gandhi a modern thinker, because of his conflation of religious and secular in a completely new way (Poddar and Alexander 2001, n. pag.). Gandhi is nonetheless also remembered as a contradicting character, because in spite of all his innovations he could not help but cut women's hair in an attempt to stop the sensual awakening of his male followers in Tolstoy Farm (1996, 182-5).

It is therefore a conflicting heritage that Meena Alexander conjures up in her poetry and essays with regards to the frictions between tradition and modernity, and it is one that does not necessarily need to be resolved. As Salman Rushdie writes in *Imaginary Homelands*, “if history creates complexities, let us not try to simplify them” (1991b, 65).

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88 Meena Alexander notices that women in the work of Fanon are “cast aside” (Alexander 2009, 81), but that his reflections on racism and the self are nonetheless useful for women. She speaks about Descartes in the interview with Poddar, where she refuses to discuss “modernity” but is eager to speak about the importance of Descartes in Western culture (Poddar and Alexander 2001, n. pag.).

89 Kabir is a fifteenth-century Indian mystic poet-saint who was brought up in a Muslim family but who grew up to question the dogmas of both Hinduism and Islam. In a simple and straightforward language, he advised people to leave aside religious texts and to follow the natural path to oneness with God. He greatly influenced the *bhakti* movement, and is still nowadays very revered. In Alexander's poem, Kabir stands for a reconciliation between different religions, and as a bridge among cultures and points of view, in opposition to a contemporary world that has become full of extremisms and nationalism. The episode when Alexander did not feel safe to wear a sari in the streets of New York and had to crumple it inside her bag and get changed in the rest room of the university building where she used to teach is also recounted in *Fault Lines* (287).

## 2.6 “Brown Skin, What Mask?”: Theoretical Reflections.

It can be argued that Meena Alexander disrupts common notions connected to being Asian American, in terms of identity as a writer and more in general as a person, by refusing to enclose her life into one single migration (Shankar 2001). As a matter of fact, Meena Alexander does not describe herself simply as an Indian woman living in the United States of America, or as an Asian American, but as “a woman cracked by multiple migrations” (Alexander 2003, 2)<sup>90</sup>. In other words, “the shock of arrival is multifold” (1996, 1), as she writes in one of her many pieces on migration. The dilemma she experiences is between what one is or thinks she is, and what the others see from the outside, the two points of view inevitably clashing. In the new land everything is cast afresh: one's ethnicity, one's nationality, even one's gender. In the overture to *The Shock of Arrival*, Meena Alexander questions W.E.B. Dubois's concept of “double consciousness”, reflecting that in her experience – and for many people at the end of the twentieth century – there are many consciousnesses, more than two, “in one dark body” (1996, 2). When Meena Alexander talks about her fragmented identity, the feeling of having “multiple beings locked into the journeys of one body” (2003, 1), she implicitly goes against the narrative of inclusion and integration that America has promoted for its immigrants. As she observed in an exhibition on Asian American identities, what characterizes her experience in her new home country is “a rich, aesthetic resistance to what might be thought of as the great unifying forces of America” (1996, 152). In this sense Alexander celebrates the multitudes present in the country, rather than its desire to integrate and assimilate, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o has

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90 Furthermore, Meena Alexander questions the term “Asian American” and its applicability, comparing it and coupling it with the term “postcolonial”. In an interview she reflects on the fact that the label of “Asian American writer” is applied to people who come from countries as different as India, China, Japan or the Philippines, forcing the construction of identity that is “formed under the pressure of being in America” (Alexander in Bahri and Vasudeva 1996a, 49).

observed in the preface to the tenth-anniversary edition of *Fault Lines*. It can be argued that Meena Alexander's poetry goes against Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea that in North America only the present counts, and that one does not need memory (Alexander 1996, 156-7). She is both fascinated and perplexed by that notion (Alexander 2009, 3), but it is clear that for her the present is not enough. In “Note Book”, a poem from *Raw Silk* composed in 2000, she questions it, and writes:

She has heard the rumor no one will have a homeland.  
She opens up her notebook,  
  
she wants to flee her past,  
she thinks she can live on the white page. (2004, 39)

The poem goes on remembering Brecht and a post-war partitioned Berlin, the poet's body tucked in two suitcases hung in a museum at Checkpoint Charlie. The poet does that in order to stress that memory is essential, and not just an accessory part of our existence.

Meena Alexander's perception of our complex and interconnected contemporary world goes against an easy and celebratory understanding of the process of globalization. As a matter of fact, in *The Shock of Arrival* she reflects on the fact that “we inhabit a world divided into bits and pieces, locked into nations, cultures, languages, creeds, distinct and multifarious” (1996, 130). To appreciate and value difference, and to oppose what she calls a “homogeneity [that] spawns terror” (ibidem), is the right path to follow, according to her. The other tendency, that to unify, leads to subjugation and destruction, epitomized by the episodes of Hindu nationalism she writes about in several poems and essays. This is of course consistent with the ideas of postcolonial feminism, especially with the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, because it values differences among women, rather than simply unifying



them under the rubric of gender. Meena Alexander finds herself on the same wavelength of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, who in their study on how to dismantle eurocentrism write that “a celebration of syncretism and hybridity *per se*, if not articulated with questions of historical hegemonies, risks sanctifying the *fait accompli* of colonial violence” (1994, 43, italics in the text). Alexander's feelings concerning identity are always intertwined with the consciousness of being a woman, so that the parables of more traditional postcolonial affiliation – like those in the work of Frantz Fanon – do not always satisfy her. Yet, she manages to make Fanon work for her, conflating him with the teachings she gathered from the poetry of Mirabai (Wilson 2009, 190). Postcolonialism and feminism are therefore set by the author in a position where they can dialogue one with the other in unexpected and profitable ways, giving life to new ways of seeing the intersections created by histories of migrations, and by one's birth, the “pot of stuff that you're given at birth” as she puts it (Alexander in M. Joseph 2009, 257).

Yet in “Rights of Passage”, an essay included in *Poetics of Dislocation*, she asks herself whether she is a postcolonial and/or a feminist writer, ending up refusing those labels. She affirms that she is a feminist and that she is certainly a postcolonial subject, because of when and where she was born, but she also thinks that being a feminist or a postcolonial writer is a very different thing, because it narrows the writer to one unique thing. In other words, she is discussing her positionality as a subject and as a writer, something Gayatri Spivak often reflects about<sup>91</sup>. Meena Alexander would agree with bell hooks in stating that it is a different thing to say “I am a feminist” and “I advocate feminism” (hooks 2000, 32), the latter allowing space for other 'isms'. In other words, feminism for both bell hooks and Meena Alexander is a commitment, but not of the kind that marginalizes or blocks other commitments.

In an essay called “Translating Violence” included in *The Shock of Arrival*, she

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<sup>91</sup> See for example Bahri and Vasudeva 1996b, 64-89.

also reflects on how countries that have experienced colonization, like India, seem to apply the same hierarchical structure, what she calls “a colonial sense of maintaining power, of keeping order” (82), to the role of women in society. In this essay the author recalls how in the 1970s, when she returned to India from her years in England, there was a growing feminism that counteracted more traditional views on women, epitomized by the prudishness of Gandhi, who during his experiments with non-violence in community living in South Africa cut the hair of young women, accused of provoking the men. According to her, women already feel marginal to the great traditions of classical literature, such as Sanskrit or Arabic, and when this is coupled with situations of violent upheaval, it leads to a fragmentation of the patriarchal mode and of the marginalization of female existence. This can be used to make sense of a dislocated life, and the connection between the violence of patriarchy and the kind of racism dislocated people are exposed to in the new country becomes obvious.

In “Illiterate Heart”, the poem that gives its name to the eponymous collection, an alter-ego of the poet comments on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a classic colonial/postcolonial text, and one that results problematic from a feminist point of view<sup>92</sup>. “Why should they imagine no one else / has such rivers in their lives” (2002, 63) ponders Meena Alexander in this poem, reflecting on the fact that people actually live on the banks of rivers such as the Nile or the Congo, and that these areas are not just areas of darkness, where nameless indigenous people wave at the ships arriving from Europe<sup>93</sup>. As she writes somewhere else, “what is an area of darkness

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92 In Conrad's novella, women hardly appear, and when they do it is in a way that has been called chauvinistic, or at least problematic for the woman reader (Pelikan Straus 1987).

93 Rivers seem to be important in Meena Alexander's poetry, so much that she has a collection called *River and Bridge* and another called *Quickly Changing River*. As a matter of fact, in most of the places she has lived there was a river: the Pamba and the backwaters in Kerala, the Nile in Khartoum, and the Hudson in New York City. *Quickly Changing River* is a reference to the many rivers she has

for the English man, is the site of ordinary life for those who live there” (1996, 92). The poet points out that she is “Marlowe and Kurtz and still more / a black woman just visible at the shore” (2002, 63). As a postcolonial subject, Meena Alexander has studied the works of Joseph Conrad at school, learning to read them from the classic point of view, developed by male Western scholars. In a sense, she is Marlowe and Kurtz, because she has developed a way of thinking and reasoning derived from male Western thinkers and poets. At the same time, though, Meena Alexander is also the unnamed indigenous character waving from the shore, and of course a woman, excluded a priori from knowledge and cast aside in Conrad's novella. This is exactly what she means with her “back against the wall aesthetic”: a constant bargaining between different traditions, tackling double and triple binds, as well as those manifestations of guilt and shame concerning writing and the body that Alexander so aptly writes about. “Illiterate Heart” goes on explaining how the author, as a woman, feels impaired both by the Indian literary tradition – exemplified in the text by the appearance of a “a mahakavi from the temples of / right thought” (ibid., 63) dressed in kurta and dhoti – and by the literary tradition of the English-speaking world, where a man “in white flannels / unherringly English, lured from Dove Cottage” (ibid., 64), a reference to Wordsworth, equally halt her.

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experienced in her life, but also to the fluidity and the ever-changing nature of the river, which seems to suit her well. See also M. Joseph 2009, 250-7; Duncan 1999, 27. Furthermore, Cynthia Leenerts observes that there is hardly any “dry poem” in *Quickly Changing River*, and that according to her, water acquires the power to heal, to cleanse, but it can also stain (2009, 206). Once again conflicts, memory and counter-memory, dominate Alexander's poetry. An example of staining in the poems of *Quickly Changing River* comes from “Cosmopolitan”: “Sometimes I cannot tell mulberry skin / From blood on the hands of children” (3). Mulberry recurs in *Quickly Changing River*: it is a reference to the mulberry patch that her maternal grandmother Kunju planted in her Tiruvella house after her return from China (Alexander 2009, 164). It is also associated to her grandfather, and the violence of his abuse, through the association with blood.

It is not the only poem where Meena Alexander comments on Conrad's novella. In “Great Brown River” the poet speaks of another river, the Mississippi, and compares it to the heart of darkness Conrad writes about, calling it nameless, and evoking “pitch black holes / between the rails” (1996, 94). To her, this North American river is new, unlike the African and Indian rivers she grew up next to. Its waves are in fact as sharp as words, perhaps because, as she tries to explain in the commentary of the poem, “they have to cut through into newness” (ibid., 93). In this sense she is subverting the preconceptions of colonial literature and its way of thinking. In this poem the dominant feature is the present location in America, and not the security of a Kerala childhood: it is part of Alexander's path of evolution to become more and more conscious of the importance of one's present in order to make sense of one's fragmentary past, through a recollection of childhood memories that is not nostalgic.

In “Illiterate Heart”, one of the most accomplished and rich poems composed by Meena Alexander, the author draws on Frantz Fanon for the concept of “zone of radical illiteracy”, which is inspired by Fanon's theorization of a “zone of occult instability” (Fanon 1963, 226), a place we must reach in our art, and in our effort to decolonize<sup>94</sup>. In an interview with Daniela Gioseffi, she expresses it as a certainty that “our deepest thoughts and feelings can only be evoked in poetry by the passage through a place without words, a zone of silence” (Alexander in Gioseffi 2006, 46). It

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94 In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon speaks of “a zone of occult instability” in his meditations on the meaning and value of violence in the effort of decolonization. For him the struggle going on beneath the surface of colonized people could trigger a violent and yet positive process of transformation. It is reasonable to argue that in Alexander's poetics there is an underlying tumult of sense and language creating a positive force which she channels through her art. The violence Fanon speaks about in his book is transplanted by the poet into the page of her poetry, which is often about conflicts and war. In a recent translation the expression has been translated as “zone of hidden fluctuation”.

is curious nonetheless that Meena Alexander makes a clear distinction between what she considers “bits of armor, postcolonial poems” (Alexander 2009, 85) – a category in which she includes “Brown Skin, What Mask?” (ibidem) – and “poems that are like flesh, the vulnerable part” (ibid., 86), including “House of a Thousand Doors” and “Rites of Sense”. She also adds that the latter poems “come out of a wordless part of the psyche, the part that didn't learn the rules of language very well” (ibidem). They are so personal that it would be arguably impossible to do as she does with “Brown Skin, What Mask?”, which she gives away to Jay, a character in her novel *Manhattan Music*. It seems to me quite important that she is able to give away a “postcolonial poem” to a male character of her novel, in spite of the fact that the consciousness in that composition is recognizably female. For more intimate poems, it can be argued, this could not be possible, so personal are the experiences of being a dislocated woman coming from a formerly colonized country.

“Brown Skin, What Mask?”, an obvious reference to Fanon's seminal book, is a poem about being cosmopolitan. As in the eponymous poem “Cosmopolitan”, where the poet questions an easy approach to globalization, in “Brown Skin, What Mask?” the speaker of this poem is seen scraping Indian things off her face, almost tearing at her own brown skin, and taking in the life in a big Western city. Yet, strange associations are offered: the speaker asks herself if she should “bruise” her skin, and “burn up” into a person with no colour (2009, 85).

Even though the connections Meena Alexander makes between different episodes of violence do not have any intention to analyse the political, historical or social circumstances that have triggered them, at the very end of her essay on belonging in the work of Meena Alexander Nalini Iyer asks whether “the emphasis on the commonality between 9/11 and Godhra [another name for the carnage in Gujarat] evade an analysis of the particular historical and material conditions that led to each” (2009, 149). In other words, do the connections between episodes of violence

in different parts of the world made by Meena Alexander go against what postcolonial feminists have taught us, that is to say to always pay attention to historical, social and political circumstances? I think they do not, because they are close to what Spivak calls “strategic essentialism” (1988a, 205). Furthermore, it is poetry that Meena Alexander writes, and not political or social criticism: in poetry, associations and what Jahan Ramazani calls “translocational juxtapositions” (2009, 54), are the norm rather than the exception. The connection she makes between apparently distant episodes of violence are those “lateral holdings” so important in her poetics. A perfect example is the Indian ocean, so present in the imaginary of her later poetry:

a site of an extraordinary hybrid inventiveness, a manifesto if you wish, for the making of poetry. The ocean allows you to conceive of a life which has multiple anchorages, and yet is not bound to one specific place. . . . The idea of the ocean as a space where one might rethink what land has enforced is a very interesting possibility. (M. Joseph 2009, 257).

In other words, water - and the ocean in particular - as a liberation from the constraint of identity politics, as another kind of identity, free to rely on “lateral holdings” and “multiple anchorages” (Alexander 1996, 128). The use of the anchor is not out of place here, and it is related to the paper boat referenced to at the beginning of *Poetics of Dislocation*. The paper boat is the potential shape of Alexander's moving house, able to navigate the liquid seas of fluid multiple identities, a notion perhaps akin to that of liquid modernity coined by Zygmunt Bauman <sup>95</sup>.

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95 May Joseph goes in so far as stating that all of Alexander's oeuvre is “a philosophical inquiry into the idea of flow” (2009, 260).

### 3. SUNIITI NAMJOSHI

*“There are ways / of belonging. / I belong with the lame ducks” - Eunice de Souza*

*“Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare” - Virginia Woolf*

#### 3.1 Biographical Introduction

Suniti Namjoshi was born in Bombay in 1941. Her father, Manohar Vinayak Namjoshi, was a senior test pilot, and died in a plane crash in 1953. Her mother Sarojini, née Naik Nimbalkar, was part of the royal family of the princely state of Phaltan, in Maharashtra. The author's grandfather was the *raja* of the state, until the accession to the Dominion of India in 1948. Her much loved grandmother Laxmi Devi Naik Nimbalkar, the *ranisaheb*, was an important influence for the author.

As a member of the Indian upper class, Suniti Namjoshi received a privileged education. She first attended an American boarding school in the Himalayan foothills, and then – after the death of her father – she was sent to Rishi Valley School, another renowned boarding school in the south of India, where she was influenced by the teachings of Jiddu Krishnamurti, an Indian philosopher who took an interest in education<sup>96</sup>. After college, she worked for a few years in the Indian Administrative

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96 Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) aimed at the education of the whole person, according to a point of view that could be described as holistic, and founded many schools all over India. Among them, Rishi Valley School was established in the early 1930s by Krishnamurti close to his birth place in Andhra Pradesh. He frequently visited the school and gave talks to the students about the value of education. Schools that follow Krishnamurti's teachings put an emphasis on discovery and exploration, also encouraging interaction between teachers and students. The aim is to form human beings who are in harmony with the world, also by choosing beautiful settings for the schools. As the author summarizes in *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, “there were more questions than lessons” (50).

Service in her home town, Pune. During this period she translated some Marathi poetry, with the help of her mother and grandmother. She left for the USA in 1968 thanks to a study leave, in order to pursue a master's degree in Public Administration at the University of Missouri.

Her first book of poetry – simply called *Poems* – was published in 1967 for the Calcutta-based Writers Workshop, a publishing house that has helped many Indian authors start their careers. Suniti Namjoshi moved to Canada the following year, having resigned from her government position, and started a PhD at McGill University, in Montreal. More collections of poetry were published in that period: *More Poems* and *Cyclone in Pakistan* both came out in 1971, also with the Writers Workshop. In the meantime, Namjoshi started to teach English Literature at the University of Toronto. Her first sabbatical leave, in 1978-79, is a turning point in her career: while in England, she came in contact with feminism and with the local gay and lesbian movement. This is when she started to read the work of feminist writers like Adrienne Rich and Kate Millett. The result is her most important and recognised book to date: *Feminist Fables*, published by Sheba Feminist Publishers in 1981<sup>97</sup>. Another collection of poems, *The Jackass and the Lady*, although written between 1972 and 1976, was published only in 1980. By that time, the author was a full-blown feminist, and revised the poems for the publication, inserting a few bold elements that were more in line with her new awareness (Namjoshi 1989a, 27). *The Authentic Lie*, written between 1976 and 1978, was also published later, in 1982. These problems with publication were due to offers with small publishers that fell through, as Namjoshi explains in *Because of India* (27).

Among her volumes that alternate poetry and fables *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* (1984) is perhaps the most political, while the material from *The Blue*

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<sup>97</sup> *Feminist Fables* was republished in 1994 by Virago Press. It is this version that I will be quoting throughout my work.



*Donkey Fables* (1988) is more concerned with aesthetic considerations. Namjoshi has also written longer fictions: *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* (1993) and *Building Babel* (1996) can loosely be called novels (or perhaps satires). The latter is peculiar because it is an editorial experiment: it encourages the readers to finish her work by adding chapters to be published on a dedicated website. *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) is a memoir, but interspersed with poems at the beginning of many chapters. Moreover, there are some fables scattered throughout the narration. *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems* (2006) is her last book to date, and again – as the title spells out – it comprehends both poetry and fiction. In addition to these, Suniti Namjoshi has also published a series of books for children, with the princess Aditi as protagonist. Suniti Namjoshi moved to England in 1987, after living for more than twenty years in Canada. She now resides in Devon, England, together with her partner and fellow writer Gillian Hanscombe, who is an Australian by birth. Together they have written several essays, and a collection of poems entitled *Flesh and Paper* (1986).

Her work has featured in many anthologies. Most notably, some of Suniti Namjoshi's fables were included in the short-story anthology *Way Ward Girls & Wicked Women* (1986), edited by Angela Carter, which features works by Bessie Head, Katherine Mansfield and Jamaica Kincaid. A first anthology of her writings called *Because of India* came out in 1989. It includes both fables and poems, and is supplied with useful retrospective comments written by the author on her evolution as a writer. It is, together with *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, the main source for commentary by the author on her own work and her life experiences. Moreover, a book that collects her best pieces from *Feminist Fables* onwards, entitled *The Fabulous Feminist*, has just been published for Zubaan Books<sup>98</sup>.

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98 Zubaan Books is an imprint of Kali for Women, the most important feminist publisher in India, set up by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon in 1984. It published influential works such as *Staying Alive*

### 3.2 Stylistic and Thematic Presentation

Suniti Namjoshi is beyond doubt a very original writer, and her style is often described as unique. She is primarily a fabulist and a poet, but she has also written longer fictions, where she often creates fantasy worlds, albeit keeping her “fabulosity” and lyrical style intact. In her poems she often uses speaking animals as protagonists, constantly questioning implied power structures and hierarchies, and interrogating assumptions of moral integrity, thus laying bare episodes of discrimination. Influenced by feminism and by the gay and lesbian liberation movement she discovered in the late 1970s, Suniti Namjoshi nonetheless criticizes certain attitudes of theory-influenced separatist feminists, by reflecting on her own path of discovery as an Indian lesbian feminist author living in the West<sup>99</sup>. She also enjoys mixing genres: her longer fictions can loosely be called novels, but they make use of feminist revisionist mythmaking, satire, traditional fairy tales and other material<sup>100</sup>. Furthermore, there are fables or poems inserted in the main narrative of

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(1988) by environmental activist and feminist Vandana Shiva, and *Shareer ki Jankari* (1989), written in Hindi by 75 village women and dealing with the body in a way that was inconceivable until then. In 2003 Butalia and Menon decided to part their ways: the former founded Zubaan Books in partnership with Penguin India, while the latter set up Women Unlimited. After having published with the feminist Virago Press, based in London, with the Australian Spinifex, and with the Canadian Fiddlehead (later to be renamed Goose Lane Editions), Suniti Namjoshi is finally seeing some recognition in her home country, with her last volume *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems* being published by Penguin Books India, and with this new anthology that covers the years when Namjoshi has published outside of the country.

99 I do not intend to enter the debate that sets gay and lesbian studies against queer studies. Namjoshi has been considered close to one and by the other by different critics. See Guarracino 2010.

100 Kanaganayakam defines them “lengthy narratives that are still fabulous” (1995, 45), while C. Vijayasree coins the term “lesbian *bildungsroman*” (2001, 102, italics in the text) to describe *The Conversations of Cow*. Using a term coined by Marleen S. Barr in her study of feminist science-fiction

these longer works, usually written by one of the characters or sometimes inserted as epigraphs at the beginning of a chapter. Suniti Namjoshi often revises traditional Western fairy tales or fables, as well as classical myths, nursery rhymes, and less often Indian folk tales. Her aim is to lay bare the politics of exclusion perpetrated by some of the most common narratives of our world, creating stories that allude to the problems of the contemporary world without being set in it. Male normativity, heteronormativity and eurocentrism, as well as the complications of the politics of inclusion and exclusion are the main concerns of Namjoshi's revisionist mythmaking<sup>101</sup>.

Because of her strong ideological stances as a lesbian feminist writer Namjoshi is sometimes marginalized by scholars working on Indian authors, and especially from within the field of postcolonial studies. Many Western critics do not consider Namjoshi's writing Indian enough, failing to acknowledge the many references to Hinduism and Indian philosophy in her work. The author of this study firmly believes that Suniti Namjoshi's work is rooted in Indian culture, in Marathi humour and sensibility, and influenced by Hindu concepts such as *leela* more than many other Indian writers who constantly include Indian words or passing references to Indian

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and its relationship with postmodern fiction, Vijayasree also proposes the term “feminist fabulation” for Namjoshi's longer works (Vijayasree 2001, 99). In my work I will call them “longer fictions”.

101The term “heteronormativity” was popularized by Michael Warner in the introduction to one of the first major works on queer theory, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, published in the early 1990s. The concept developed from the realization that heterosexual culture attributes to itself the ability to create society, in a way that excludes every non-heterosexual human association from its formation (Michael Warner 2004, xxi). The concept of “heteronormativity” as postulated by Warner is connected to Adrienne Rich's notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980), but also to Monique Wittig's ideas on the nature of society.

culture in their work<sup>102</sup>.

Her style is characterized by “verbal economy” (Vevaina 1998, 198), and it is devoid of any self-complacency. Her compositions are generally short: many two or three-line poems, one-page fables, with longer fictions being no more than one hundred and forty pages long. As a result, the impression is that she enjoys writing in fragments. Her work could be described as simple in language and structures, yet often enigmatic, “sprint[ing] buoyantly ahead of any attempt at paraphrase” (Vijayasree 2001, 14). This ambiguity is nonetheless not entirely intentional, and in the aforementioned interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, Namjoshi affirms: “I’ve bent over backwards trying to be clear. No writer sets out to be obscure” (Namjoshi in Kanaganayakam 1995, 46). Suniti Namjoshi does not believe that authors have the authority to assign definitive meanings to the texts they have written (Vijayasree 2001, 14). Instead, she offers clues and asks questions to her readers, undermining assumptions about what is perceived to be universal, i.e. the human experience. She also reflects on the creative act of writing, and how it is structured and sometimes biased by preconceptions. Her texts often demand to be re-read, in search of possible reading keys. A definite meaning is not possible, however, for most of Namjoshi’s writing, and this is perhaps why even the most seemingly pragmatic texts she has written, some in prose and relatively devoid of figures of speech, can be compared to poetry. What is striking, however, is the way Suniti Namjoshi looks at life and human experience from unusual angles. She uses irony and sarcasm throughout her work, and makes use of playfulness as a powerful weapon to speak about serious matters

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<sup>102</sup>Arundhati Subramaniam wrote a vitriolic poem on the issue of the preconceptions of Western critics about Indian writers. It is aptly entitled “To the Welsh critic who doesn’t find me identifiably Indian”. She writes: “arbiter of identity / remake me as you will. / Write me a new alphabet of danger / a new patois to match / the Chola bronze of my skin. / Teach me how to come of age / in a literature you’ve bark-scratched / into scripture. / Smear my consonants / with cow-dung and turmeric and godhuli” (Subramaniam in Thayil 2008, 177).

such as discrimination, the creative effort of writing, not to mention the cruelty and absurdities of the world we live in. Suniti Namjoshi claims that “the irony, the malice and the bizarre sense of humour are characteristic of Marathi” (Namjoshi 1982b, 15), which is the language she spoke at home (even though she was educated mainly in English)<sup>103</sup>. Playfulness is a central element in Namjoshi's work: it is a feature of postmodernism, but it is also essential in the Hindu concept of *leela*, the interpretation of the universe as a divine play<sup>104</sup>. As Vijayasree points out, playfulness in women's writing has sometimes been seen with suspect, with even Virginia Woolf's playful narrative strategy in *A Room of One's Own* having supporters and detractors<sup>105</sup>.

Suniti Namjoshi's work does not sound like that of any other Indian diasporic

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103Suniti Namjoshi is rather attached to her Marathi identity. In an interview she states: “if you get anything that is Indian in my writing, that is Marathi sensibility; it is there in the sensibility, not in the content. Marathis are known for their sarcasm and for their irony. You cannot offer a compliment in Marathi without sounding as if you were being ironic or teasing” (Namjoshi in Kanaganayakam 1995, 48). Further on in the same interview she says that the Maharashtran landscape – with its burnt grass, the dust and the heat, the blue skies – appears in her work, even if it may appear imperceptible.

104*Leela* (also spelled *lila*), often translated as “play”, “whim”, or “sport”, is used in Hinduism to describe reality as a manifestation of Brahman, the cosmic principle, who creatively creates or destructs. This power is also personified in the goddess Lalita, also called Mahadevi.

105Elaine Showalter criticized it, for instance, claiming that Woolf “plays with her audience, refusing to be entirely serious, denying any earnest or subversive intention” (1977, 283), while Toril Moi defends Woolf's choices in an essay that answers to Showalter by pointing out that her playful strategy of continuously shifting the perspective in her fiction and essays must be read at the light of “a deeply sceptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity” (1988, 9), also interpretable as that endless referral in language that Derrida theorized. Playful attitudes to storytelling should not be equated with a lack of concerns for serious matters, as postmodern modes of writing do not imply indifference for politics, but on the contrary they amplify the issues at stake by questioning common assumptions.

writer, and when critics try to compare her to other writers they end up making improbable comparisons<sup>106</sup>. The author justifies the dissonance of her work with that of authors like Salman Rushdie or Vikram Seth by claiming that she is from an older generation, and that she left India rather late, at the age of twenty-seven (Croyden 2000)<sup>107</sup>. It is her style, however, that distinguishes her from other writers from the subcontinent who are popular among Western readers. Namjoshi does not cater for a Western audience who is thirsty for Indian stories, and she is not at all tempted by the kind of exoticism Graham Huggan talks about in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, also defined by Ritu Menon in an afterword to a novel by Shashi Deshpande as “a *National Geographic*-land-and-its-people kind of treatment of the unfamiliar” (Menon 1999, 251). For the author, the fact that when writing in English Indian words become exotic is a cause of affliction, rather than an element to exploit. Moreover, her stories are not realistic but fantastic, sometimes bordering on science fiction or on dystopias (*The Mothers of Maya Diip* and *Building Babel*), genres that are not often associated with Indian writing, and even less with Indian women's writing. Furthermore, Namjoshi has always kept a low profile, relying on small publishers that allow her to be more free with her material. Her poetry and fables were considered, especially in the past, not Indian enough. India often appears only in the background, as a vague

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106Gina Wisker compares her to Angela Carter, Fay Weldon, Emma Tennant, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison (2000, 271). Somak Ghoshal, on the back cover of *The Fabulous Feminist*, cites Virginia Woolf, Hélène Cixous and Anaïs Nin in order to give a few coordinates to potential readers. Another writer often compared to Namjoshi is Margaret Atwood, because of her concern with revisionist mythmaking. All these names are however desperate attempts to find literary coordinates familiar to Western readers.

107In reality, Rushdie was born only six years after Namjoshi, and Vikram Seth eleven years after her. When asked to name some writers she identifies with she rather astonishingly mentions male Western writers: Jonathan Swift, Lewis Carroll, and Ezra Pound, plus the Marathi writers she grew up with (Croyden 2000, n. pag.).

setting for her stories or as a reference in poems such as “The Old Country Says” (Namjoshi 1971a, 12). The contempt and puzzlement readers and reviewers of her work have felt for this choice is evident for example in the words of an early Indian critic of her verse who maintained that “the balance should not tilt in favour of foreign things” (Dwivedi [1991]2001, 220). If one looks deeper into her poetry, however, references to her Indian upbringing abound. Namjoshi’s intertextual references can range from Western literature – say *Gulliver’s Travels* or *Alice in Wonderland* – to Indian-related topics such as funeral pyres (in “Once I Saw” from *Poems*) or the Hindu religious imagery (in the longer fiction *The Conversations of Cow*), depending on the situation. Her characters are often talking animals, but her inspiration comes from both Aesop’s or LaFontaine’s fables, and the Pañcatantra, a book of Indian folk-tales<sup>108</sup>. Sometimes, the strategies that she uses can be interpreted in multiple ways: while, for instance, C. Vijayasree writes that Namjoshi’s employ of self-referentiality, i.e. characters called Suniti that recur throughout her work, is a postmodernist technique (2001, 102), this is also a legacy of her Hindu background, where the author of a text can also be a character. In *The Mahabharata*, for example, Vyasa is the compiler and the author of the epic poem who writes it down with the help of Ganesha, but he is also an important character in the complex cosmology of the story he is telling. In other words, as Ruth Vanita remarks in her review of *Suniti Namjoshi: The Artful Transgressor*, which is the only monograph dedicated to Suniti Namjoshi to this date, the author’s work is imbued with references to Hindu philosophy. Her reflection on identity and self-representation, which constitutes the

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<sup>108</sup>The Pañcatantra, composed in India around 300 AD, is one of the most famous books of animal folk-tales. It had a great impact on European culture and literature, influencing both the Arabian Nights’ tales and La Fontaine. At least until the end of the nineteenth century, the book – sometimes known as *The Fables of Bidpai* – was recognized in Europe as a great Eastern classic, and was more popular than the Upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita. Some of the tales have a striking resemblance to those of Aesop.

main concern of works such as *The Conversations of Cow*, is for instance clearly influenced by the Hindu concept that what one is in life is arbitrary and precarious, because according to Hinduism reincarnation allows creatures to shift into different bodies, both human and nonhuman. Bhadravati, the lesbian cow who continuously changes identity in *The Conversations of Cow*, represents the mutability of things, the wholeness and pervasiveness of the Goddess she is sometimes referred as. Even though it may not be evident at first sight, India pervades Namjoshi's texts, albeit in subtle ways. As a matter of fact, the author still feels very rooted in the country of her birth. She says about it: “India is not something anyone can either give or take away from me. So it is not roots or a home that I am looking for. These are not roots that are possible for me to leave. . . . Sometimes this makes one feel like Gulliver tied down in Lilliput” (Namjoshi in Vevaina 1998, 200).

It can be argued that Suniti Namjoshi comes to the concept of fluid identities, or to that of strategic essentialism made popular by Gayatri Spivak, or again to the revolutions of queer theory through a personal path of discovery and evolution, rather than with the employ of theory.

One may feel intimidated by Namjoshi's stress on sexual, decolonial or feminist politics. Her work nonetheless speaks to Indians, women and lesbians, as well as to everybody else who cares to listen to her stories of juxtaposed hierarchies and interlocked exclusions. Namjoshi is eager to have her stories set in her home country, India, but she is aware of the implications. “The Giantess”, for instance, is set “in far away India, which is so far away that anything is possible” (1994, 31). While Namjoshi is satisfied with that fable, which deals with a giantess ruling a country where only men exist, she observes that the fable does not work for an Indian audience. She reflects on this, writing:

what troubles me is that such a remark could only be addressed to an English-



speaking Western audience. There would be no point in addressing it to English-speaking Indians. Am I speaking *for* Indians *to* the West (mostly feminists and anyone else who cares to listen), but not *to* Indians? (Namjoshi 1982b, 14, italics in the text)

In the fable that precedes it, “The Monkey and the Crocodiles”, the setting is also India, identified by the Yamuna river where the animals live, but the geographical location is normalized by the author, reflecting a double intention to portray India as both a normativity and an alterity, therefore defying binary oppositions<sup>109</sup>.

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109Interestingly, works like “Snapshots of Caliban” are sometimes included among Canadian revisions of *The Tempest* (Laframboise 1991; Brydon 1984), as if there were something intrinsically Canadian in the way the author worked with the Shakespearian text, when in fact it is imperialism in general and not a specific manifestation of it that Namjoshi deals with. As mentioned in 3.1, Namjoshi lived in Canada for twenty years, throughout all the 1970s and well into the late 1980s, moving to the United Kingdom in 1987, where she has been living ever since, albeit with frequent visits to India. The ironic thing is that were those essays on Canadian revisions of *The Tempest* written today, perhaps Suniti Namjoshi’s work would not be included in the collection, as the author is no longer located in Canada. A similar incongruity happened with an interview with Suniti Namjoshi that appeared in a journal called *Australian Women’s Book Review* published by the University of Queensland (Croyden 2000). She was included because her autobiographical book *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* was published by Spinifex, a publishing house based in Melbourne (her connection with Australia is through her partner, Gillian Hanscombe, a fellow poet hailing from Australia). Ironically, *Goja* was funded by a Canadian arts grant, written in England, and published in Australia. This is the proof that definitions and categories are hard to work with for writers like Suniti Namjoshi, who may be considered “at a crossroad of three [or more] variables” (Wynter 1992, 356).

### 3.3 Early Collections of Poems and Self-censorship

*“Tell all the Truth but tell it slant” - Emily Dickinson*

Namjoshi's first works are slim volumes of poetry published by the Writers Workshop of Calcutta, a publishing house founded by Purushottama Lal (usually abbreviated as P. Lal) in the late 1950s. Her early work has been described as tentative (Vijayasree 2001, 32; Dwivedi [1991]2001, 210), with some poems “not completely free from the sins of affectation” (Dwivedi [1991]2001, 210). Namjoshi confessed that in her first works she was exceedingly concerned with the formal aspects of writing poetry. She chose to write her doctoral dissertation on Ezra Pound exactly for the possibility of analysing in depth the work of a skilled poet (Namjoshi 1989a, 21). Certainly the collections are uneven, as they are the author's first attempts at writing verse, but there are several interesting poems that deserve attention. Furthermore, early reviewers such as Varma (1973) or Dwivedi ([1991]2001) are guilty of having certain preconceptions about what poetry is and how it should sound, giving harsh judgements about Namjoshi's poetry that in retrospective sound almost ridiculous. In this chapter some interesting poems from her early collections will be analysed, showing how from her early efforts Namjoshi was already concerned with some of the themes that will pervade her work, such as the dissatisfaction with the order of things, with conventions and final answers, but also for a feeling of being out of place, and for a certain uneasiness for normative forms of sexuality.

There were of course other women poets writing in India, and in English, at the time, most notably Kamala Das, whose confessional poetry on issues like love, marriage, seduction, and eroticism opened a path for Indian women writers in the

1960s<sup>110</sup>. Namjoshi never mentions Das as an influence, in spite of the fact that she was one of the first Indian poets to speak about a woman's sexuality. As a matter of fact, Namjoshi's early work shows a degree of uneasiness with conventions that is hard to find in other Indian poetry written at the time.

For an example of this uneasiness with conventions, my analysis will start from a short poem called “On Stage”, where the persona announces the fracture between the person she is and the person other people see, in a simple but effective way:

In a wine glass I float,  
Whoever I be,  
And the person who sits talking to them  
Is the person They see. (Namjoshi 1967, 9)

It should be taken in consideration that Namjoshi had to be very discrete about her sexual preferences while in India, also because homosexuality was still punishable by law (Namjoshi 1989a, 9). Because she belonged to a powerful family respected by everyone in the area where she lived and worked, the author had considered herself mainstream while in her country (Namjoshi in Kanaganayakam 1995, 47), thus these verses – published while the author was still living in her home country – hint at an uneasiness with conventions, instead of remarking some form of concrete discrimination, an experience that she will expose in poems like “How to Be a Foreigner” (1971a, 14) or “A Problem” (ibid., 36), published a few years afterwards,

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<sup>110</sup>There is at least another Indian woman poet that deserves to be mentioned here: Gauri Deshpande, who hailed from Maharashtra like Namjoshi. Deshpande published a collection of poems in English in 1968 called *Between Births*, and another one called *Lost Love* (1970). Both collections speak freely about a woman's sexuality, focusing in particular on marriage, in what N.V. Raveendran calls the “feminist/'confessional' mode” (2001, 15), also attributed to Kamala Das.

during her Canadian years. In one of the most powerful poems of her first collection, “Various Reasons”, the author conjures up the image of policemen, seemingly halting her imagination and the break-up of certain rules:

A policeman? He raised his hand? So,  
He said, “Stop.” But is that poetry?  
Is that life? Now there are no policemen  
In my mind, neither traffic, nor otherwise,  
Tho' of course it's natural to assume,  
But stone walls do not a prison make,  
And by upbringing and birth I'm not a citizen  
Of a police state. (1989a, 11)

As the author remarked in *Because of India*, “there's a knowledge in it that there are some rules it would be foolhardy to break” (1989a, 9). As a matter of fact, Namjoshi's sexual orientation seems to be thinly disguised in these early poems, but the rules she speaks of could also be those supposedly needed in order to write verse. In “Pinocchio” (1971a, 10), a poem from her second collection, written when the author had been living in North America for a few years, the author draws inspiration from the popular children's book, and writes a painful poem about pretending, faking and acting. The poem is full of references to the colour white, and to luminous light objects: ivory, the moon, a powdered white mask, and a transparent ghost are part of the imagery of the poem. The author, on the contrary, identifies with a doll made of brown wood, thus emphasising the difference of her skin tone. Pinocchio and the ivory doll then dance a minuet, but must be very careful not to be found out by the public of the puppet show, because in reality they are made of flesh and blood, not wood and ivory. The opposition between what is real and what is not, between what is a masquerade and what is truth is the subject of the poem. “Oh be a ghost/ In the

moonlight, be a dream. That you should be real / terrifies me” (ibidem), says the persona of the poem. Differences intersect in this poem: two dolls, identical but made of different materials are pretending to be something they are not, but one is terrified if the other happens to be real and not just a dream. Namjoshi denounces here her own strong feeling of acting a role on a stage, of living a false life, and the danger of certain interactions. The end of the poem is rather straightforward in that it offers the image of the curtain, often used to indicate the separation between sexual orientations:

We're neither wood nor ivory, they'd switch on  
The lights and the children would scream  
And we would have to move  
To the other side of the curtain. (ibidem)

Some other poems from her first collections are more straightforwardly about love relationships, but the author is very careful and never mentions whether it is a heterosexual or a homosexual relationship that she is describing, so that the poems can work for both sexual orientations. In “Doubledate” (1971a, 16) Jo-Ann and Sally are disappointed by their respective love interests, but the names of the boys they are dating are not given, and it appears that they are going on a date with the moon, often a synonym for the female body in poetry. It is interesting to note that both Jo-Ann and Sally are presumably Western girls with “bright hair” (ibidem), and that they go on a date with a white, pale moon. The estrangement of the author for the ritual of dating and of heterosexual love relationships in North America is evident in the way she describes the ordinariness of it all: the salty popcorn, the combing of one's hair, the punctuality. The ambiguity of the double date is emphasized, to the point that one ends up wondering whether it is actually a secret date with each other

in front of the moon, rather than a date with boys.

In another interesting poem, “My Aging Country”, India is compared to a man with green eyes. The persona of this poem is unsure of how she should handle her “beautiful” – but “lazy” and “wicked” (1971a, 18) - home country, and wittingly asks if she should handle it by the Rann of Kutch<sup>111</sup>. Geographical pun aside, the poem suggestively evokes a languish image that conflates the love for her home country with eroticism:

You lie there  
Smiling, lazy, wicked  
Unashamed of yourself,  
Lazy in a blue sea. (ibidem)

The incongruity is not so much that a country cannot be compared to a loved one, but that the imagery in the poem hints at a woman, not at a man, in spite of the reference to a handle. It is generally women who in poetry are passively described as lying somewhere, being admired by men who write poems about them. Here Namjoshi conflates her feelings for gender and sexuality with her origins from a non-Western country, as she does in “Pinocchio”. Consciously or not, Suniti Namjoshi subverts preconceptions of gender in poetry, and this is a feature that will recur in her work throughout all her career.

India is also on focus in “The Little Chapel”, where the persona of the poem imagines herself as an old lady in a white sari, praying in the mornings and pouring tea in her precious white porcelain in the evenings. The obsession with the colour white – one of the recurring features of the collection, mentioned four times in this poem only – has a deeper meaning here, as white in India is the colour of mourning,

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<sup>111</sup>The Rann of Kutch is a salt marsh in the Indian state of Gujarat, and geographically speaking it may look like the closest thing to a handle that India has.

worn by widows. Once again the author plays with the readers' assumptions: white is an “elegant” and “gracious” colour (these adjectives are repeated, twice each, in the poem) by Western standards. The tea ceremony thus becomes a funeral ceremony by the end of the poem: “And my old bones will lie comforted / With the elegance of my white sari / And my elegant porcelain” (1971a, 19). Conventions stand accused by Namjoshi here and in several other poems of the collection. Yet, it is not cynicism that pervades Namjoshi's first poems, as Dwivedi for instance asserts ([1991]2001, 214), but rather the frustrating feeling of having to perform a role for the sake of conventions, and of painfully recognizing the cruelty and absurdity of the contemporary world. This is repeated in poems spanning various collections, for example in the beautiful and often anthologized “And She Wrote Her Poems” (1980, 16), where the feeling of being different, somehow a reversal of what one should be, is conjured up through an upside down swan reflected in the lake water.

Her refusal of writing about India as an exotic place is evident from her very first poems. In her first collection there are attempts at deconstructing Orientalism, well before Edward Said published his seminal book. In the poem “In English” the persona asks: “Oriental princess, / How can I make these foreigners understand you are my mother?” (1967, 10). Here Namjoshi addresses the stereotypes about Oriental women, commenting on the predicament of women in colonial and postcolonial societies in a period, the 1960s, when consciousness about the connections between the yoke of colonialism and that of patriarchy was not as widespread as it is today. In the verses cited above, the Oriental princess is not enclosed in a *zenana*, the Indian equivalent of a harem, nor restricted to the world of fairy tales: the author's mother, a real woman who has borne a daughter, is the princess addressed in fairy tales about the Orient.

Dwivedi uses words like “horrible” ([1991]2001, 213; 214) or even “inhumane” (ibid., 215) to describe the author's poetry, failing to understand how the author uses

irony and sarcasm. In “Beauty and the Beast” (1980, 29), the maiden of the fairy tale waits in vain for the groom – that is to say the beast – to turn into a prince, ending up in bed with not one but two beasts instead. The Shakespearian echo is rather obvious here, but whether the second beast is the maiden or something else it is not said. Enigmatic as ever, Namjoshi's poem here shows her concern with conventional heterosexual relationships, but it is not simply “horror and disgust in the matter of love and sex”, as Dwivedi suggests ([1991]2001, 213), that the author wants to convey. The entanglement of “compulsory heterosexuality”, a concept that would be later popularized by Adrienne Rich, arranged marriages, domestic violence, as well as the perceived horrors of misgenation and homosexual love are all themes that come to mind in relation to these verses<sup>112</sup>. For Dwivedi, in Namjoshi's poetry “the whole human relationship between man and woman [flounders] on the rocks of ruin” (ibid., 214), forgetting that the maiden of the poem, that beauty who marries the beast hoping that he will turn into a good man, is not necessarily a representative of all women, or of womanhood for that matter.

With *The Jackass and the Lady* – which also contains the poem “Beauty and the Beast” – Namjoshi reveals herself as a lesbian and feminist writer, with some of the most powerful poems written in her career. As mentioned in 3.1, the author had written the poems in the 1970s, but while revising them for publication (*The Jackass and the Lady* came out in 1980), she decided to make some bold choices and, with the strength that the discovery of the lesbian movement gave her, she stopped hiding her sexual orientation under circumlocutions and metaphors. It is interesting to note that

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<sup>112</sup>In the 1980s Adrienne Rich wrote an essay entitled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, where she argued that since heterosexuality is a violent political institution that hinders women's liberation, all women should stop directing their energy towards men and rather divert it to other women, thus subordinating lesbianism to feminism. The article was later used as a manifesto by lesbian separatists, but the author had never intended it as such. In 2004 Adrienne Rich wrote a second essay reflecting on the issues raised by “compulsory heterosexuality”.





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*“Interconnections and Tensions Between Postcolonialism and Feminism  
in South Asian Women Poets:  
the Case of Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Imtiaz Dharker”*

from conventions of any sorts.

### 3.4 Blue Donkeys and One-eyed Monkeys: Animals and the Politics of Difference

Vijayasree calls *The Jackass and the Lady* and *The Authentic Lie* the “conversion poems” (2001, 51), because of the feminist and lesbian politics of the two works. Moreover, it is with *The Jackass and the Lady* that the author starts to insert animals in her writing, so it is in all aspects a turning point in Namjoshi's career. In the introduction to the collection that she wrote for the anthology *Because of India*, the author speaks of a “not entirely happy confluence of Western and Hindu influences” (28) which she later explains as a way to use the notion, characteristic of Hinduism, that there is no clear cut division between human beings and animals (Vijayasree 2001, 177). She confirms that, at that time, she had the perception that in order to be “centrally human . . . one had to be an Anglo Saxon heterosexual male” (ibidem), and thus she chose to identify with animals. She also says in the interview with Vijayasree that she would realize only later that this meant accepting one's own marginality, instead of trying to claim a centre-stage positionality, which she would later choose to do, for example in the sequence “Snapshots of Caliban” (2001, 177). Her own explanation of the choice to identify with animals is that “in a humanist universe, which has been male-centered historically, women are 'the other', together with the birds and the beasts and the rest of creation. An identification with the rest of the creation, possibly with the whole of it, would only be logical” (Namjoshi 1989a, 28-9).

The animals chosen by Namjoshi as characters for her fables and poems are often bearers of multiple differences: the donkey chosen as a protagonist of many fables is not only an animal in a world dominated by humans, but her fur is naturally blue, a thing that disquiets everybody and that raises questions of normativity. Hers is considered an obstinacy to be blue, and therefore to clash against the red bridge Namjoshi saw in a painting by Chagall and which inspired her to write *The Blue*

*Donkey Fables*. Discriminated for something that others think is “culpable wilfulness” (1988, 1), the blue donkey is first scorned and later exploited as a tourist attraction<sup>113</sup>. In the same way, the One-eyed Monkey – a character introduced in *Feminist Fables* – has difficulties in having her book published because of her niche status, whereas one of the main characters of *The Conversations of Cow* is not simply a cow, but a Brahmin lesbian cow who befriends humans, in a fantasy world where they can interact<sup>114</sup>. The fact that the animals she uses are often female is another marker of difference, pointing at their affinity with women in terms of difference. Women, like animals or homosexuals, are not considered humans, Namjoshi denounces in her poems and fables, because they are not the norm<sup>115</sup>. The fact that their names are capitalized – “the Blue Donkey”, the “One-Eyed Monkey”, “Cow” etc. – is also indicative of the author's will to grant them subjectivity, since animals are not usually given capital letters and their individuality is usually denied.

According to Ruth Vanita, there are specific reasons for the choice of every animal in every fable. She writes:

the donkey is supposed to be a stupid beast but is the only one who speaks in the Bible and is also chosen by Christ for his triumphal ride into Jerusalem. The cow in modern

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113The same pattern is present in “Schooling” (1994, 67), where a red fish with blue dots is deemed absurd and foreign by the others.

114According to Ruth Vanita, the presence of a cow in this particular narrative makes sense if one thinks that the cow, sacred for Hindus, is free to wander Indian streets and obstruct them, walk at its own pace and pick its own food, essentially with impunity. It is therefore contrasted to a domesticated animal that has to follow certain rules (2000, 156). As a matter of fact, Namjoshi sets in opposition Suniti and Bhadravati, showing how the latter is much more free to behave as she wishes, whereas Suniti is constrained by society.

115Namjoshi repeats this in many fables: in “Logic” (1994, 75) a woman goes to war in order to achieve human status, while in “From the Panchatantra” (1994, 1-2) a Brahmin is reborn as a woman, and also asks for human status.

Western parlance connects with contempt for women (“stupid cow”) as well as for Hindus (“cow worshippers”). Contesting the British reading of cow worship as barbaric idolatry, Mahatma Gandhi insisted that the cow was a symbol of all nonhuman creatures. (1996, 233)

This makes sense if one reads the fable “Bluebeard’s Way” thinking back at Bhadravati from *The Conversations of Cow*. In that fable, Bluebeard hoards women as one would hoard cows, visiting their cells twice per day, an activity the author compares to milking. Other actions usually associated to farmers like ploughing are also mentioned in the fable, with obvious erotic overtones. Mocking the claims made by anthropology, Namjoshi writes in the fable that, “after all, economists say that from a male point of view cows and women are a form of property” (1993, 98), and then cheekily argues that, “cleaning up shit, the problems of space, the awkwardness of size, in short, the logistics [of owning cows instead of women], just weren’t worth it” (ibidem).

Another image used by Namjoshi several times, and especially in *The Blue Donkey Fables*, is that of putting on and off an animal skin. It often happens in dreams: in “The Lion Skin” the persona of the poem dreams of being a lion. She is admired and ruffled by a lady, until she brings her to a clearing in the grass. At this point, “the dream fails” (1988, 33), because of the uncertainty of the situation. The poem goes on:

What happens next? Do I remove my skin?  
And what does she do? Is she shocked and shy?  
Or civil, and removes her own clothing? (ibidem)

In “Serious Danger” (1988, 83-4), Suniti tells the Blue Donkey a dream that she has had. She dreamt that she had to choose between a lion’s skin and a donkey’s skin, but

the result is that she is not comfortable in neither of them. Having lost her original skin, Suniti – an alter ego for the author – is trapped in a difficult situation, but finally decides to adapt to the donkey's skin.

Animals who are able to talk are common in the folk tales of many cultures, for instance in those of ancient Greece. In Indian mythology, Hanuman is the monkey chief of the magical tribe who in *The Ramayana* helps Rama freeing Sita from captivity with magical powers, in one episode even jumping from India to Sri Lanka in one single leap. Apart from the story told in *The Ramayana*, Hanuman is also the protagonist of many other legends and local tales. Another Hindu deity, Ganesh, is a combination of man and animal, half human and half elephant. As a matter of fact, in Hinduism there is no clear distinction between humans and animals, as Namjoshi herself tells us (Namjoshi in Kanaganayakam 1995, 50).

In “Manichean Poem” (1980, 12) from *The Jackass and the Lady* we have one of the first instances in Namjoshi's poems of a recognizably she-animal, a female bird whose shadow lengthens and widens as she flies above the green sea, but is reduced to a shadowless creature as the bird curves. The poem, apparently very simple, emphasizes opposites – black and white, light and shadow – but at the same time shows how everything is relative, and changes according to perspective. The title of the composition warns the reader that Manichean opposites, what Cixous and Clément call “double braids lead[ing] us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection” (1986, 63), is one thing the author is interested in and tries to avoid at the same time. As a matter of fact, in much of her writing involving animals she tries to dismantle this fixation on clear identifications, the fixity of oppositions and identity.

In “The Arbitrary Order”, the poet spells out her point of view on discriminations of any kind. In the first stanza, it is asserted that in the arbitrary order of things, reduced by the poet to a pond, she-animals are inferior to their male

counterparts, and the former mate only with the latter, not with their own kind. This is expressed very vividly with short verses: “ducks / quacking in the pond, / drakes mounting them” (1980, 34). In the next poem, the poet invents a story about a girl giving birth to guinea-pigs and then dreaming of them dying by her side. They are perhaps suffocated by her, out of guilt for not respecting the order of things. What is in evidence in this poem is that the girl has broken the rules by mating with another species, and not by mating with a human of the opposite sex. Ducks should mate with drakes and not other ducks, Namjoshi seems to point out, but the order of things dictates also that they should not mate with other species either. Namjoshi's own uneasiness with the conundrums of race, gender and sexuality is expressed through the employ of what could be called “specism”, a form of discrimination towards other species of creation. According to Namjoshi, being a duck is just another form of difference, a sort of double discrimination, since the duck is not only an animal, but a she-animal. Namjoshi's own identity as an Indian lesbian living in the West, something perceived as inconceivable and incongruous by others, both in India and in the West, is represented in the author's rich imagery as weird juxtapositions, like the girl giving birth to guinea-pigs, and of course the Blue Donkey and the Brahmin lesbian cow of *The Conversations of Cow*. In other words, her strategy is to speak about multiple differences and interlocked oppressions in unfamiliar contexts. Moreover, as Ruth Vanita points out, animals are “less containable than human beings in categories of nationality and gender” (1996, 233), so that identification with other creatures is for Namjoshi “a device for ungendering” (Vanita 2000, 156), but also for a more general escape from categories and stringencies<sup>116</sup>.

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116 Namjoshi sometimes inserts in her poems and fables answers to readers' or reviewers' questions about her peculiar style. In “The Animals in the Forest”, for example, a question is placed in brackets: “Why do beasts inhabit your mind?” (1980, 49), and one of the the author's possible

It is also interesting to note how the author often uses the word “creature”, both in her fables and poems, and when she talks about her writing experiences, making an unconscious reference to myths of creation. She prefers not to engage with terms like “humanity” or “human kind”, because for her they imply exclusion, rather than inclusion like the term “creature”. As a matter of fact, woman is often provocatively construed by Namjoshi as non-human, extraneous to the category of “human being”. In “Exegesis”, for instance, in order to point out the malenormativity of knowledge, she ends her composition with the provocative assertion “man is at the centre. There are no human beings” (1994, 57).

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answers is given immediately after: “They like it there”, she simply explains. Furthermore, in a poem called “Explanation”, Namjoshi starts with a section called “No Daffodil”, writing: “Why do you write about plants and animals? / Why not people?” (1988, 6). In this fragment she seems to address Wordsworth, and wonder why he was never asked the reason for writing about plants, and not people. In an interview, Suniti Namjoshi also complains that the presence of animals in her fables, and the way they are inserted in her works, bothers Western reviewers, while the thing that bothers Indian readers is that many of the animals are female (Kanaganayakam 1995, 50).



### 3.5 Suniti Namjoshi's Peculiar Brand of Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking

*“Most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts.  
I’m all for putting new wine in old bottles,  
especially if the pressure of the wine makes the old bottles explode”  
- Angela Carter*

There are references to myths and fairy tales since the first collections of poems that Namjoshi has written, for example in “Glaucus, the Grass-Eater” (1971a, 22), but it is only from *The Jackass and the Lady*, it can be argued, that a feminist revisionist attempt appears evident and central to the author's project. Countless writers have worked on mythology, telling their own versions of narratives that had been drafted by men only, the most famous in the anglophone world being Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood. Yet, any form of feminist revisionist mythmaking is done and approached in a different way, the result depending on different sensibilities and influences.

In the 1980s Suniti Namjoshi was influenced by radical feminism, a branch of feminism that considered patriarchy as an institution as the main reason why women were oppressed, and therefore wished for its abolition. Furthermore, it is important to note that Radicalesbians' manifesto “The Woman-Identified Woman”, published in the early 1970s, was a stepping stone for the establishment of lesbian feminism, which believed that sexual orientation was a choice of resistance, a strategy to counteract a society fixed on norms of compulsory heterosexuality, but also a way to counteract behaviours closely connected with gender stereotyping, not to mention the stringency of norms applied to women regarding marriage and family life. For Suniti Namjoshi, though, the ideas of radical feminists have never been the sole reference: being born in India, but living and working in North America, she had to face racism and prejudice, as well as patriarchy and heteronormativity.

In *The Newly Born Woman* Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément reflect on the

ways in which patriarchy dominates language, history and the narratives that have been made to explain it, provocatively asking:

what would happen to logocentrism, to the great philosophical systems, to the order of the world in general if the rock upon which they founded this church should crumble?

If some fin day it suddenly came out that the logocentric plan had always, inadmissibly, been to create a foundation for (to found and to fund) phallogentrism, to guarantee the masculine order a rationale equal to history itself.

So all the history, all the stories would be there to retell differently; the future would be incalculable; the historic forces would and will change hands and change body – another thought which is yet unthinkable – will transform the functioning of all society. (1986, 65)

While Cixous's words focus only on the male hegemony that dominates language and the narrative mode, writers like Suniti Namjoshi cut across these words, seeing what Western feminists had failed to acknowledge: that together with phallogentrism, other hegemonies were equally strong, real rocks on which the church of contemporary society and culture is built on. Among them, of course, eurocentrism, and heteronormativity.

On myths Simone de Beauvoir argues against in *The Second Sex*, while Gubar finds that certain myths can be invigorating for women (qtd. in Ostriker 1982, 71n). Ostriker writes this about feminist revisionist mythmaking:

the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations for collective male fantasy. Instead . . . they are corrections, they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival. (ibid., 73)

While Ostriker's essay on feminist revisionist mythmaking is considered a milestone in the field, there is an undeniable generalization and universalization of the experiences of women that clashes against the innovative ideas of postcolonial feminism, which diversifies women's experiences along different axes. Furthermore, to define Namjoshi's brand of revisionist mythmaking as a “correction” of traditional myths would be misleading if not incorrect, as that implies a certain fixity of meaning that perpetrates exclusion on any other possible other “re-vision” of myth. Later in the same essay, Ostriker argues that the texts she has analysed (H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature*, and Anne Sexton's *Transformations*) are in fact “enactments of feminist antiauthoritarianism opposed to the patriarchal praxis of reifying texts” (ibid., 87), and in that sentence Ostriker goes in the direction of unhinging fixity of identity and meaning, which is an attitude absolutely congenial to Namjoshi's work.

Unlike the Western feminist revisionist mythmakers that Ostriker analyses in her essay, though, Namjoshi does not employ easy reversal metaphors such as flowers, water or earth, assigning new meanings so that water stands for life instead of death, and so on (Ostriker 82, 71). Namjoshi prefers a completely independent imagery, rather than reconfirming hierarchies and exclusion by simple reversions. She offers her own definition of feminist revisionist mythmaking in the introduction to her longer fiction *Building Babel*, which features characters like Alice, Mad Med (Medusa), or Rap Rap (Rapunzel): “Every re-telling of a myth is a re-working of it. Every hearing or reading of a myth is a re-creation of it. It is only when we engage with a myth that it resonates, that it becomes charged and re-charged with meaning” (1996, xi). One of the reasons why revisionist mythmaking comes naturally to the author is perhaps because in Hinduism one is allowed to make up local stories about gods in a way that it is not common in other religions, where the concept of blasphemy is more widespread. The author made this observation during an

interview, but also noticed that other features of her mythopoesis, for example her choice to use female animals, sound alien even to Indian readers (Namjoshi in Kanaganayakam 1995, 50-1).

One of Namjoshi's major inspirations is Aesop, of course (Kanaganayakam 1995, 51). Unlike Aesop, however, Namjoshi does not offer clear-cut morals at the end of her fables. Sometimes she prefers asking questions regarding the meaning of the story she has been telling. This happens in “The Oyster Child”, for example, where an oyster is being picked up by a diver and displayed in public. Whether the oyster is pleased that she is being admired, and why she keeps silent about it, is questioned by the author at the end of the fable:

Question: why did the oyster say nothing?

- a) From habit
- b) Because by this time she was already dead
- c) Out of sheer modesty. (1994, 81)

No answer is given, and the reader is left wondering what is the right answer, and if there is a right answer at all. As Chelva Kanaganayakam writes about another fable where Namjoshi uses this same strategy, “perhaps even the question pillories the reader who habitually seeks absolute answers” (1995, 46). Namjoshi's attempt at defying fixed meaning is achieved by means of the enigmatic quality of some of her fables, where unusual turns often puzzle the reader, who has an active role in their exegesis of the text, as in the aforementioned multiple answer quiz of “The Oyster Child”, or in the open form of one of her longer fictions, *Building Babel*, where the reader is given the possibility of providing a last chapter to the book through a dedicated website.

One of the first examples of feminist revisionist mythmaking in Namjoshi's

work comes from her collection *The Jackass and the Lady*. In “Her Form in Clear Water” a beautiful assonance at the end of the poem haunts the whole composition. After writing a poem where “he” and “she” slide one against the other with obvious erotic overtones, Namjoshi finishes her poem by mentioning “Adam / and evil and Eve” (1980, 13), offering a fresh correspondence between the woman of the Bible tale, the “brown snake”, and the man, Adam. Namjoshi does not simply portray the evil snake tempting Eve, nor Eve falling in temptation, but it is both the woman and the snake who are tempters, with the snake being identified with an ambiguous “he” that could be attributed to Adam, as well. The reciprocity of temptation is therefore emphasized, in opposition with the one-sidedness of the canonical version. In this sense, “Her Form in Clear Water” is a real feminist re-vision.

In most of Namjoshi's revisionist mythmaking the process is to take a character from canonical literature, or a mythical creature from Greek and Roman mythology, or again from traditional fairy tales, and tell a different version of the story, or expand it beyond the traditional happy ending. Kings, queens and princesses abound: in “The King of a Rainy Country” (1980, 19), a monarch is desperate because he is not able to make the sun shine on his kingdom, while in “Emigree” (1980, 18) the poet reflects on the fact that even though she was the daughter of a princess in her home country, actually “we are all princes in exile” (ibidem). References to India and its heritage are scattered here and there: in “Ormuzd & Ahriman” (1980, 30), for instance, Namjoshi draws on Zoroastrianism, one of the many religions of India, representing the leaders of the good and evil spirits, Ormuzd and Ahriman, as parts of one's self to be accepted, a feature that will be further developed in “Snapshots of Caliban”, a sequence of poems to be published four years later. This poem, dealing with the inextricable relation between good and evil, is not by chance inserted in a section called “Homage to Circe”, a character that for Namjoshi represents the constant conflation between good and evil. In “Dragon

Story” three different versions of a dragonslayer are given to the reader (1980, 31). In the first, Namjoshi deviates from traditional fairy tales, having a woman kill the dragon, and claiming that the severed head of the beast simply looked well in her hall, therefore assuming that the dragonslayer did not kill the beast to defend the kingdom. In a second version, which the poet deems “classical”, it is a man who slays the dragon, this time for money, “each scale worth a gold ingot” (ibidem). The last stanza of the poem offers the third version of the tale, where the man and the woman kill each other while the dragon applauds. The author wants to comment on the battle of the sexes, showing that in this way the real enemy, the beast, would win. Here I believe Namjoshi is denouncing the way in which a certain kind of feminism has focused exclusively on demonizing men, while being blind to other problems women have to face. This point of view is developed in the next poem, “Blind Sun”, where a prince and a girl free an entire population from seeing things in black and white, by poking at the sun. Colours and nuances start to appear, and people stop “build[ing] / their patterns out of zebra stripes” (1980, 32). In other words, they stop seeing things in stark oppositions. Unfortunately, too much light is also a problem, as they end up not seeing anything. The poem ends with the hope that they will find a solution. Here Namjoshi creates a myth of her own, using a traditional character, a prince, but involving also a girl in the quest. Ultimately the girl will marry the prince, and it is said that they will have a happy life with children, thus at a certain moment everything in the poem seems to be reduced to compulsory heterosexuality. The happy ending is nonetheless disrupted in Namjoshi's version by the recognition that something went wrong in their plan to give back the colours to the population. The next poem, “Seal-Folk”, also puts into question how we read popular myths, by re-elaborating the mythical story of the sirens that in Homer's *Odyssey* enchant the sailors. In this version the she-seals, who towards the end of the day shed their skins and come out of the water, disturb no one, until a landsman comes across them, and

falls in love, snatching one of them from her quiet life, and reducing her to a life where images of “illicit liquors” (1980, 33) and marriage, also implicitly illicit, make her forgive who she was before. The she-seals, on their side, have a fascination for golden bears, and “cornfields & barley” (ibidem). The conflation Namjoshi makes between the lives of women, entrapped in unwanted marriages and ensnared by fishermen, and an animal, in this case the seal, is characteristic of Namjoshi's storytelling, as it has been shown in 3.4.

In “Homage to Circe”, the sorceress who turns her lovers into beasts carries the message of a different sexuality, conveyed through the relationship with her animals:

Circe,  
all animals adore you,  
you are all things to each  
In the tutelary garden, at the continuous feast. (1980, 45)

The message is also extended to the whole section, as “Homage to Circe” is also the title of one of the three sections of *The Jackass and the Lady*. Circe is a conglomeration of good and evil, with a snake curling around her ear in a languish way, and a dog fondly burrowing its nose between her warm thighs.

Yet, the poems from *The Jackass and the Lady* and from *The Authentic Lie*, a later collection dealing with the death of her father that I chose not to analyse in this context, are sometimes still biased by an androcentric point of view. As Vijayasree writes, Namjoshi at the time “was . . . not fully conscious of the political implications of the freedom she was questing for. This accounts for the contradictions and ambivalence one finds in these two anthologies of Namjoshi's poems” (2001, 67). Even the author notes “the gap between intention and achievement” in a poem

whose imagery is drawn from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (Namjoshi 1982b, 12). In this poem the speaker, whose gender is never specified, falls in love with a giantess from Brobdingnag, one of the fantastical lands Gulliver travels to. As Namjoshi explains later, in a reflection on the poem, the problem is that “the consciousness is . . . irredeemably male-centred and heterosexist” (ibid., 13).

*Feminist Fables* is the most famous among Namjoshi's books, and the one where her feminist revisionist mythmaking reaches its apex. Some of the fables included here were also published in *Manushi*, the most important feminist journal in India, founded in 1978 by Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, both influential figures in the discussion of women's issues in the Indian subcontinent. Many of Namjoshi's fables, and especially her *Feminist Fables*, disrupt and question the typecast role of women in traditional fairy tales: the protagonist of Andersen's “The Princess and the Pea” actually dies because of her exaggerated sensitivity (1994, 5-6), but in many cases Namjoshi shows how even women who rebel against the order of things do not succeed, like the princess who decides to challenge her brother and gets killed or shut in an attic (ibid., 10), or the queen who wants her daughter to be the sovereign and is exiled for the outrage (ibid., 16-7). The author does not simply subvert myths offering reinvigorating and empowering new myths for women, but she cynically denounces the patterns that make us see hierarchies and differences everywhere. In “The Secret Wisdom” (ibid., 40-1), for example, a young woman visits a fantastical country, that of the Smilers, where people have learnt to watch at things with one eye only, thus enabling them to ignore things they do not want to see. The young woman failing to see the servant who brought her some sandwiches to eat, or the Leader of the Smilers deliberately refusing to see the beggars in the street are the examples Namjoshi makes of our blindness to difference.

One of the most interesting examples of revisionist mythmaking in *Feminist Fables* is “A Room of His Own” (1994, 69), where Namjoshi subverts both the tale of



Bluebeard, and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. In Namjoshi's version, Bluebeard's unlucky fifth wife does not open her husband's secret room, believing that he is entitled to his own privacy, as Virginia Woolf taught her. Outraged because he had wanted her to give him an excuse for killing her, Bluebeard claims that his wife's lack of curiosity was a provocation, and kills her anyway. The author thus denounces the way in which women are typecast: like the four wives before her, the protagonist of the tale was *supposed* to open that room, and her failure to behave as predicted ends up badly for her.

Namjoshi lays bare how many fairy tales are about identity, and how this is connected to notions of a hierarchical structure that permeates even apparently innocuous tales told to children: a maiden must prove that she is a princess by feeling that she is very delicate, because common people are supposedly not delicate (1994, 5), and a duckling studies to be a swan, because a swan is considered superior to ducks and drakes (*ibid.*, 19). In the end, the duck who studies to be a swan is neither a swan nor a duck, and as Andersen says – the author of the original tale is also a character in this fable – “you are beginning to question the nature of ducks and the values of swans” (*ibidem*). In “Olive Branch” (1988, 46-7), the Greek goddess Athene complains that she is always identified as her father's daughter, and that she does not have a female ancestry to look back to (Vijayasree 2001, 122). She therefore asks her owl (the owl is one of the attributes of Athene) to invent a female ancestry and an affiliation for her. The bird comes up with the idea that the earth is her mother and that she is her sister, relying on stereotypical images of a woman's identification, and on claims of universal sisterhood. Ironically, Athene and her bird come to be known to the other women as “the owl and her sister”, thus Athene's identity is once again related to somebody else. In this fable the author warns the reader about the dangers of replicating the same oppressing structures in apparently revolutionary or innovative ideas.

Monsters recur in Namjoshi's work, and are also indicative of the typecast role of women in traditional narratives. In “A Moral Tale” (1994, 23-4), the Beast of the traditional fable is simply a woman who prefers other women, and who convinces herself that she is not human. A happy ending is not granted in this fable, and sadly the Beast dies alone. In “Look, Medusa!”, which experiments with the sonnet form, the Gorgon “troubled no one” (1988, 59), and apparently had no intention of killing Perseus, until he desperately called for Medusa's attention.

Some of the fables reflect on the women's liberation movement, or on the lesbian's cause, and are acutely aware of the contradictions that contemporary theories and activism sometimes entail. In “The Loathly Lady” (1994, 20), the author images what would happen if at the time of the Knights of the Round Table it was decided that “the Woman Question” should be addressed not by men, but by women themselves. Queen Guinevere therefore looks for volunteers among the ladies in her kingdom, but their husbands and fathers do not give their consent, on the grounds that caring for their families comes before anything else. In the fable, men end up enquiring the matter, and they come with a futile answer to the problem: the chosen knight comes back at court with “the loathly damsel” (*ibidem*), who is turned overnight into a beautiful maiden. Namjoshi makes the setting of this fable a medieval kingdom, in order to show how in patriarchal societies women have been prevented from joining feminist movements on the grounds that it distracted them from caring about their families. This bears a particular resonance for India, where this excuse has often been used to hinder the women's liberation movement, and to reinforce patriarchal structures (see chapter 1.4). What Namjoshi wants to denounce in this fable is that women's cause could not flourish in the past, unlike chivalry, because women were discouraged from it. What is striking is that even Queen Guinevere in Namjoshi's poem is powerless: in spite of being the queen, she does not oppose her subjects' veto on the women joining the quest, and in this way she

submits to her own subjects, because after all she is a woman. In other words, two hierarchical structures juxtapose in the fable: patriarchy and political power, with the former prevailing on the latter. In other words, “as [Namjoshi's] questioning of power shows, privilege can be unfixed when viewed in the context of a larger system of interlocking oppressions” (Karpinski 2008, 234). In “Turf” (1988, 32) one can see this logic working for the story of a frog who claims a patch of the garden, but is considered irrelevant by the home cat, who prides himself on fighting the other cats and being admired by his mistress, but is considered by the mistress in the same way that he considers the frog. In a final turn, the mistress gets divorced – the “interlocking oppression” reconfiguring and making questions of privilege relative – so that the frog, the bottom of the heap living at the bottom of the garden, is convinced that she has chased the cat away from her patch, when in reality he is gone away with his mistress. The conflicts between feminism, lesbian and gay politics, postcolonialism, and nationalism are satirized by Namjoshi in this fable, but without naming them. In “The Badge-Wearing Dyke and Her Two Maiden Aunts” (1994, 11) Namjoshi questions the assumption that lesbianism is necessarily a recent practice achieved for political reasons, and that one needs to acknowledge the theory in order to be a lesbian. In the fable, two spinster mice who have been living together for twenty five years receive the visit of their university-educated niece, who wears gay and lesbian liberation badges. The two aunts have been practising for many years what the niece has been preaching, thinking it was a complete novelty<sup>117</sup>.

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<sup>117</sup>In “The Wicked Witch”, another fable where Namjoshi reflects on sexuality, a lesbian woman is concerned because she is being said that what she feels is not “the Real Thing” (1994, 43), and that true love is only between a man and a woman. In this story, the adviser is “a wicked witch” because she does not reject the lesbian woman's quest for authenticity, but she gives her some advice instead. Having refused the possibility of turning into a man, or of having her love validated by other people, the lesbian woman decides to look inside herself for “the real thing”. With this fable the author makes a clear stance on lesbianism, refusing different attitudes, like that

India is represented in some fables with all its contradictions. In the first of Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables*, “From the Panchatantra”, India's caste system is mocked, together with the contempt for women inscribed in religious texts. In “Local History” (ibid. 53-4), instead, Namjoshi invents a mythology for what she considers a shameful Indian habit, that of greeting the birth of a son with joy, but that of a girl with distress. In this fable Namjoshi uses a clever device: that of creating a myth mirroring the patriarchal structure of the ones we are used to hear. The result is that the reader becomes exceptionally aware of the sexism of some myths.

Another way in which Suniti Namjoshi uses mythology is by reshaping personal experiences in order to construct her own mythology as an Indian lesbian feminist writer of fables and poems, reshaping the past at the light of her own artistic path, in the form of a *künstlerroman*. As a matter of fact, her memoir *Goja* is subtitled *An Autobiographical Myth*. African American poet, critic and activist Audre Lorde coined the term “biomythography” for her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). Lorde rejects the canonical definition of autobiographical novel or autobiography, and invents a new genre, or as Caren Kaplan argues she creates “an out-law genre” (1998, 208). Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept that the idea of genre has in itself the seed to go beyond its limits (Derrida and Ronnel 1980), Kaplan finds several forms of resistance to the coding of genre in autobiographies written by women, and in particular by transnational women. Audre Lorde comments on her

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of behaving like a man in order to be approved by society. In another fable, “Thorn Rose” (1994, 10), the last paragraph is about a lesbian woman who clambered to an attic and started to spin the wheel on her own accord. The fable is perhaps a reference to Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which was published two years before *Feminist Fables*, in 1979, but it also asks lesbian women not to isolate themselves. As a matter of fact, the lesbian Sleeping Beauty of Namjoshi's fable dies because there are no women available to wake her up. In “Troglydyte” (1994, 68), the existence of lesbian artists in the past is established, but with the sad realization that they have been wiped out by patriarchal culture.

definition of biomythography by saying: “it’s a biomythography, which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and history and myth. In other words, it’s fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision” (qtd. in Tate 1985, 115). Reworking her sense of self through past experiences, the protagonist of *Zami* is Audre Lorde herself, though her memories are being manipulated by the time that has passed, and by the author’s poetics. As Nellie Y. McKay observes, “the form is not unknown in literature; the specific naming is new” (1985, 491). Namjoshi’s *Goja* starts with a preface, where the writer asserts: “This account is autobiographical in that my experience is all I have. It’s fictional since any version manipulates facts. And it’s mythical, because it’s by making patterns that I make sense of all I have” (2000b, ix). The parallel with Audre Lorde’s definition of biomythography is therefore patent, and probably even intended. *Zami* connects with Namjoshi’s *Goja* not only because they are autobiographies – or rather biomythographies – about searching for one’s identity, but because they were both written by lesbian women writers of colour, and there were no rules on how to write about that at the time they wrote their works<sup>118</sup>. For Audre Lorde, one aspect of identity – being a feminist, being lesbian, being black, being a mother and so on – should not take over, because a person is made of a myriad fragments. In what is arguably the most lyrical chapter in the book, “Enchanted Forests”, Namjoshi writes:

*Where one is is a word. Who one is is a word – Indian, lesbian, poet, Hindu, donkey,*

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118In Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn’s *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography* there is a chapter dedicated to Namjoshi’s *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* which argues that Namjoshi’s book is an example of “autoethnography”. In the introduction to the book, the editors explain the meaning of the term, which draws on Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997), for whom autoethnography is a synthesis between postmodern ethnography (where realist conventions and the objective observer’s position of traditional ethnography are called into question), and postmodern autobiography, which also challenges notions of authenticity and fixed subjectivity.

monkey, dying animal... And much of one's life is just a matter of exploring words to see which ones fit comfortably, and in which forest of words one might live and breathe. (200b, 83, italics in the text)

In “Enchanted Forests”, Namjoshi conflates the leaves of Canadian trees – maples, chestnuts and silver birches – with the enchanted forest of language, that is to say the real referent of English words in the Canadian landscape. She is trying to make sense of the discrepancy she feels between the English word she knew back in India and the actual leave she is seeing out of the window. She writes:

if only I could see each word, each leaf, with greater and greater clarity, and somehow focus on the shifting patterns of the leaves, see clearly, always see clearly, then there would be such wealth! Once I got the hang of it, such prowess! I could redesign the landscape! Or I could just gape at it. (ibid., 82)

Yet another strategy used by Namjoshi to discuss and subvert mythology and to rewrite from a point of view in line with the concept of “intersectionality” theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw is the use of utopian/dystopian and feminist separatist tales in her longer fictions *The Mothers of Maya Diip* and *Building Babel*<sup>119</sup>. Some antecedents of Namjoshi's feminist utopian/dystopian fictions can be considered Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, a work written in the 1910s that has also been considered a precursor of ecofeminism, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, depicting a future where women are slaves to their biological functions, Monique Wittig's *Les guérillères*, written in the late 1960s, and, within the boundaries

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119For a discussion of feminist utopias, see Nancy Walker (1990), especially chapter 5.

“Intersectionality” was first introduced as a concept in the late 1960s and 1970s, but it was popularized in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Kimberlé Crenshaw. She reworked the term “black feminism” into an expression that could include differences among women that went beyond the fact of being African American, and thus included other variables such as sexuality or class.

of India, the short story “Sultana's Dream”, published in 1905 by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and soon become a classic of Bengali science fiction and of feminist separatist tales. Namjoshi's dystopian novels distinguish themselves from their antecedents in the fact that they are essentially lesbian feminist dystopias, depicting a society of all women but also emphasizing the problems that this may bring, such as more subtle forms of discrimination than that perpetrated by patriarchy in our contemporary society. Another important feature is that Namjoshi's feminist dystopias are not set in the near or distant future, like Atwood's novel for instance. As it happens for *The Gulliver's Travels*, one of Namjoshi's main influences, the characters travel to a distant land where society has completely different rules, as if the characters were travelling to an alternative reality. In this sense, Namjoshi's dystopian fiction borders on science fiction.

While in my thesis I do not intend to analyse in depth Namjoshi's complex and sometimes enigmatic longer fictions, the relationship between colonialism and feminism in these texts is interesting to explore for the purpose of this work. In *The Mothers of Maya Diip* the colonial encounter is substituted with an equally interesting encounter with a feminist separatist and matriarchal society. Inspired from the worlds created by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* and by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland*, Maya Diip is a fantasy land situated by the author among the many princely states of pre-Independence India. The Blue Donkey, who is a character from a previous collection, and her friend Jyanvi, an Indian lesbian and a poet who functions as an alter ego for the author, are invited to visit Maya Diip, thus learning about the strange customs of the inhabitants. In Maya Diip there are only women, because the male children are thrown away. Women live to be mothers, which they do not achieve through sexual intercourse, since they only form lesbian liaisons, but through clever means reminiscent of artificial insemination. The Blue Donkey and Jyanvi are puzzled by the customs of the Mayans, who divide society in Grade A,

Grade B and Grade C mothers, and who cannot conceive of a woman who has no children. The Mayans are ruled by a matriarch, who establishes a complicated system of hierarchies among her biological and adoptive daughters, because one of them will inherit the throne. In this lesbian separatist fantasy Namjoshi wants to show how even in a hypothetical society formed exclusively by lesbian women injustices and exploitation are likely to be present. Asha, the matriarch's daughter who tried to rebel from the restrictive customs of her people is considered heretic and therefore banned from Maya Diip. Incidentally, she will go into the forest, like a lesbian Sita sent into exile, and will form her own society, formed exclusively by the men sent away from her native land, where she is the absolute ruler. The narrative establishes a pattern in which the customs of every tribe Jyanvi and the Blue Donkey encounter during their journey are seen as incomprehensible, exotic and curious, as it happens for colonial encounters. Through a process of de-familiarization, our own customs, where patriarchy is the general frame of reference and heterosexual relationships are the norm, become absurd to the reader, thus the encounters with the Mayans and the Ashans become a way to reflect on our own society.

In *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, instead, the author focuses on two people who influenced her during her childhood: her grandmother Goldie, the *ranisaheb*, and Goja, an old servant who looked after her and whom she considered like a second mother. Divided by their different social status, but allied in the fact that they are both women and therefore powerless, Goldie and Goja confront themselves with the author and with her choice to live as a lesbian woman in the West. She chooses to trace her ancestry through women, rather than through the men in her family, and she deliberately decides to include a servant. As Karpinski asserts, “through the allegorized configuration of Goldie and Goja, the Rani and the nanny, Namjoshi is ironically rewriting the Indian nationalist constructions of motherhood, a transgressive move, especially in reclaiming Goja as mother figure” (2008, 231). She



also makes up artificial tales about Goja's birth, questioning the fact that poor people's lives are not infused with legends, because so little is known about Goja's origins<sup>120</sup>. The painful opposition between rich and poor – which places the Ranisaheb and herself against Goja and the other servants – is made null and void when she compares all of them with the British Empress and her family. She writes:

In this tableau the Empress's representatives are like the grey-eyed, pink-faced monkeys the monkey man carts about, and who do a show. At least the divisions appear to be clear. Seen in this way here we all are, all on the same side: the Rajasaheb, Ranisaheb, Goja et al. against the Empress of India and her progeny, brown against white, black against pink. (2000b, 6)

Distinctions and alliances are made and unmade: on some occasions Goja is “set against” her masters because of her different status, but on other occasions, they are allies against somebody else. The consciousness of these patterns is also present in the story Goja tells the child (Namjoshi herself). The story is about a monkey and a crocodile who are friends, but seen that the crocodile thinks that the monkey's liver must be very sweet from eating all that fruit on the trees, he volunteers to ferry the monkey to the other bank of the river<sup>121</sup>. Further on, thinking about Goja and

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120In a note to her informative essay on the subject of autoethnography in *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth*, Karpinski notes that “Namjoshi's respectful stance and her acknowledgement of epistemological and ontological aporias in relation to Goja might be helpful in trying to defend her from the charge of voice appropriation. Nevertheless, the ethical questions involved in writing about the subaltern woman inevitably haunt the text, ironically resonating in the words attributed to Goja 'Do not exploit me...’ “ (2008, 244n).

121This story is inspired from one included in *The Pañcatantra*, where the crocodile has to kill his monkey friend because his wife is sick and he has been told that the only way to save her is to give her the heart of a monkey. He then offers to ferry the monkey on his back in order to bring her to his house in the middle of the ocean, with the intention to kill her. Luckily, the monkey is smarter

referring to her in the second person, the author muses: “Are you in fact my grandmother's sister? Unequal in rank, but equal at bottom, because men rule” (2000b, 17). In other words, like elsewhere in her writing, in her memoir *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* Namjoshi “attempts to deconstruct power and oppression as shifting, not fixed categories” (Karpinski 2008, 229), using her lesbianism as a “vantage point from which to envision a new, off-centre or queer humanism” (ibidem).

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than the crocodile and once she has understood the crocodile's intentions, she fools him, telling him that she has left her heart on the fig tree.

### **3.6 Remembering Shakespeare Differently: “Snapshots of Caliban” and “Sycorax”**

*“Remember Shakespeare always, but remember him differently” - H.D.*

#### 3.6.1 “Snapshots of Caliban”

*“A woman in the shape of a monster / A monster in the shape of a woman /  
The skies are full of them” - Adrienne Rich*

There have been countless appropriations of *The Tempest*. Male Caribbean writers have seen Caliban as a mark of the resistance of colonized people over the colonizers, while feminist writers have focused on the overwhelming patriarchy disclosed in the play, trying different possibilities, the most common being the insertion of a feminist Miranda who rebels from the authority of her father. For black women writers, however, neither Miranda nor Caliban are satisfying identifications, because Miranda is white and Caliban is a man. Yet, Rob Nixon (1987)'s argument that the play is difficult to work with from a feminist perspective because of the absence of a female counterpart to Caliban has been overcome by the imagination of many women writers. From the creation of a black Miranda in Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* (1988), to the retrieval of the suppressed characters of Sycorax and Claribel, the possibilities are endless<sup>122</sup>. The characters in *The Tempest* continue to inspire writers to

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<sup>122</sup>George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Aimé Césaire's play *Une Tempête* (1969), and Roberto Fernández Retamar's essay “Calibán” (1971) are considered the pioneering re-interpretations of *The Tempest* that work on Caliban as a mark of resistance to Prospero, the colonizer. Hailing from Barbados, Martinique and Cuba respectively, these writers give an idea of how iconic *The Tempest* is in the postcolonial debate of the Caribbean. An interesting feminist rewriting of *The Tempest* has instead been attempted by H.D in *By Avon River*, an experimental text published in 1949 that retrieves Claribel, the daughter of the King of Naples married off to the king

express their point of view on the relationships of power, and on the coercion exercised by the “scattered hegemonies” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994a) inherent in the play. According to Kate Chedgzooy, author of *Shakespeare’s Queer Children*, a book on contemporary appropriations of the bard,

if Shakespeare come nearer than any other English playwright to satisfying all the competing demands and desires to which the theatre is subject, it is surely not because his works succeed in reconciling or obliterating . . . differences, but because they offer a cultural space where conflicting desires – aesthetic, social and erotic – can be staged, explored and transformed through the medium of art. (1995, 2-3)

Yet, the play does not seem to have inspired many Indian writers, its setting on an almost uninhabited tropical island perhaps seen as too distant from the Indian context. An exception is the work of Indira Ganesan, whose novels – *The Journey* (1990), *Inheritance* (1997) and *As Sweet As Honey* (2013) – are set on a fictional island called Pi. Not unlike Ganesan, Suniti Namjoshi uses *The Tempest* as a reference more than once in her works. In an essay called “Snow White & Rose Green; or Some Notes on Sexism, Racism, and the Craft of Writing” Namjoshi comments on a poem about her father from the sequence “Discourse with the Dead” included in *The Authentic Lie*, saying that “a reference to *The Tempest* is not particularly Indian, but if it is intelligible and if that is the one that occurs to me, then why should I not use it?” (Namjoshi 1982b, 13).

While most classic appropriations of *The Tempest* tend to focus either on the colonial/postcolonial experience or on the defiance of Prospero's restrictive power, Suniti Namjoshi's sequence of poems “Snapshots of Caliban” departs from most of

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of Tunis in the play. Over the decades there have been many feminist reinterpretations of *The Tempest*, but it is Canadian women writers who have taken a particular interest on Miranda, as the essays by Lisa Laframboise and Diana Brydon attest.

them in the sense that she attempts to incorporate both the postcolonial *and* the feminist perspective, also adding a third variable: a lesbian point of view<sup>123</sup>. For Suniti Namjoshi, the violence of heteronormativity is only contiguous to the yokes of colonialism and patriarchy. For her, it is important to offer a perspective that is at the same time postcolonial, feminist and lesbian<sup>124</sup>. Namjoshi's way of approaching *The Tempest* is consistent with the critique attempted by Laura E. Donaldson, who talks of a “Miranda complex”, to be paired with a so-called “Prospero Complex”, that is to say a “reading structured so tightly by a single principle . . . that it excludes all other interpretive categories” (1992, 17)<sup>125</sup>. In *Because of India*, Namjoshi compares

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123This is not the only postcolonial and lesbian feminist work on *The Tempest*. Lesbianism is in Cliff's agenda in the essay “Caliban's Daughter. The Tempest and the Teapot” (1991), where she discusses the value of both the concept and the terminology in the Caribbean. Furthermore, in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985) there are implicit references to *The Tempest* and to the reclamation of the existence of a female colonial subject, not to mention to forms of sexuality that defy normativity. Lesbianism in Kincaid's novella is nonetheless hinted at, but with the assumption that it will be re-absorbed into heterosexuality once the protagonist's turbulent period of adolescence is finished.

124A clarification should be made here about lesbianism and feminism in Namjoshi's work. In her essay “Rose Green Alone” (1992), the author reflects on the difference between writing as a heterosexual woman, and writing as a lesbian woman, considering that the latter positionality is way more radical. She comments on some of the poems and fables from her early collections, analysing how she failed to claim a specifically lesbian awareness, subordinating it to feminism. She writes that even though *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* is the first of her works where the lesbian feminist perspective is central, the emphasis is still on feminism.

125“*The Prospero Complex*” is a concept initially developed by French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni (1899-1989), who had worked in various French colonies, and in 1950 published a study called *La Psychologie de la Colonization*, then translated into English as *Prospero & Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*. He based his analysis on observations made in Madagascar, soon after a revolt of the indigenous people ended with one of the harshest repressions in colonial history (Bloch 1990, v). Mannoni considered that the colonized subject is constantly in a dependency relationship with the colonizer, and therefore the former requires the presence of the latter. Prospero, on the other hand, always according to Mannoni's study, suffers from a paternalistic

mathematics and literature, considering that while in the former one makes “beautiful patterns within self-contained systems” (104) but it is not usually permitted to change systems, in literature this is possible, and the results are often rather good (see also Vevaina 1998, 198). She is thinking of course of applying logics to storytelling, a potentially curious encounter, but it is also likely that in the case of this sequence of poems the systems that she uses, comparatively and continuously skipping from one to the other, are a postcolonial critique of metropolitan texts and a lesbian feminist critique of male-centred and heteronormative texts.

Namjoshi comments on the process of reading an old text and writing an adaptation in these terms:

a poem or a play rises in the space between the writer's writing of it and the reader's reading of it. It grows in the common cultural space, generated by communication between human beings as they take in each other's words and give them out again. [...] And in this common cultural space, over time, the poem and parts of the poem inevitably mutate: that is the cultural process. (qtd. in Bono 2008, XXIV)

This is how Namjoshi in the cycle of poems entitled “Snapshots of Caliban” could re-imagine Caliban as a lesbian woman, colonized by the white people who have taken possession of the island she had considered hers. Indeed, as Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism* about the process of writing back from the former colonies,

many of the most interesting post-colonial writers bear their past within them – as

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complex. Mannoni's work was criticized by both Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, who attempted to write about the same dynamics from the point of view of the colonized. Laura E. Donaldson, in a study called *Decolonizing Feminisms* (1992), criticized any monolithic reading of *The Tempest*, or of any other text for that matter, considering how the obsession for one relationship – either that between master and slave, or that between mother and daughter – obfuscates the other relationships in the text, and makes the critic blind to other dynamics.

scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending towards a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire. . . . And now these writers can truly read the great colonial masterpieces, which not only misrepresented them but assumed they were unable to read and respond directly to what had been written about them, just as European ethnography presumed the natives' incapacity to intervene in scientific discourse about them. (1994, 34-5)

Namjoshi's sequence of poems “Snapshots of Caliban” was first published in 1984 in *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*, one of Namjoshi's first works, but then it was reprinted in *Because of India*. It is made of seventeen short poems, some written in prose or in the form of diary entries. The title of the cycle is perhaps a reference to Adrienne Rich's early collection of poems *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), the American lesbian feminist poet being one of Namjoshi's favourite authors and sources of inspiration, by her own admission<sup>126</sup>. As in Rich's ground-breaking work, the term “snapshots” points at the fragmentary nature of the poetical material at stake, at the multiple personae who are voiced in the text and at the heterogeneous forms employed: entries from a journal and short poems are the ones used by Namjoshi. The title of the sequence, with its allusion to photography, consciously hints at different perspectives and subjectivities, and at a lack of narrative unity.

Another connection to Rich's work is evident if one considers that Namjoshi's cycle of poems enacts what Adrienne Rich calls re-vision, a new perspective on an

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<sup>126</sup>Namjoshi dedicates one of her feminist fables to her: “For Adrienne Rich – if she would like it” (Namjoshi 1994, 74). Zabuz states that Suniti Namjoshi came to know Adrienne Rich's work after having written “Snapshots of Caliban” (2002, 119), so there is no direct connection between the two. In my reconstruction it is not so: Namjoshi started reading Adrienne Rich in 1978-79 (Namjoshi 1989a, 79) and she wrote most of the material in *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* between 1981 and 1983 (ibid., 83).

old text that is fully feminist, and in the case of Namjoshi also fully postcolonial and fully lesbian, with all the conflicts that these confluences can bring. What Namjoshi attempts is therefore a peculiar kind of “contrapuntal reading”, or rather of “contrapuntal rewriting”. Said famously defines his contrapuntal strategy as “a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (1994, 59). For Said, reading a text contrapuntally means being able to take into account the point of view of both the colonizer and the colonized, *simultaneously*. Accordingly, Namjoshi says that her work is engaged in shedding light to “warring egos” (1989a, 83), either in the Shakespearian text and in her identity. In *Because of India*, Namjoshi says about the sequence: “I found that though its manifestation differed, egoism itself was as central to the voices of Miranda and Prospero as it was Caliban’s.” (Namjoshi 1989a, 84). The warring egos of Prospero, Caliban and Miranda mirror the author's warring (and *simultaneous*, I would like to stress) identities as a woman, an Indian living in the West, and a lesbian.

Keeping in mind the warring egos that the author wanted to focus on, it is more clear why the inspiration for these poems did not come from any of the rewritings or commentaries written by postcolonial writers, nor from feminist adaptations of the play, but from a white male poet, W.H. Auden (Namjoshi in Kanaganayakam 1995, 57). *The Sea and the Mirror*, written and published in the 1940s, criticized the Manichean opposites Auden found engraved in *The Tempest* and tried to recast the characters in the play as complementary. In Namjoshi's re-vision of *The Tempest*, as in Auden's work, the idea is that each character opposes and compensates the others, so that Miranda has something of Caliban inside her, and Caliban something of the “gentle” Miranda, not to mention of Prospero, who in turn acknowledges both creatures as his<sup>127</sup>. The danger of reconfiguring Caliban as

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127The idea is also present in George Lamming's non-fictional work *The Pleasures of Exile*, as



Prospero's dark side can nonetheless lead to a situation where the former exists only in relation to the latter, thus becoming a selfless being, lacking history and wholeness. This is the problem that Gayatri Spivak sees inherent in the reading of *Jane Eyre* attempted by Gilbert and Gubar in the feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic*<sup>128</sup>. While Auden's cycle of poems may be considered guilty of falling prey, at least partially, to this, reducing Caliban to Prospero's id and failing to analyse him in terms of race or relationships of power, Namjoshi avoids the trap by allowing space to Caliban's subjectivity, as well as to Miranda and Prospero's meditations.

Moreover, Namjoshi moves the axes: rather than focusing on the already inflated Caliban-Prospero colonial relationship, or on the unbalanced Prospero-Miranda connection, she introduces the Caliban-Miranda axis. Namjoshi breaks up the concepts of sameness and difference: Caliban and Miranda are “sisters”, but as Lady Shy says in another of Namjoshi's works, the enigmatic longer fiction *Building Babel*, “there certainly is a problem. The problem is that the sisters aren't sisterly” (1996, 28). While Auden focused on the male characters of *The Tempest*, reflecting

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Guarracino (2010, 426-27) already observed. Lamming's text, which is a reflection on his experience as a Caribbean expatriate in the form of a series of essays, has an entire chapter dedicated to Shakespeare's play, alongside numerous passing references to *The Tempest* scattered throughout the rest of the book.

<sup>128</sup>Gayatri Spivak in “Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism” criticizes the way Anglo-American feminist critics Gilbert and Gubar in their otherwise ground-breaking work *The Madwoman in the Attic* celebrated *Jane Eyre* as a proto-feminist heroine, because in their interpretation Jane's path to self-determination is made at the expense of Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife. According to *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Bertha is Jane's “truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self that Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead” (2000, 360). Bertha is read only in relation to Jane, and therefore deprived of selfhood. It is also the failure Lisa Laframboise (1991) sees in some Canadian rewritings of *The Tempest* that use a female Caliban only as a way to foreground the development of a white Miranda.

mainly on Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel (the latter actually an airy spirit, sometimes represented on stage as androgynous), Namjoshi also pays attention to Miranda, and changes Caliban's gender and sexual orientation<sup>129</sup>.

As in Auden's commentary, there are multiple points of view. Fragmentary even in the title, the sequence might be posited as postmodern because it denies the truth of the original narrative. As a matter of fact, at a certain point in Namjoshi's sequence, Caliban says: “They dreamed it. There was no storm / no shipwreck, nobody came” (1989a, 92)<sup>130</sup>, thus challenging the narrative of the colonizers, as Harveen S. Mann (1997, 103) and Lisa Laframboise (1991, 47) already observed. While in every poem of Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* it is always clear who the speaker is, in Namjoshi's work this is very ambiguous (and, incidentally, it is in this sense that the text should be considered postmodern rather than modernist<sup>131</sup>).

In an essay written together with her partner and fellow poet Gillian

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129Whether or not “Snapshots of Caliban” is, among other things, an attempt to subvert Auden's intrinsically male and Eurocentric point of view is unclear to me. In the early 1970s, Namjoshi wrote her PhD dissertation on Ezra Pound. She wrote about it that she was astonished by her own ability “to overlook the male-centred consciousness of the literature [she] was studying” (1989a, 22). An important difference between Namjoshi's “Snapshots of Caliban” and Auden's text is found in the language Caliban speaks: the prose section of Auden's work, entitled “Caliban to the Audience”, is written in the dense and complex style of Henry James' late novels, a “real tour de force” according to Marjorie Garber (2008, 30). It is somehow ironical for Caliban, who has only recently learned the language of the colonizers (ibid., 28). In Namjoshi's sequence, instead, Caliban speaks a simple language: “these berries are nice, those are not nice” (89). Namjoshi does not connect intelligence with verbal ability in English: being a polyglot like many Indians, she is extremely conscious of the conundrums of language.

130The quotations from “Snapshots of Caliban” are from *Because of India*, rather than from *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*.

131Namjoshi's sequence of poems is described by Chedgzoy as “post-modern rather than modernist, both in form and in the subjectivity it inscribes” (1995, 106).



turn to rage.

And there is rage.

Cal, Cal, Caliban

threshes her limbs. For this –

Pardon.

I and my creature

must seek for grace. (1989a, 85)

Since the title of the sequence mentions Caliban only, one is inclined to think that the persona of the poem is the “abhorred slave” (*The Tempest* I.ii) of Shakespeare's play, here transmuted into a woman who desires Miranda, repents about her rage (perhaps a reference to the attempted rape referred to in the original text, also suggested by the assonance “rape-rage”), and punishes herself, also evoking the rebellion against Prospero in the original text, where he cheekily calls out “‘Ban Ban', Cacaliban” (*The Tempest* II.ii), playing on his own name. The last verse of the poem is the most ambiguous, as “I and my creature must seek for grace” may point at Prospero as a speaker, who acknowledges Caliban as his creature in the original text, or towards Caliban's own dark and raging side that must be tamed, as suggested by the reference in the play, where Caliban says “I'll be wise hereafter, and seek for grace” (*The Tempest* V.i)<sup>133</sup>. Moreover, the sudden introduction of Caliban's gender in the sequence comes as a shock to the reader, and points at the fact that gender should not be taken for granted in lyric poetry. One starts wondering whether the persona of the poem, who unexpectedly takes an active role in loving someone, is a woman, perhaps Miranda having a homoerotic affinity with Caliban but having ambivalent

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133The word “creature” recurs in Namjoshi's work. In *Because of India*, for instance, while explaining something about the genesis of “Snapshots of Caliban” she uses this term to define herself. She writes: “as a creature, a lesbian creature, how do I deal with all the other creatures who have their own identities, or perhaps I mean their own identifications?” (84). In the book where the sequence first appeared, there is also a poem called “The Creature”, which I also mention later in the chapter.

feelings about it. As Namjoshi explains in her essay “Rose Green Alone”, which deals with the predicament of writing from a lesbian perspective:

in the heterosexist tradition, 'I' speaks, defines himself, defines her, defines the relationship, while 'you' keeps quiet. 'You' presumably has ears and the intelligence to understand 'I's words, but she is not a poet, she is the object of the poet's attention. The poet is speaking *for* his other readers – it's a miracle that all women readers aren't lesbians – and *to* that particular woman. (1992, 51, italics in the text)

In other words, there is no clear answer as to who the speaker is, and the more one goes on with the sequence, the more one understands what Suniti Namjoshi is aiming at. Undermining the reader's assumptions about creative writing is a specific concern of Namjoshi's writing. In the poem “The Creature”, also part of *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* and included in her essay “Rose Green Alone”, an unidentified speaker approaches a woman at the edge of a wood. A short sensual moment follows: “I licked her throat, I cropped the grass / between her feet” (Namjoshi 1992, 50), where the referent is clearly identified as a woman, but the speaker remains unidentified. There is confusion, by the end of the poem, as the speaker seems to be an animal, rather than a human being. In that poem, Namjoshi is trying to find a way out of the heterosexual and androcentric implied speaker of poetry by breaking up the sameness/difference opposition into other, less codified, forms of difference<sup>134</sup>.

While some critical attention to “Snapshots of Caliban” has been paid, the fact that Namjoshi deliberately makes the personae of her poems extremely ambiguous

<sup>134</sup>The excruciating pain of confronting oneself with heterosexuality is also central to the poem. As Namjoshi explains in her informative essay: “heterosexuality is hardly a peripheral concern for any lesbian in the world today. We have to deal with it, and what's more we have to deal with our feelings when confronted with it. I think that's what I'm trying to do in the following poem from *The Bedside Book*” (1992, 50).

has so far been considered an extra, rather than a fundamental feature of the text<sup>135</sup>. I concur with Chelva Kanaganayakam who, speaking in general of Namjoshi, affirms that in her works “one encounters more questions than answers, and in the indeterminacy lie their strength” (1995, 46). One should always keep in mind that subversion is an important element in Namjoshi's writing, emphasized by several critics, and because of this, intertextual references can be misleading and contradictory, as illustrated in the first snapshot, where the use of a seemingly Calibanesque language (“Cal, Cal, Caliban”) seems to suggest one speaker, while the reference to the famous moment when Prospero acknowledges Caliban as his “thing of darkness” seems to suggest another, equally possible persona.

In the second poem of the sequence, Caliban is represented as “squat and ugly” (86) by the speaker, who could be interpreted to be either Miranda or Prospero, because the colonial attitude is common to both<sup>136</sup>. Caliban is envisioned with an alliteration of “s”: “she was squat and ugly”, “sometimes she cried, sometimes she lied”, “she was so sly and sometimes so forthright”, alluding at the disgusting

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135While Chantal Zabus (2002) and Harveen S. Mann (1997) ignore the fact that the personae of the poems are deliberately made ambiguous, Chedgzoy (1995) does consider, in her analysis of the sequence, the “deliberate ambiguity” of the speakers in Namjoshi's poems, suggesting nonetheless that it is possible to divide the poems among those to be attributed to Prospero, Miranda, or Caliban, and that such an attempt should be made in the exegesis of the text. Chedgzoy writes for instance: “my interpretation, based on intertextual resonances with Shakespeare's text and the thematic preoccupations of *Snapshots of Caliban*, is that it is Prospero who speaks in I, II, III, VI, XII and XIII, but clearly the deliberate ambiguity of these poems is what should be emphasized” (1995, 118). Even though Lisa Laframboise (1991) briefly mentions this peculiarity of “*Snapshots of Caliban*”, she does not pay attention to it.

136It is interesting to note how different critics are convinced that a certain persona is unequivocally speaking in a particular snapshot. The second snapshot, for instance, is attributed to Caliban by Chedgzoy (1995), and to Miranda by most critics (Zabus 2002; Guarracino 2010; Laframboise 1991; Mann 1997).

sentiment of the speaker and at the seemingly animal quality of sliminess, perhaps even slyness. A second alliteration follows: “*murderee*”, “*monstrous me*”, “trying to save herself, and *me* from *me*” (ibidem). The alliteration at the beginning of the words is perhaps an allusion to another word that begins with M: Miranda. Miranda attempts to kill Caliban (while it is not clear in this fragment that Miranda is the speaker, later on it is revealed that it was Miranda who had murderous instincts towards Caliban). The idea that pervades the sequence is that there is a monstrous side to Miranda and Prospero, as there is one to Caliban. Women are monsters because of their difference, and because their sexuality is not considered normative and acceptable. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous asks herself what woman “surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives . . . hasn't accused herself of being a monster?” (1976, 876). She-monsters recur in Namjoshi's work (see for instance the fables “Legend”, “The Ugly Ones” and “Of Spiders” in *Feminist Fables*), as in Greek mythology, and of course in Cixous's text that retrieves Medusa, yet another Sycorax who scares men. Lesbians, of course, are considered monsters too, and Namjoshi is well aware of that. Caliban is different and monstrous in many ways: in race, gender and sexuality. Prospero's monstrous side, on the other hand, is perhaps less visible, but it becomes clear if one thinks of his dictatorial manners, already noticed by Lamming, who writes: “what would [Miranda's mother] have had to say about this marvellous monster of a husband who refuses us information?” (1992, 115).

The third poem in “Snapshots of Caliban” is equally interesting. From the first lines the reader has the impression that it is Miranda who is imagined as sleeping, her lips parted, and her breath gentle, her body peaceful, not at all monstrous. The name Miranda is traditionally interpreted as meaning “she who is being watched”, and in the Shakespearian text Miranda refuses to look at Caliban: Caliban is in fact construed as the one who is not to be looked at. Yet, while the poem goes on it

becomes unclear who is speaking and who is the passive object of the gaze: it is in fact Caliban who in *The Tempest* listens to the strange sounds of the island, “her ears prickling / to the strange sounds”, 87), who knows the secrets of the island, and who could easily be fishing (“or found her fishing / in a cranny of the island”, *ibidem*). Is it possible that it is Caliban who is being watched instead? One wonders if Namjoshi is reversing the idea that a monster, Medusa for example, or the barbaric cannibal slave, or worse the depraved black lesbian woman, should not be watched or approached with friendliness. Furthermore, in the poem that precedes it the speaker refers to herself as “monstrous me”, so the roles get even more confused. Who is watching Caliban then? The reader is led to wonder whether it is Miranda who is having an almost homoerotic pang of desire for the “abhorred slave”, a term she uses to describe Caliban in the original text. It could nonetheless be Prospero, safely male, who is approaching his slave in a sexual way. After all, Namjoshi is rewriting a text that, through the scene where Trinculo and Caliban are under the gaberdine and appear to Stephano as a monstrous animal, already comments on the anxiety over both homoeroticism and miscegenation.

In the fourth poem of the cycle it is certainly Prospero who speaks, identified but also isolated by the pronoun “he”. He is watching Miranda and Caliban playing in the sand. They fight, like normal children would do, and one of them destroys the castle the other one is building. It is unclear who is destroying whose castle, and therefore whose dream of ruling the island. In this poem Caliban and Miranda are indistinguishable. In the meantime, Prospero broods over the tempest he is preparing. The poem is a symbol for the conflict that will arise between Miranda and Caliban, and that will have a prominent role later in the sequence.

What follows is “Caliban's Journal”, a series of short prose poems that are also entries from a journal Caliban is writing in her new acquired language. It is interesting to see how Namjoshi makes her Caliban literate. Gone is the play's



“startling encounter between a lettered and an unlettered culture . . . , almost parodies, in the relationship between a European whose entire source of power is his library and a savage who had no speech at all before the European's arrival” (Greenblatt 1990, 23). Caliban confronts herself with heterosexuality in the person of Ferdinand, a presumably educated white man who remains unnamed in the sequence, and whose hands Miranda accepts to look at, while refusing to look at Caliban's. The opposition between Miranda, “she who is admired, looked at”, and Caliban who should not be watched, is evident here. Caliban is excluded from any intellectual activity: she is banned from playing chess with Miranda and Ferdinand, not to mention from any erotic/romantic interaction with Miranda, because of her gender and race. Namjoshi subverts the allusion to rape in Shakespeare's text by making the equally horrible admission of Caliban's homosexuality the subject of Prospero's scorn. It is one of the main reasons why Caliban, and later Miranda, are seen as monster creatures. When Caliban admits that she likes Miranda, Prospero is outraged. The berries that Prospero gives to Caliban in the pre-text – those same berries Barbadian poet George Lamming commented upon with his novel *Water With Berries* (1971) – are recovered by Suniti Namjoshi in this part of the sequence. Prospero's gift to Caliban is that of an edible fruit. The berries are comparable to language (and knowledge, intended as a way of thinking and theorizing) which he also gave Caliban as a present, but which will reveal to be poisonous, a sort of implicit prison (Lamming 1992, 110). In snapshot xviii, it is revealed that Prospero has poisoned Caliban with his gift, or so she thinks<sup>137</sup>. “Caliban's Journal” also engages with the worshipping of other people as gods. Caliban writes: “M thinks that the new men are very like gods. What is a god? I think M is a god. When I told it

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137 Zabus even comments on the fact that in Germanic languages “poison” and “gift” are rendered with the same word (2002, 17-8). Ironically, Caliban is addressed as a “poisonous slave” in Shakespeare's text (*The Tempest*, I.ii).

to her, she said I was stupid” (1989a, 89). Namjoshi reveals how in the entanglement offered in Shakespeare's *Tempest* it is not only Caliban who idealizes and worships people, but Miranda also, enquiring further into the notion that there is something of Caliban inside the other characters in the play<sup>138</sup>.

In snapshot vi Caliban is seen from the colonizer's perspective: the unidentified speaker starts by affirming that there is something strange in her appearance, perhaps her shape, or her size, reminding the audience of the monstrosity of difference. The admission that she might not be stupid and that she might have feelings is a marker of the ambivalence in the play, a feature that Namjoshi stresses when she comments on it by saying that:

One feels sorry for Caliban because this creature was the king of the island. I think that is inherent in the play. Ferdinand is such a wimp by comparison. Prospero is often very rude in all his machinations to control others. The ambivalence is all there in the play.

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138 In *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* there are several references to how the author fell into this “Calibanesque” trap, especially during her school years. She reflects: “Why did I invent gods and what use were they to me? . . . Perhaps the point about gods is their superiority: ‘I do not want to be a god. I cannot hope to be a god, but I can make my parents and grandparents gods.’ Perhaps it was natural. Everyone else had made them gos – the Rajasaheb, the Ranisaheb, my mother the Akkasaheb, and my father, just plain Saheb, the high-flying, tiger-shooting pilot. Bow down and worship. Why not? . . . At the new school three ‘gods’ were on offer. The first possible god was J. Krishnamurthi. . . Then there was the Principal. . . And . . . my father, who was dead ” (2000b, 49-50).

(Namjoshi in Kanaganayakam 1995, 57-8)<sup>139</sup>

Prospero and Miranda are therefore complicit in the imperial rule over Caliban, as showed in the possibility of Miranda speaking in snapshot vi. Namjoshi highlights the anxiety over the distinction between colonizer and colonized that permeates *The Tempest*, showing in another poem of the cycle the other nightmares brought in by colonization in Shakespeare's time: homosexuality and miscegenation. As a matter of fact, in snapshot number ix the scene where Caliban and Trinculo are under the gaberdine is evoked by the author: in Namjoshi's reinterpretation, Caliban and Miranda climb one on top of the other, and they are described by Prospero as “crabs” and “monsters” who came out of his eyes, not unlike Athena born from her father's head<sup>140</sup>. The crab, with more than two legs sprouting out of the body, is of course reminiscent of Caliban and Trinculo's monster animal, as seen by a drunken Stephano in the play. This is a veiled erotic scene that Namjoshi conjures up, but it is menacing to Prospero who sees “monstrous projections of aspects of the self which are unacceptable to [him] and which have eluded his control and understanding” (Chedgzoy 1995, 118). From an aesthetic point of view it is one of the best achievements in the sequence, as the word “scrabbling” contains the word “crab”,

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139According to Zabuz, this snapshot is to be attributed to Miranda without any doubts. About the fact that, almost inexplicably, it is Miranda who worries about Caliban ruling the island, she writes: “that Miranda is allowed to contemplate ruling and to fear usurpation is quite a reversal of fortunes, given that Miranda is the only one in *The Tempest* not to imagine, plot, or claim to be a 'king'” (2002, 129). In this snapshot Namjoshi may be playing with Miranda's possible complicity in her father's colonial rule over the island, showing how both characters are part of the imperial project.

140Fuchs writes that the scene where Trinculo takes shelter under Caliban's gaberdine and thus forms, in Stephano's eyes, a strange animal, is reminiscent of a more explicit scene: that where Othello and Desdemona's marriage is described as a misgenetic “beast with two backs” (1997, 48).

and hard sounds (“scuttling”, “crawling”) recall the dissonance and uneasiness that Prospero feels while watching the monsters he created. Prospero does not understand Miranda and Caliban. They are indistinguishable to him in their differences of race, sex, and sexuality:

of their two crabs which is more dainty?  
Which one of the two least crab-like?  
Most graceful? Is there a lovelier sheen  
on one curved carapace, a subtler shine? (94)

Miranda and Caliban end up hurting one another, and their claws break<sup>141</sup>.

A point of view is allowed to Miranda as well, who in snapshot viii, aptly called “M’s Journal”, reflects on her relationship with her sister Caliban, writing a hate poem for her, and subsequently crossing it out. Miranda is complicit with her father and his colonialism when she writes “I shall speak to father” (93). The clever typographic strategy of crossing out Miranda’s poem, apart from being an attempt at metapoetry, a common feature in Namjoshi’s writing, is in line with the negation of truth in snapshot vii, where the point of view of the colonizer is questioned by

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141This poem may also comment on Namjoshi’s relationship with her sister. While the patriarchy disclosed in the sequence is imagined, as the author’s father died when she was very young, the relationship with a sister is something Namjoshi personally knows. She dedicates a fable/poem to her sister: “Snow White and Rose Green” in *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*. In the aforementioned essay that bears the same name, and also includes the entire text of the fable/poem, Namjoshi mentions that “Snow White and Rose Green” is meant for her sister, although she doubts that she would recognize herself in it (1982b, 14-15). The story is that of two sisters who, in order to make their mother happy, decide to cut themselves in half and make out of two imperfect people one good person. The story is reminiscent of this poem from “Snapshots of Caliban” in the sense that it involves two sisters who are very different, but also similar. The idea of complementing each other, but with risks, is common to the two poems.

Caliban, what Laframboise calls “the illusory wish-fulfillment of the imperialist inscription of colonial discourse” (1991, 47)<sup>142</sup>. In the hate poem, on one hand Miranda repeats the sentence first uttered by an ambiguous speaker in snapshot ii, stressing once again that Caliban is “squat and ugly” (86; 93), but on the other hand she acknowledges that Caliban is part of her, much like Prospero does at the end of the play. The colonized subject is therefore a threat, at the same time similar and dissimilar from the colonizer. Further on in the same poem, Miranda is worried because Caliban is ill. Caliban thinks that Prospero, the authoritarian ruler of the island, poisoned her, but it is revealed by the end of the poem that it is Miranda who did it: “I also feel ashamed, but then, I have a reason” (93). Here Namjoshi is making a direct reference to the conflict between postcolonialism and feminism: for Caliban, it is obvious that it was Prospero, the colonizer, who poisoned her. It is inconceivable that Miranda, a woman like her, and therefore her “sister”, wished to do her harm. Racism and the violence of heterosexuality for Miranda came before solidarity among women, and made her blind to the possible sisterhood/bond/romantic relationship they might share. In a sense, Namjoshi is referring to Prospero's poisonous gift of language and knowledge, pointing out that Miranda's invisible, silenced gift, is also pernicious. It would not be strange for Caliban to say to Miranda, as Bhadravati, the lesbian cow of *The Conversations of Cow* says to Suniti, equally blind to bonds that are not dictated by heterosexuality, specism or positionality, “the trouble with you is that you're very conventional” (1985, 99).

In snapshot x the speaker is once again ambiguous: it is either Miranda or Caliban speaking about Prospero, “the larger shadow” (95) which menaces to

142 There are countless examples of metaliterature and poems within a poem in Namjoshi's work: the Blue Donkey of the eponymous fables, for example, attempts to write verse, and the cat in “Poetic Practice” writes poetry and teaches Suniti, an alter ego for the author, what poetry is (1988, 11-2). Another example is given by the characters in *Bulding Babel* or *The Mothers of Maya Diip* who attempt to write poetry.

swallow her, because in one way or the other he is the oppressor. Prospero is portrayed as a schemer, “when his dream darkens / it will swallow everything” (ibidem). Unlike Miranda and Caliban, who only build castles in the sand, Prospero's dreams are menacing, deleterious for both women<sup>143</sup>. How much Prospero is a schemer it is revealed in the next poem where Miranda reflects on how she is seen by her father: he considers her “fit for a king” (96), thus reducing her identity to that of her husband's, as in Adrienne Rich's collection *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law*, where the speaker is identified simply as someone else's in-law. Miranda feels that she has been construed by Prospero, and that her dreams are those same dreams Prospero had for her: “For his superior knowledge / he made me a dream” (ibidem).

In poem xiii, Namjoshi mentions once again the berries and the crabs, also adding crayfish to the food easily available on the island. Whereas in Shakespeare's play it is Prospero who picks berries and mixes them with water, as a present for Caliban, here it is a monstrous woman who does it for someone else, whom she loves. Once again, it is not clear whether it is Caliban or Miranda who chooses presents for Prospero, since we learned in snapshot ix that Miranda is also perceived as “monstrous” and “crab-like” by Prospero. The possibility that Caliban is making a present to Miranda is also not to be ruled out, or even that Miranda is picking crabs and berries for Caliban.

Caliban's dream in poem xiv, revolves around a dream where a big tiger threatens the island, and therefore also Prospero and Miranda. Caliban thus kills the

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<sup>143</sup>The presence of dreams and shadows in this poem may point at the use of psychoanalysis as a frame of reference. In spite of the fact that psychoanalysis certainly informed Auden in his work, Namjoshi denies that she has made any conscious references to Jung and his archetype of the shadow, where the subject so dislikes aspects of one's nature that he, or she, fails to see them inside himself/herself, criticizing them in other people. Namjoshi however admits that writers like Freud or Jung are part of our contemporary culture, and that their ideas might have unconsciously entered her work (Vevaina 1998, 196).

tiger, and by doing that she destroys everything, precisely like the tiger. It is evident that Caliban's raging side is on focus here: just like Prospero, who is able to destroy their dreams with his magic, or Miranda's murderous attempts, Caliban must come to terms with her own dark side. Poem xiv, written in prose, contains the revelation that it was Miranda who poisoned Caliban, and not Prospero. Caliban is surprised, because she did not think her sister capable of that. At first she is angry, but then she comes to terms with her raging side by thinking about the tiger in her dream. Rage has therefore become a recurring element, present since snapshot i, when the unspecified speaker made a reference to his/her desire which can turn into rage. When Miranda hears about the dream Caliban had, the two women laugh together: a bridge is finally established between Miranda, oppressed by Prospero because of her gender, and Caliban, the racialized and sexualized subject. Prospero is left out of this final laughter, but he has the last word, in the form of a last poem, where he acknowledges that he has made both Caliban and Miranda into a conflation of “maiden and monster” (102), and that it is not right to disdain them. He seems puzzled: he asks himself if there is a part of him inside of them, and if they are his to own. Emblematically, the poem has four question marks, so that the sequence ends with questions rather than answers.

The fact that in the sequence Caliban is envisioned as a black woman – both in alliance with Miranda against the patriarchal power exercised by Prospero, and against Miranda on the grounds of her position on opposite ends of the imperial divide – suggests a refusal of the essentialization of woman, but also of the theorization of marginality and identity politics. Miranda is discriminated and patronized by Prospero because of her gender, but at the same time she discriminates and patronizes Caliban because of her race. Differences need to be acknowledged, while bridges between gender, class, race and sexual preferences need to be made, Namjoshi seems to tell us. As the author claims in an interview with Coomi S.

Vevaina:

what sometimes happens in the course of activism is the tendency to claim moral ascendancy on the grounds that one is oppressed and that is not really reasonable. For one thing, if one is oppressed in one way, it does not imply that one is oppressed in every way. (1998, 195)<sup>144</sup>

Namjoshi's sequence therefore discusses various forms of oppression, calling for an alliance between women but avoiding at the same time to determine the role and the purpose of each woman in the alliance. As a matter of fact, identity according to Namjoshi is not fixed, engraved in stone, but rather an identification that is always cast by others, changing according to the situation. This is consistent with what postcolonial feminists such as Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have theorized. Namjoshi writes about it:

Identity isn't only a matter of self-definition. It also depends on the identity that that other attribute to one. . . . As a creature, a lesbian creature, how do I deal with all the other creatures who have their own identities, or perhaps I mean their own identifications? It's apparent that the components of the core identity change from place to place and period to period. (1989a, 84)

Here the influence of Hindu philosophy is obvious and cannot be ignored: as Hindus believe in a kind of reincarnation that prevaricates boundaries of gender, species or

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<sup>144</sup>Gayatri Spivak would agree with it, as she also is aware of such discrepancies. In an interview for a book on South Asians and postcolonialism she discusses what it means to claim a particular identity, making an observation that resonates with the work of Suniti Namjoshi. She asks, with a certain awareness of her own positionality: “Why should I make myself representative as a colonial subject rather than make myself representative as a female employer of female servants? Which one do you choose? Victim or agent?” (Spivak in Bahri and Vasudeva 1996b, 75).



ethnicity, one's identity is only what one is in this moment of his/her existence. As Mann summarizes, Suniti Namjoshi “[fails], here construed as positive, to achieve any idealized sense of belonging to one (essentialized) culture, nation or group, or, conversely, to arrive at (an even more problematic) 'universal' state, [occupying] instead a 'third space', an interstitial location between nations and cultures, as theorized by Homi Bhabha” (1997, 98).

### 3.6.2 “Sycorax”

*“We are still dumb in the language of Sycorax, whatever that might be”*

- M. NourbeSe Philip

The cycle of poems called “Sycorax” was written by Namjoshi more than twenty years after “Snapshots of Caliban”, and included in *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems*, published in India in 2006. In this new sequence, Namjoshi takes a character who in Shakespeare's play is only mentioned but never actually on stage, the witch Sycorax who once inhabited the island with her son Caliban, and places her centre-stage. She imagines that the witch, presumed dead in Shakespeare's play, returns to the island after Prospero has gone.

In the last few decades there has been a retrieval of Sycorax, especially as an answer to a discourse on postcolonial identity formation that was mostly malenormative and androcentric<sup>145</sup>. Malaysian American writer and performance  
145As Abena P.A. Busia summarizes, “in excluding even a recognition of the place of the woman's voice in the arena of public action, not only the manifold forms of colonial fictions but the literature of colonial discourse itself appear consistent in this one factor; the colonial subject is always male – as are also the colonial object and, these writers assume, the colonial reader. Scant acknowledgement is made of the fact that the woman's position is still being silently subsumed

artist Chin Woon Ping, in her essay “Sycorax Revisited: Exile and Absence in Performance”, which discusses her own play *Psycho Wracks* (2001), claims for example that by writing on Sycorax she attempts to resurrect “the exiled feminine or the exilic consciousness of the banished subaltern female, an endeavor built on a meditation upon absence, literal and symbolic” (2003, 94).

Both silent and haunting, the story of Caliban's mother is never told in Shakespeare's text, leaving a curious blank in the narrative. Leaving Miranda aside, the only other women mentioned in the play are Sycorax, Claribel and Miranda's unnamed mother<sup>146</sup>. Sycorax is the only one who is mentioned more than once, but her story, with several missing parts, is always told by someone else, either Prospero – who heard it from Ariel – or Caliban. She is acknowledged by Prospero as Caliban's witch mother, who was banished from Algiers, her native city, and whose life was spared for a reason we are never to know, but are encouraged to connect with her illicit pregnancy. She is guilty of having imprisoned Ariel in a tree, and to have practised black magic, which Prospero deprecates. Sycorax has been written out of the play: her deviant sexuality, her origins in North Africa, and her black magic merely forming a counterpart to Prospero, the white magician. She is therefore never allowed to speak for herself, or to enter the stage as a real living character. In

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under that of the male. For most critics, the debate still is on the interpretation of *mimic men*” (1989-90, 97, italics in the text).

146 Claribel, daughter of the King of Naples, is mentioned in the play because she has been married off to the king of Tunis, and because on the way back from the wedding there is a shipwreck that will lead to the events in the play. According to numerous critics, the presence of Claribel might point at the fear of the expansion of the Ottoman empire (see for instance Loomba 2002, 166-7; J. Singh 1996, 201; Sachdev 2000). Miranda's mother is instead mentioned by Prospero, and – rather curiously – her integrity is questioned when he says “thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter” (*The Tempest*, I.ii). This has sometimes been considered a marker of the misogyny that supposedly pervades the play.

Shakespeare's world view, it is true that, as Harold Bloom points out, “Prospero's Hermetic art is white magic, and has nothing in common with the horrors of Sycorax” (2008, 245). Shakespeare seems nonetheless to encourage comparisons between him and Caliban's mother: for example they both make use of and enslave Ariel, were banished from their lands, and now claim the ownership of the island<sup>147</sup>.

In spite of being dead, Sycorax is always in Prospero's and Caliban's mind, and therefore haunts the play with her “presence/absence” (Hall 1994, 398)<sup>148</sup>. She is

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<sup>147</sup>This reading is supported by some critics; Stephen Greenblatt for instance thinks that Prospero and Sycorax are alike. He writes: “As magician Prospero resembles no one in the play so much as Sycorax, the hated witch who had preceded him as the island's ruler. The play, to be sure, does not endorse a challenge to Prospero's rule, any more than Shakespeare's culture ever encouraged challenges to legitimate monarchs. And yet out of the uneasy matrix formed by the skilful interweaving of cultural materials comes an odd, discordant voice, the voice of the 'salvage and deformed slave” (1995, 231). After a long quotation from *The Tempest*, he goes on pointing out that “Caliban, of course, does not triumph: it would take different artists from different cultures – the postcolonial Caribbean and African cultures of our own times – to rewrite Shakespeare's play and make good on Caliban's claim. But even within the powerful constraints of Shakespeare's Jacobean culture, the artists imaginative mobility enables him to display cracks in the glacial front of princely power and to record a voice, the voice of the displaced and oppressed, that is heard scarcely anywhere else in his own time. If it is the task of cultural criticism to decipher the power of Prospero, it is equally its task to hear the accents of Caliban” (Greenblatt 1995, 232).

<sup>148</sup>Irene Lara (2007) compares Sycorax's presence in Shakespeare's play to Stuart Hall's “presence/absence” of Africa in the Caribbean, “the site of the repressed, . . . [an] unspoken 'unspeakable' presence” (Hall 1994, 398). Stuart Hall argues that “apparently silenced beyond memory, . . . Africa [is] in fact present everywhere” (ibidem). What Lara does not linger on, nonetheless, is the fact that Prospero can be equated to what Hall calls, drawing on Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor, “Presence Européenne”, characterized by “exclusion, imposition and expropriation” (ibid., 400). What is interesting about Hall's analysis is that he recognizes how the European presence is not external to Caribbean people, but now forms part of their identity, just like every character in *The Tempest* must acknowledge his other, “darker” side, as emphasised by Suniti Namjoshi in “Snapshots of Caliban”.

also set in opposition to Miranda, the white virginal maiden who is subdued to her father. According to Prospero, Sycorax has mated with the devil, and has “littered” her deformed child Caliban on the island (*The Tempest*, I.ii). She is the “foul witch” (*ibidem*), the unrepresentable monstrous other whose difference is inconceivable for matters of gender, race and sexuality (M. Joseph 2002; Goldberg 2004; Loomba 1989). She is, in Abena P.A. Busia's words, the “disembodied symbol of the men's most terrible fears” (1989-90, 86). As a matter of fact, Sycorax is linked to both Medea (Shakespeare's knew Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and Circe, and through her name to the Scythians, barbarians according to the Greeks<sup>149</sup>. Sycorax is destructive, wild, and has acquired her power through the study of the occult, whereas Prospero's magic comes from the study of books, therefore it is scientific and rational. Sycorax is monstrous in the way described by another Algerian by birth, feminist writer and literary critic Hélène Cixous, who in “The Laugh of the Medusa” denounces the threat represented by the otherness of women in a way familiar to Namjoshi, who also uses mythology to convey meaning. Cixous channels through one of the she-monsters of Greek mythology her claim of the difference of the female body. What she writes about women in that essay seems particularly suitable to describe women in Shakespeare's play, and their re-interpretations by twentieth and twenty-first-century women writers. Cixous writes:

Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naiveté, kept

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149According to Greek mythology, Circe was exiled on an island from her home town after having murdered her husband, just like Sycorax. She appears in Homer's *Odyssey* and in later Greek texts as a practitioner of magic, in other words a sorceress who knows how to use herbs and potions. While for Homer she saves Odysseus from the sirens and from Scylla and Carybdis, however, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* she is a witch rather than a simple sorceress, and turns Scylla into a monster out of sheer jealousy. According to critics, Shakespeare draws more on Ovid's version, recurring to the myth of Medea as well, especially for the character of Prospero (see also Marina Warner 2000).

in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new) hasn't thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble. (1976, 876)

It is Sycorax's body, in Shakespeare's play, that is the target of scorn: age has made her “grown into a hoop” (*The Tempest*, I.ii), her sexuality is perceived as not normal, her eyes are alarmingly blue, her pregnant status emphasized. In respect to Cixous, however, we have to add a detail to make the Medusa text work in this context: the Medusa we are speaking of is also dark-skinned, if we are to give prominence to the fact that she is from Algiers rather than caring for the incongruous assertion that she has blue eyes, which is however often interpreted as a sign of pregnancy and not of her race.

From the early 1990s, several women writers of colour have attempted to challenge classic interpretations of Shakespeare's play, and have worked on the fascinating and haunting character of Caliban's mother, the repressed female *and* (post)colonial subject who must be claimed in order to start a process of identity formation in a way more congenial to women. Jamaican-American writer Michelle Cliff, for example, in an essay called “Caliban's Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot” chooses to bring back what lies “underneath it all, the granddaughter of Sycorax, precolonial female, landscape, I(s)land: I land” (1991, 40). Writers and scholars as different as M. NourbeSe Philip, Chin Woon Ping, or Marina Warner have explicitly written about Sycorax<sup>150</sup>. A more common practice has been, however, that

<sup>150</sup>In the 1990s, M. NourbeSe Philip, a Canadian author born in the Caribbean island of Tobago, has published an essay entitled “A Piece of Land Surrounded”. In 2001, aforementioned writer and performance artist Chin Woon Ping staged a play called *Psycho Wracks*, in the form of a monologue

of reclaiming the specificity of a female postcolonial experience and subjectivity, with implicit references to *The Tempest* but without recurring to Sycorax. Within the Caribbean area, Jamaica Kincaid's novella *Annie John* and Michelle Cliff's novel *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) are two examples of narratives that make use of Shakespeare's play avoiding an androcentric and eurocentric point of view (Goldberg 2004, 110-12). As Irene Lara has observed, however, the general choice for women writers of colour has been to either claim a female genealogy through the male line and identify themselves in hypothetical descendants or sisters of Caliban, or to create black Mirandas. Irene Lara denounces the preference for the development of “a Caliban(a) positionality” (Lara 2007, 90) which has overshadowed a direct engagement and rediscovery of Sycorax, the exiled dark-skinned woman whose non-Western knowledge scares Prospero<sup>151</sup>. The choice to feminize Caliban,

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and featuring a return on stage for Sycorax. Chin has also written an essay discussing the play together with the figure of Caliban's mother. Contrary to what one may think, however, retrievals of Sycorax have not been attempted by women writers of colour only: Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, for instance, has found a way, through his “Sycorax video style”, which is an experiment in typography, to go back to his African roots, which he connects to the female energy that Sycorax possesses (Goldberg 2004). Another example is *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992), a novel written by British-Italian author Marina Warner, a descendant of the white settlers who in the early seventeenth century first colonized the Caribbean island of St. Kitts. In her novel, Warner recasts Sycorax as a Carib woman who finds herself face to face with the white invaders of her homeland. Author alongside her novels of several books on mythology and symbolism, Warner has also written an article discussing the relationship between Sycorax and her Greek ancestor, the sorceress Circe.

<sup>151</sup>Lara mentions as examples anthologies called *Daughters of Caliban* or *Sisters of Caliban* (1996) collecting writings from Caribbean women writers, but there are many more examples. Mônica Castello Branco de Oliveira's essay on the work of Helena María Viramontes calls Chicana writers “contemporary Calibans” (2005, n. pag.). Furthermore, Michelle Cliff's essay “Caliban's Daughter: the Tempest and the Teapot” does retrieve Sycorax, but also reinforces an identification through Caliban's descendants, resorting to the former as a symbol of the African roots of Caribbean

rather than to resurrect Sycorax, can be partly justified by the urgency to find a subject that conveys resistance, rather than defeat and repression, as Eliana Ortega (1989) explains in the specific case of Latin American women writers<sup>152</sup>. It is nonetheless that same repression that characterizes women's experience *vis-à-vis* colonialism, and after all Caliban is not that perfect as a figure of resistance: he speaks the language of the colonizer, and ultimately surrenders to him, swearing to

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people, and of a sort of benign wildness that, according to Cliff, Sycorax entails. Lara also notes how some women writers of colour have sometimes made the awkward choice to ally themselves with a white Miranda (she takes as an example Afro-Cuban writer Coco Fusco's "El Diario de Miranda/Miranda's Diary", published in 1995 in *English is Broken Here*). Sylvia Wynter wishes that instead of claiming Miranda as a representative of all women, writers would choose to reclaim what she calls "Caliban's woman" (1992, 355), his "physiognomically complementary mate, . . . an alternative sexual-erotic model of desire" (*ibid.*, 360), in order to make the oppressed and obliterated black female subject emerge. As a matter of fact, in many of the essays or anthologies that invoke Caliban as an ancestor, it is not mentioned who Caliban's woman may be. The absence of a female genealogy is problematic, especially for the Caribbean environment, where a link through the mother – rather than through the father – has often been emphasized by sociologists. Caliban's woman can only be Sycorax, in a sense, as she is the only dark-skinned woman in the play, and one that Caliban compares to Miranda, albeit discarding her in favour of the latter. This is precisely what Wynter regrets: the refusal to claim a sexual mate for Caliban that is also dark-skinned, what Philip calls "an abject failure of the imagination" (1997, 173): the incapability of acknowledging Sycorax.

<sup>152</sup>She writes: "for the Latin American woman intellectual, uniting with Caliban signifies only a half liberation, because as long as the mother figure remains forgotten, as long as women continue to be silenced, there can be no liberation for an entire people. However, to incorporate Sycorax would imply, for Latin American women, that they continue to be associated with the imposed dominant discourse. It would be a continuation of her definition within the mythological, colonizing codes imposed by Europe that convert woman into witch/goddess, Eve/Ave, exploited/adored by men. Therefore, the most viable alternative for Latin American women and men is the recovery of the rebel autochthonous mother, Anacaona, original owner of the land" (1989, 125). What I find troubling is that Ortega does not seem to take into account the possibility of subverting the story of

“be wise [thereafter], and seek for grace” (*The Tempest*, V.i). As M. NourbeSe Philip writes, “Caliban is as much the creation of the colonial power, which Prospero and Miranda represent. To find the true source of authenticity, a more autochthonous lineage and line of descent, it is to Sycorax we must turn” (1997, 166). We shall see in the analysis of Namjoshi's work how even this theorization of the exiled dark-skinned woman can be questioned.

It could be argued that in this second cycle of poems Suniti Namjoshi abandons the “Calibana positionality” of her previous re-elaboration of Shakespeare's play in order to focus on another character who is already racialized and sexualized, and who – being already present (or rather absent) in the play – deserves more attention. The sequence is in a dialogic relationship with “Snapshots of Caliban”, although it should not be considered as a follow-up, or else the two cycles would have been published together. It is clear, however, that *The Tempest* is for Suniti Namjoshi a text so dense that it requires more than one commentary, or reflection. In Shakespeare's play the reader hears of Sycorax only through the male voices of Prospero and Caliban. Even the tale of how she imprisoned Ariel in a tree is given second-hand, by Prospero, “a ventriloquism of sorts that we cannot fully trust” (Lara 2007, 83) because, as another critic cleverly observes “we have no way of distinguishing the facts about Caliban and Sycorax from Prospero's invective about them” (Orgel 1986, 55). Namjoshi therefore grants Sycorax a subjectivity, a point of view on herself and on the history of the island.

The idea that Sycorax in reality was not dead was already Aimé Césaire's, who in his play *A Tempest*, takes a first step in rehabilitating Sycorax, having Caliban pronouncing the following words:

Dead or alive, she was my mother, and I won't deny her. Anyhow, you only think she's

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Sycorax as it is told by Prospero and Ariel.



dead because you think the earth itself is dead. . . Dead, you can walk on it, pollute it, you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror. I respect the earth, because I know it is alive, and I know that Sycorax is alive. Sycorax. Mother. (1985, 15)

Césaire equates the earth, that is to say the island, and therefore the positive qualities of wildness and spontaneity, with the figure of the mother (Mother Earth), somehow reducing Sycorax to a symbol, to be considered always in relation to someone else, a descendant in this case<sup>153</sup>. Suniti Namjoshi probably acknowledges Césaire's re-appropriation, as in her work the themes of nature and death are of paramount importance. Whereas Aimé Césaire mentions Sycorax only through the words of Caliban, thus not granting her a voice, Suniti Namjoshi does what many writers have been reluctant to do: write explicitly from her point of view.

Namjoshi nonetheless challenges postcolonial re-appropriations which have seen in Sycorax simply the pre-colonial female, and creates a complex figure, as we shall see later in the analysis. Insisting on the ambiguity of the distinction between colonizer and colonized already suggested by Shakespeare, the author interestingly overlaps and compares the attributes and attitudes of Sycorax and Prospero in interesting and new ways. This juxtaposition is for instance evident in the theme of old age that pervades the sequence, a preoccupation of Prospero towards the end of the play in the pre-text. It must be pointed out that when Namjoshi wrote the cycle she was in her sixties, and she had been struck by the death of two friends, the painter and writer Mary Meigs, and Anna Mani, the physicist (Mahadevan-Dasgupta 2006, n. pag.)<sup>154</sup>. Prospero's preoccupation with old age (“Every third thought shall be

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153For a critique of Césaire's treatment of Sycorax see also Jyotsna G. Singh's essay which, despite focusing on the conflict between Caliban and Miranda, offers also a vantage point on Césaire's depiction of Sycorax, which “displaces the sexual, maternal identity of the 'native' woman, Sycorax, onto the idealized abstraction of the Earth as Mother” (1996, 207).

154Mary Meigs (1919-2002) was an openly lesbian American-born painter and writer, who lived for

my grave”, *The Tempest* V.i) is an ironical counterpart to his earlier scornful description of Sycorax as “grown into a hoop” (*The Tempest* I.ii) because of age and envy. Namjoshi picks up from there and shows Sycorax's old age, rather than Prospero's far less appealing last years in Milan. Helplessness at the prospect of death is a preoccupation of both Prospero and Sycorax in Namjoshi's version of the conflict between the two magicians. Instead of fighting and hating each other, they have to tackle their own mortal status.

As it happens for “Snapshots of Caliban”, the perspective of the colonizers is questioned, this time right from the start of the sequence, when the reader is offered an alternative history of the island, inhabited in Shakespeare's *Tempest* by Prospero, Miranda and Caliban. As a matter of fact, Sycorax says in “Prologue”, the first poem of the sequence:

I'm able to say clearly that when Prospero  
said he took over an uninhabited island  
save for Caliban and the enslaved  
Ariel, he lied. (2007b, 21)<sup>155</sup>

Sycorax has a peculiar understanding of property that contrasts with that of Prospero: she thinks that the island is her property as much as it is anybody else's. An island, according to her, cannot be owned. Prospero, on the contrary, drove her away, and made himself king. At first, it seems that in Namjoshi's sequence Prospero

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many years in Canada and was an activist in the lesbian and feminist movement. Anna Mani (1918-2001) was instead an Indian physicist and meteorologist, influenced by the teachings of Gandhi. They were both friends of the author, and she dedicates a poem to each of them in *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems*.

<sup>155</sup>The quotations from “Sycorax” are from the journal *Wasafiri*, rather than from *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems*.

and Sycorax are antithetical characters, and that they have very different attitudes towards everything. As the colonized subject in a postcolonial society would do, Sycorax now asks herself “not who / they were, but who I was and what I mourn” (ibidem). The island has changed after Prospero's colonization: Caliban has gone, like many contemporary migrants he has moved to the colonizers' land and has learned their ways, thus Sycorax is left alone, her only companions being the exuberant nature of the island and Ariel, who keeps watching at himself in every stretch of water, like Narcissus<sup>156</sup>. Sycorax asks herself what she is supposed to do now, and wonders if she should take leave of her senses one by one, a renunciation of life that recalls certain practices of Hinduism and Jainism<sup>157</sup>. The poem ends with two lines separated from the rest of the text, and written in italics. Sycorax is described here as a good witch with bright blue eyes, who can finally think about herself.

In the second poem of the sequence, “Animals”, the relationship between reality and illusion is discussed. The speaker names a dog – actually a bitch, as most of the animals in Namjoshi's works are female – and wonders if she just introduced a real or an unreal element in the poem. The subject is discussed in Shakespeare's text, for example when Alonso, Gonzalo and their companions cannot distinguish between what is real and what is not (*The Tempest*, V.i). The reader starts wondering

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156It is unclear if this second cycle of poems is connected to “Snapshots of Caliban” to the point that here as well Caliban is reinterpreted as a lesbian woman.

157*Sannyasa* is in Hinduism a process of renunciation, practised by monks who live in ashrams or by men and women usually over fifty years old. A *sannyasi* or *sannyasini* renounces material life, starting a path of spiritual contemplation, which includes abandoning his/her possessions, living as a celibate, and practising yoga. It is common for renouncers to lead a wandering life, rather than choosing to live in an *ashram*. The Jain ritual of *sallekhana* (or *santhara*), and the Hindu practise of *prayopavesa* are other examples of renunciation. In these cases, the renouncer – who has come to the realization that he or she has no other ambitions or desires left to pursue – gradually chooses to fast until death comes.

whether the bitch in the poem, described as “so spiteful and so reproachful all at the same time” (21), is a symbol for something else. Namjoshi first announces and then denies that what she calls “real animals” are not symbols as well. The question remains of course unanswered, as it often happens in Namjoshi's texts. Dreams are also referred to later in the same poem: “Sometimes though it's hard to tell what is real – in a dream for instance, composed of something that happened, or might very well have happened” (ibidem). As in “Snapshots of Caliban”, dreams and reality are juxtaposed: one can never be sure that reality is not just a dream, or an illusion, as in the Hindu concept of *maya*<sup>158</sup>. A lizard, on the other hand, is – according to the internal logic of the poem – a real animal, something that Sycorax rather pragmatically eats when she is hungry. By eating lizards, Sycorax puts herself first, so that her previous statement refusing ownership of the island is called into question. Sycorax seems to refuse the ownership of the island only theoretically, when in fact she does not consider the other creatures of the island her equals. In “A Piece of Land Surrounded”, an essay that switches from standard English to Creole and back numerous times, Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writer Marlene NourbeSe Philip discusses the question of the ownership of the land in a post-slavery and postcolonial environment, connecting it to Sycorax in the following way:

how you beginning and loving a place, a land, “a piece of land surrounded” when everything around and surrounding conspiring and making you alien – stranger to yourself? . . . Is in these pickabush questions that we finding the tracing and the spores that Sycorax leaving.

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<sup>158</sup>*Maya* is, in Hinduism, the illusion connected to the fact that we do not experience the real world, but a projection of it. According to this philosophical concept, the distinction between the Self and the universe is false: the aim of enlightenment is therefore to understand that body and mind are not separated entities. It is closely related to the concept of *lila* (game), since it is God who freely creates the world with a playful act.

How we belonging to this land; what ownership meaning? Is use we using the Western model of ownership that saying once you owning it, you doing what you wanting to do, and to hell with what happening, with resulting in the devastation of the earth that facing us today. Or is it that we closer to how the Native and aboriginal peoples “owning” the land, where one generation holding it in trust for all the future pickneys?

. . . This land – this piece of land, an island – *I-land* – causing we so much pain.

(1997, 168-9, italics in the text)

Namjoshi's Sycorax seems unaware of this problem, so convinced she seems to be that the land is hers, I-land. Compared to Philip's Sycorax, though, Namjoshi's “foul witch” is more nuanced, not a simple pre-colonial female subject, but only a stage in an endless and circular process of expropriation and appropriation. In Philip's text, Sycorax is put side by side to the aboriginal inhabitants of the island, in the same way that Namjoshi's Sycorax is put by the author next to the other creatures of the island. Namjoshi's text sheds doubts on the assumption – suggested by NourbeSe Philip and Michelle Cliff among others – that Sycorax may be a “true source of authenticity” (Philip 1997, 166), denying in fact that any culture – and this includes feminist culture, or lesbian culture for that matter – is pure, authentic, and devoid of foreign influences and biases. Namjoshi therefore implicitly challenges the theorizations made by black women scholars, and she does this from a marginal, albeit vantage, point of view, because she does not come from the Caribbean, where the discourse on *The Tempest* is already heavily structured, and burdened by the many malenormative writings of the past.

It is at this point in the poem that the theme of death and old age rather boldly enters the text: Sycorax evokes the image of “badger-like animals” (2007b, 21) who mourn on their preys. A poem within the poem follows: a solitary sparrow is conjured up, perhaps a symbol of Sycorax's loneliness. The speaker nonetheless

makes fun of the reader's constant attempt at understanding the symbolic meaning of real and unreal animals, by pointing at the tragic or comical significance of the sparrow's presence. The vulture is supposed to be a bad omen, of course, whereas the sparrow could indicate the willingness to keep oneself busy. Sparrows always move in clusters, but this particular sparrow is alone. The key here is to consider, as C. Vijayasree does, that “since Namjoshi's work insists on the relativity and mutability of truth and reality and defies fixity of meaning, it is ingenuous to attempt any definitive readings or interpretations of her texts” (2001, 28). It is however safe to consider that the sparrow asks Sycorax for food, and that the reciprocity of it – Sycorax eating a lizard and then feeding the sparrow – indicates that the author is trying to conjure up an entire world and the relationships between the creatures that inhabit it.

The poem is, among other things, a reflection on the animal world, on how humans assign to themselves more importance than they do to other creatures. Once again Hinduism is important in order to understand the poem, and Namjoshi's way of thinking. As a matter of fact, Hinduism is less anthropocentric than Abrahamic religions, and it extends inherent value to both animals and humans. The issue is of paramount importance in Namjoshi's work, because it shows how we all establish hierarchies within our world, be it between masters and servants, men and women, humans and animals, and so on. It is also possible that Namjoshi is commenting on her own terms upon a play that, as Jyotsna G. Singh writes “does little to question the inevitability of hierarchical structures” (1996, 194). It is later revealed that Sycorax has always wanted to be able to speak with animals, as if she saw a sisterhood or a similarity with them, and wanted to further that sensibility. To a certain extent she managed that, but now, in her old age, she admits that she has “spent the rest of [her] life unlearning that” (Namjoshi 2007b, 22). In the present time of the poem, Sycorax is aware that she is supposed to be different from animals, that

humans – at least in the Western culture of the colonizers – are taught to feel superior to them. Yet, on this island it is still possible to find that connection: “On this island though I may dream again” (ibidem). Sycorax is going back to her own self, to the wild native woman Michelle Cliff celebrates in her essay “Caliban's Daughter: the Tempest and the Teapot”. This is a strong reference to the dichotomy between colonizer and colonized, and its effect on the native/black woman who is taught to repudiate the witch/healer, the irrational side of herself, and her heritage. Sycorax is also re-imagined as a double for Sita, the heroine of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, in the verse that suggests that upon her death “the earth is waiting to eat [her] up” (ibidem). Sita and Sycorax have a lot in common, assonance in the name aside: they are both women sent into exile, and have both suffered because of men. Moreover, Sita's desire to be swallowed by earth suggests a return to nature.

In the last part of the poem, the author connects Sycorax with cyclical time, another feature that is apparently dissonant with Prospero's culture, and incidentally yet another concept that Namjoshi borrows from the religion she was brought up with, Hinduism. She writes:

If anything monstrous happened  
someone could dream in the wild wood.  
And all that happened be rehearsed  
until at last it was understood. (2007b, 22)

The sequence continues with another poem about old age, “Physicality”, where the speaker recalls nursery rhymes about old women – “The Old Lady Who Lived in A Shoe” and “Old Mother Hubbard” – thus reminding the audience that Sycorax, like Prospero, has renounced her powers and is now a mortal woman. In Namjoshi's version of the nursery rhyme, nonetheless, Old Mother Hubbard who

could not give a bone to her dog because she used it for her soup puts herself before her dog, while the old lady who lives inside a shoe is not able to feed her children because she has too many. Sycorax is dealing with “problems of survival” (2007b, 22). The next poem, “Copies”, ventures further into the mind of the old woman, as she deals with her own identity. Instead of accepting the fact that she is ageing, she looks back at herself at the age of five, wondering if she had a happy childhood. The image of herself that she is proposing is rather different from what we learned from Prospero: blonde, blue-eyed and sweet, Sycorax is here not the “foul witch”, but a fair maiden. After realizing that it is counterproductive to “produce copies” of a younger self, because of “their stunned disbelief when they look at [her older self]” (ibidem), the speaker projects her own mother, Syco the Dam, also a copy of herself. The old woman is also renouncing life, and is remarkably similar to her daughter. She is also characterized by apparent madness – “she hears voices, of course. Always has done” (ibidem) – alluded at also by the spelling of her name.

The fifth poem, “Ariel”, further proves all the contradictions of Sycorax, by introducing a character inexplicably left out of her previous cycle, the airy spirit whose history in Shakespeare's play includes being imprisoned inside a tree by Sycorax. Ariel is later released by Prospero, who nonetheless enslaves him in another, more subtle way. In Namjoshi's revision, Sycorax decides all about Ariel's identity, deeming him eternally happy and vain. What follows is nonetheless Ariel's point of view, indented and written in italics, where the airy spirit reveals that, according to him, “the old woman is as bad as the old man” (2007b, 22). Indifferent to him, trying to make what she wants of him, Sycorax is an egoistic character, in spite of her good intentions. Ariel is the key to understand the text. As a matter of fact, even though Sycorax is the exiled witch woman who is trying to find her identity in the island after Prospero (the colonizer) is gone, Namjoshi complicates this, by introducing Ariel as a further subject who is colonized by the colonized, Sycorax. Moreover, Ariel



has forgotten who he is, because he is always trying to please other people. This recalls the situation of women in a (post)colonial society, colonized by the colonized. It should be noted that Ariel is merely a spirit in Shakespeare's play, but he is often conceived as androgynous, and is sometimes played by a woman in contemporary performances. About Ariel's subservient role in the play, it is evident that:

although Ariel need not not be read as the co-opted native, as some modern rewritings of *The Tempest* insist, it *is* possible to view him as the colonizer's fantasy of a pliant, essentially accommodating, and useful subject. Of course, the play's ironic presentation of Prospero's fantasy shows the tensions inherent in this model. Ariel's gratitude is never as complete or as certain as Prospero would wish. Perhaps, the text suggests, a liberated native tends to interpret liberation in terms rather different from those of his or her enlightened liberator. (Fuchs 1997, 53, italics in the text)

Sycorax and Ariel turn their back on each other. It is another example of the Miranda/Prospero complex, where one form of colonialism or inequality cannot perceive the other, because of an excessive attention to one single principle. Sycorax's ego and her assumption that she is the most important creature on the island is stressed also as she reflects on her own imminent death. As a matter of fact she seems to be pondering:

but the trees will grieve  
In their own way they might  
sense a difference  
in the light and shade, an absence  
rather than a presence,  
and Ariel in his pine tree, or oak tree,  
or whichever tree  
it happens to be, will wail tunelessly. (2007b, 22)

Here the speaker makes an allusion at the absent presence Stuart Hall talks about, but it is a rather awkward reference because it is self-attributed, the old woman boasting about her own importance. Subsequently, Ariel criticizes Sycorax's assumption that nature is at her service, and claims that he is in fact the weather, the elements, and the island itself. In the source text, Ariel is equally close to the elements, confessing in one of his songs:

Where the bee sucks, there suck I:  
In a cowslip's bell I lie;  
there I couch when owls do cry.  
On the bat's back I do fly  
after summer merrily. (*The Tempest* V.i)

The warring egos of “Snapshots of Caliban” are a central theme in this sequence too, as both Sycorax and Ariel become paranoid, and attribute to each other natural things, like stepping on a snail or provoking a storm, therefore implicitly denying their centrality in the island's nature. The poem ends with a complication of the reflection on the difference between real and unreal animals: Ariel turns into a red bird, a cardinal, in order to watch over Sycorax. The speaker reflects on the fact that cardinals do not exist on the island, and therefore wonders whether Ariel is a real or an unreal animal. In other words, Sycorax is reflecting on the meaning of identity<sup>159</sup>.

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159 Changing identities and attributes is a very common theme in Suniti Namjoshi's work, because it highlights the fluidity of identity, its futility and the dangers associated to its essentialization, but also its centrality in our existence. In *The Conversations of Cow*, for instance, Bhadravati keeps switching from her original identity of a Brahmin lesbian cow, to that of a white man called Baddy, and finally to the identity of an Indian woman. The Brahmin cow of the tale represents the ever-changing forms of an Indian deity, the precariousness of identity, especially for a Hindu believer, but also the unrealized obsession of Western thought for a fixed identity. It is interesting to note in

This might be a hidden reference to Namjoshi's sexuality, and to the claim often made by some Indians – and more in general by some people in many non-Western societies – that homosexuality has been imported from the West, an issue also discussed for example by Michelle Cliff (1991) in reference to the Caribbean<sup>160</sup>. Paraphrasing Sycorax's question in the poem: does this make the author – and lesbians in the Indian subcontinent – real or unreal? The speaker reports the fact that Ariel whistles every two minutes, “for verisimilitude” (Namjoshi 2007b, 23). Here the speaker seems to be pondering on artistic practice: is one's work legitimate or derivative when such concepts are at stake? Does the author – or Sycorax, her alter ego – express herself freely or are Indian lesbians only copying what Western writers have created? That cardinals do not exist on that particular island is of course also a reference to the difficulty of writing verse for poets who come from the colonies, because poetry uses a highly codified language, where animals like cardinals always appear.

As the sequence progresses, it is more and more obvious that Sycorax is feeling lonely, so much that her famous blue eyes have melted in the ocean for having cried too much. Life and death are juxtaposed and set in contrast in the colours green, that of grass and of nature, and red, the colour of blood. The last part of the poem is a reinterpretation, and a parody perhaps, of the aforementioned song sung

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this context that, as Marina Warner argues, in Shakespeare's play the island, Sycorax, and Ariel are all associated to “a condition of continuing somatic, elemental and unruly mutation” (2000, 98), as opposed to Prospero's fixed identity and hierarchies.

<sup>160</sup>Regarding lesbians and, more in general, homosexuality, in the Indian subcontinent, I refer to Ruth Vanita's oeuvre, and especially to *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* for a general overview and a couple of essays on specific authors engaged with the theme, and to *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, co-edited with Saleem Kidwai, for a survey of both ancient and contemporary examples of same-sex love in 2,000 years of Indian literature.

by Ariel, only that here the protagonist are old women. They, like Ariel:

sleep like kingfishers  
on the charmed wave and waked so refreshed  
that when they look about them, they truly believe  
that they have the power to control themselves  
and the sea. (2007b, 23).

Unlike Ariel in Shakespeare's play, nonetheless, Sycorax is mortal, just a normal woman attributing too much importance to herself.

Other animals appear in the poem entitled “Visitors”: the bat, for example is not deemed beautiful, and is destined to extinction, like Sycorax and Caliban. The dolphin, on the other hand, is beautiful, like Miranda, and for this reason it is considered incapable of being murderous. As the reader learned from “Snapshots of Caliban”, things are not as they seem, and it is quite legitimate that Caliban may want to people the island with good people. Sycorax decides to welcome these animals to the island, but the lizard – who has been living on the island since time immemorial – does not want to be welcomed, because she considers that “this is her home, her shack, / and her planet” (Namjoshi 2007b, 24). Sycorax also admits that the lizard's ancestors preceded hers. The author thus reveals how claiming a place, a piece of land, or an identity, can be tricky, and even pernicious. Colonialism proves to be relative, as layers of colonizing and colonized people juxtapose. Later in the same poem, Sycorax reveals that she would like Ariel to be a female spirit, charming, delicate and devoted to her. For many reasons in Shakespeare's play Ariel is what Prospero would like Caliban to be, a foil character like Prospero is one to Sycorax. Unfortunately, as mentioned in “Being Robbed”, “Ariel / is only a copy of a dream” (ibidem). Once again Suniti Namjoshi shows to her readers how Prospero and Sycorax are not too different in their mindsets. “Were it not for the children we'd be /

two different species vying for precedence” (ibidem), she reflects in “For that One Thing”, the eighth poem in the cycle. Her relationship with Prospero is thus not unlike that with the lizard: they both claim the island.

“Being Robbed” functions as a turning point in the sequence, because the speaker affirms that her real enemy is not Prospero, who nevertheless robbed her, presumably of her youth, or Ariel. Although she does not name her enemy, she explains that he – notice the absence of a neutral pronoun here – stole Caliban from her, and that he is devouring her, thus it is reasonable to think that she is thinking of old age and death. Her enemy “rides in the sea wave, / rides in the foam, seduces with jasmine” (2007b, 24), in other words it is the time passing. In the next poem, “By the wayside”, Sycorax perceives herself as already dead. She is mourning her death by trying to write an epitaph, but she does not have an audience. Being alone on the island, she asks a shoal of fish to listen to her, or attempts to dispense poetry to various animals, one word at a time. Sycorax's desperate search for an audience, and for poetry companions, recalls how the author often expresses in her work the hardships she experienced as an Indian lesbian feminist author of fables and poetry. The conundrums of race, gender and sexuality become problematic: in fables such as “The One-Eyed Monkey goes to Print” (1988, 9), the author expressed this difficulty by transferring her anxiety to a one-eyed monkey who wants to write in a world dominated by the human kind, struggling understandably to be heard and appreciated. The absence of an audience is even harder now that death is approaching, thus Sycorax looks for a way to be remembered, and finds it in poetry. That same snail that at the beginning of the sequence Sycorax trampled on, attributing the unfortunate circumstance to Ariel's doing, appears again in the form of death approaching “at a snail's pace” (Namjoshi 2007b, 25).

The sequence ends with Sycorax's death, and with her dissolution “in the dew”. Sycorax rather simply

dissolves in the foam,  
in the blue twilight  
leaving only a ripple on the waters,  
a mild turbulence  
a not unpleasant odour. (2007b, 25)

Her death does not provoke a tempest, and the world is not turned upside down, in fact “all planetary preoccupations / as per normal” (ibidem), because she is not as important – as central – to the island as she wished she was.

In conclusion, Namjoshi's Sycorax is a dark-skinned, non-European woman who is not despised for that by the author who grants her a voice, to the point that she is paradoxically described as blue eyed. Her relationship with the other creatures on the island is contradictory, forming a complex web of alliances and hierarchies affirmed and denied. The many juxtaposed levels of different and divergent relationships of power is laid bare by the author, in a sequence that chooses to follow a character after the official story narrated by Shakespeare. The poem Sycorax composes at the end of the sequence is “fragmented”(24), like her story in Shakespeare's play. She struggles to be heard, ultimately appearing as an alter ego for the author. Sycorax's desire to be remembered, at least with poetry, is granted by the author who writes the sequence in remembrance of her. In her sequence, Namjoshi offers a fresh version of the exiled (post)colonial female, setting herself free from the constraints of the many other readaptations of the play.

## 4. IMTIAZ DHARKER

*“we family women who let ourselves be so put upon,  
leaving our possible rebellion like ghosts in every room” - Sara Suleri*

*“So wrap the nubile girl in veils. Make her invisible.  
Make her more unseeing than the sightless, destroy in her  
every memory of the world without. And what if she has learned to write?  
The jailer who guards a body that has no words – and written words can travel –  
may sleep in peace: it will suffice to brick up the windows,  
padlock the sole entrance door,  
and erect a blank wall rising up to heaven” - Assia Djebar*

### 4.1 Biographical Introduction

Imtiaz Dharker was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1954, and grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, where her family had relocated when she was less than one year old. She went to a Protestant school, but also had a religious upbringing, a Koranic school her parents sent her to in the weekends. Rather than considering that her school education clashed with her family background, when prompted she says that “it meshed . . . There was an emphasis on simplicity, austerity, and 'Islamic' attitude to material things, an emphasis on giving” (Dharker in de Souza 1999, 111). About her family environment, she observes that “nothing was forced down your throat, but there were certain expectations and you wanted to meet them” (Dharker in A. Joseph *et al.* 2004, 131).

She eloped to marry Indian journalist Anil Dharker, a Hindu by birth<sup>161</sup>.

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<sup>161</sup>Anil Dharker comes from a family of writers: his mother, Vasumati Dharker, is a Marathi writer who published several short stories about women issues in India between the 1930s and the 1950s, while his sister, Rani Dharker, is the author of two novels: *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997), shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and *Anurima* (2011).

Because of that, her family completely cut her off and she did not see or hear from them for the next fifteen years (Dharker in de Souza 1999, 112). She has a daughter, Ayesha, who is today a successful actress. Her second husband, Simon Powell, whom she married in 2007, was a Welsh poetry entrepreneur, the creator of Poetry Live!, a series of events directed at GCSE and A-level students, where contemporary poets read their work to the children at various venues around the country. He died in 2009 after an eleven-year-long battle with cancer. Imtiaz Dharker currently divides her time between the United Kingdom and Mumbai. She often describes herself as a Scottish Muslim Calvinist, born in Lahore and adopted by India.

Imtiaz Dharker has published six volumes of poetry: while *Purdah and Others Poems* (1989), and *Postcards from god* (1994) were published in India, another volume also called *Postcards from god*, which combines the poems from her two previous books, was published in England by Bloodaxe Books in 1997. *I speak for the devil* (2003), *The terrorist at my table* (2006), and *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009) are her other collections, also published by Bloodaxe Books<sup>162</sup>. She also illustrates her own books, with elegant black-and-white drawings, and has also exhibited her works in Mumbai, Delhi, London, New York and Hong Kong, as well as in other Indian cities<sup>163</sup>.

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<sup>162</sup>*The terrorist at my table* was first published by Bloodaxe Books in 2006, and then by Penguin Books India in 2007. In this study I will use the latter version for the quotations. A short note on capital letters: I have noticed that “god” in the title of Dharker’s collection is spelled with a lower-case first letter, therefore I have kept it that way throughout my study. Subsequently, I have paid attention to lower case letters in the titles of Dharker’s collection of poems, because they seem to be a deliberate stylistic choice. In *I speak for the devil* it would have looked incongruous perhaps to provide capital letters.

<sup>163</sup>Her first solo exhibition was held in Mumbai in 1982, and it was called “Purdah” like the collection of poems to be published in 1989. Most of her exhibitions have the same names as one of her poem sequences or single poems: “Borderlines”, “Living Spaces” and “These Are the Times We Live in” are some examples. She has also exhibited her work at the Indo-American Arts Foundation



While *Purdah* and *Postcards from god* are concerned with the misuse of religion, and the way it affects women, her third collection *I speak for the devil* has more personal poems, for instance “Knees” or “The umbrella”, both included in the section “The broken umbrella”, which deals with personal relationships in a way that her previous collection did not. *The terrorist at my table*, first published in 2006, deals with the tensions related to being a Muslim person after 9/11 and after the terrorist attacks in the London underground of the previous year. *Leaving Fingerprints* is her most accomplished and mature book to date. The metaphors are more intricate, as the poet tries to grasp the reality of her complex identity as a dislocated writer straddling several continents, cultures and religions.

Her poetry has been included in the AQA GCSE English Anthology, and in 2008 she has been on the judging panel of the Manchester Poetry Prize. She is a fellow of the Royal Society in Literature, and was the poet in residence at Cambridge University Library in 2013. Imtiaz Dharker is also a documentary film-maker, with more than 300 films and audio-visuals to her credit. She has filmed about many subjects, from street children to cancer treatment and the prevention of disabilities. In 1980 she has been awarded the Silver Lotus for the Best Short Film by the President of India. Many of her documentaries are concerned with social problems, especially among the rural or poorer communities in India.

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in New York and at the Nehru centre in London.

## 4.2. Stylistic and Thematic Presentation

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry is concerned with the politics of the body, with religious strife, and with matters of dislocation and exile, especially when they are connected to women's experiences. As a matter of fact, she often writes about the suffering of women in oppressing societies, pointing the finger against what Brinda Bose calls “the state of menace that has been consistently threatening to engulf South Asian secular freedoms” (2007, 14). Yet, Dharker is far from being the kind of writer who only has a socio-political agenda, as her work is also highly valuable for aesthetic reasons. About the process of balancing activism and poetry, she says:

it's taking the mud of the anger and letting it fall away, and making it into something pure and hard and sharp. Of course a poem can never be propaganda. It isn't just propaganda. It has to be something beyond that. It has to be the spire that rises out of whatever emotion it is, and that's where the craft and the sifting out of the gritty bits [takes place], . . . the concentration of the words when the poem begins to happen. (“Spiritual Journeys”)<sup>164</sup>

She expresses this in a poem called “Spire”, from her latest collection *Leaving Fingerprints*, where the task of writing poetry is associated to manual labour: the artist has to excavate and transport mud, working with “axe on wood” (2009, 49) in order to “let the spire / break through to upper air” (ibidem). The poem ends with the revelatory lines: “This is how you draw your human breath / in one pure line across an empty page” (2009, 47). For Dharker, the task of the poet is therefore that of shaping something out of rough material, turning something painful and angst-ridden into a piece of art, channelling those conflicting emotions through the

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<sup>164</sup>This interview for the BBC world service has been carefully transcribed for the purpose of this study.

production of poetry.

Sudeep Sen writes that Dharker works on her poetry with “a very specific and tightly-wrought Muslim sensibility” (1994, 276), yet her writing resonates for all people whose voices have been in a way or another silenced, regardless of gender, religion or nationality. As Tishani Doshi writes in a review of *I speak for the devil* published in *The Hindu Literary Review*, “Imtiaz Dharker's poems are essentially an offering of hope in the face of violence; not just the violence of men, who, she says, 'have a rare genius for revenge', but also from our societies or from ourselves” (2004, n. pag.). As a matter of fact, even though her writing is often associated to a Muslim sensibility, the influence of her Scottish upbringing should not be forgotten. She says about it that her Scottish education, with its Calvinist influence, is evident “on work ethics, attitudes, going straight to the bone, cutting down to basics” (Dharker in A. Joseph 2004 *et al.*, 141), all things that Dharker also values<sup>165</sup>.

While reading her, one has the impression of a double consciousness: Dharker plays the terrorist and the victim, the devil and the possessed woman, the tempted one and the temptress. In *The terrorist at my table* she even uses Osama Bin Laden's words “Remember Andalus” as the title of one of her sequences<sup>166</sup>. Even the devil of *I speak for the devil* is not “a unitary monolithic figure” (Dharker in Pinto 2004, n. pag.), but a multifaceted entity with many different and discordant voices.

She writes with a language that has been called “flat, terse, minimalist” (Subramaniam, n.d., n. pag.), although some critics have noticed that some of her

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<sup>165</sup>Calvinism in Scotland was spread in the sixteenth century, mainly thanks to John Knox (1514-1572), who became the leader of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland. Allegedly, Calvinism has had an influence on the Scottish psyche: the focus on hard-work and education, not to mention the austerity of the Scottish character are the elements most often cited as an heritage of Calvinism.

<sup>166</sup>Osama Bin Laden and other extremists often expressed the wish that the former Muslim territory of Andalucía (called Al-Andalus in Arabic) were to return to them, thus justifying terrorism in the region.

poems are “slight and sing-songy” (King 2002, 88). Her poetry has also been described as having “a highly visual, layered, or palimpsestic quality”, which is especially true for her last collection, *Leaving Fingerprints* (“Imtiaz Dharker: British Council Literature”, n. pag.). She also uses irony, a weapon also employed by other Indian women poets, for example Eunice de Souza, one of the most influential women poets in the Bombay area, where Dharker has lived on and off for years.

Imtiaz Dharker's poetry seems to be concerned especially with everyday, concrete things, and with their connection to bigger, more abstract things, with what one could call the spiritual. In an interview for BBC World Service she states:

I like to deal with the things of the world, the everyday: the sounds of streets, the sounds of conversations. Now, having said that, I do believe it's the everyday acts that lead to the really sacred things. For example in Seamus Heaney's . . . poem “Digging” he talks of his father “heaving sods / Over his shoulder. [...] / Digging. [...] // The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap / of soggy peat”. And I do think it is that kind of closeness to the smell of real things . . . that can lead to the sublime and the creation of the sublime. (“Spiritual Journeys”)<sup>167</sup>

She was influenced by Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, who also had a complicated relationship with religion, and with Islam in particular<sup>168</sup>. Another

<sup>167</sup>Imtiaz Dharker quotes from the great Irish poet, but skips the end of two lines, somehow changing the rhythm of the poem. The complete quotation would be: “heaving sods / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf. Digging. // The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap / Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge / Through living roots awaken in my head” (Heaney 1980, 11).

<sup>168</sup>Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984), one of the most influential Urdu contemporary poets and a revered figure in all of the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, was brought up in a family of devoted Muslims, but – similarly to what shaped Imtiaz Dharker – he attended a Mission School run by a British family in his native town, Sialkot, in what is now Pakistan. Faiz revitalized Urdu poetry, introducing political commitment in a tradition that was exclusively focused on “poetry for

writer that she often mentions in interviews as one of her inspirations is Arun Kolatkar, the author of *Jejuri* (1976), a sequence of poems about a trip to an Indian pilgrimage town written from the point of view of a person who is there for sightseeing rather than for spiritual uplifting<sup>169</sup>. As in Dharker's poems from the sequence “Postcards from god”, Kolatkar in *Jejuri* occasionally shifts to the mind of either the priest or even to that of god (“Tutor Academy: Imtiaz Dharker” 2012, n. pag.). Dharker's other influences include other poets from the Indian subcontinent such as Agha Shahid Ali, and British poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jo Shapcott, Jackie Kay, Daljit Nagra and John Agard (ibidem)<sup>170</sup>. As she mentions in an interview

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poetry's sake” (Rahim 2008, 25-6). Faiz was accused of atheism, but in reality he was close to the Sufi tradition, which has a more holistic approach to religion than the orthodox Muslim faith predominant at the time. Sufism, a mystical and philosophical current of Islam, had flowered particularly in the Delhi sultanate in the tenth and eleventh centuries and is nowadays evident in the many Sufi shrines scattered throughout the Indian subcontinent. It is characterized by a tolerance for other faiths, but at the same time by an intense spiritual self-involvement. Because of their heterodoxy and the devotion for their saints, Sufi mystics have been considered with suspicion and even persecuted by orthodox Muslims.

<sup>169</sup>In spite of a lack of recognition outside of the Indian subcontinent, Arun Kolatkar (1935-2004) is sometimes considered one of the fathers of Indian literature written in English, together with Salman Rushdie, whose seminal novel *Midnight's Children* was published a few years after Kolatkar's *Jejuri*. Amit Chaudhuri, for instance, writes in the introduction to the American edition of *Jejuri* that Kolatkar's contribution to Indian literature written in English should be recognized as much as Rushdie's is, and he blames the lack of an international audience for Kolatkar to the fact that the book did not find an American publisher until recently. *Jejuri* is a real pilgrimage town in the district of Pune in Maharashtra, with a temple dedicated to the regional Hindu god Khandoba, particularly revered by the Dhangars. Kolatkar wrote the book with the intent to describe from an objective point of view, through the curious eyes of an observer. When asked by an interviewer if he believed in god, Kolatkar answered “I leave the question alone. I don't think I have to take a position about god one way or the other” (qtd. in A. Chaudhuri 2005, xvii).

<sup>170</sup>These poets are more familiar than Faiz Ahmad Faiz or Arun Kolatkar to a scholar of postcolonial

for the radio, she has also been inspired by Sufi poetry and philosophy, and in particular by Pakistani Sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (“Spiritual Journeys”)<sup>171</sup>. This is especially evident in her most recent collection, *Leaving Fingerprints*, which even includes “Kinna Sona”, a poem entitled like a song composed by Khan. Imtiaz Dharker describes the Sufi poets in the following way:

[they] are very much of the world, very much involved with the things of the world. They never saw the need to turn their backs on the everyday world, and in a lot of ways Sufism has this idea of continuous recreation of the self. . . . For me it fits in with what I feel I'm doing, which is constantly making myself up, as a person, and as a poet, as a writer. Again as I said, the idea of lifting the veil between the person and the spiritual world. So there is a kind of circular movement back, through the Sufi poets perhaps and the Sufi singers to reaching for something else in the last collection (“Spiritual Journeys”).

She expresses this interest as a way of coming full circle, as a spiritual journey that started from a refusal of organized religions and reached a kind of spirituality that acknowledges both practical everyday and spiritual things (“Spiritual Journeys”).

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studies, mainly but not only for their location in the United Kingdom or in the United States of America. While Gerard Manley Hopkins is a nineteenth-century male “canonical” English poet, the others are contemporary authors, all women and/or “minority writers”. About Hopkins, Imtiaz Dharker states in an interview that he was “a great revelation, the way he construed his words, the anti-form of what he was doing. He was a revolutionary, the way he was handling rhyme and rhythm, and there was a lovely spin to it” (Dharker in A. Joseph *et al.* 2004, 135).

<sup>171</sup>Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948-1997), a world-renowned musician, born in Faisalabad just after Partition, was primarily a singer of Qawwali, the devotional music of the Sufis. He introduced the genre to Western audiences, having worked with artists such as Peter Gabriel and Pearl Jam. Qawwali is a musical tradition that although still very popular in parts of Indian and Pakistan has a history of seven hundred years. Formed as a fusion between Persian and Indian musical tradition,

All of her books are conceived as sequences of poems and black-and-white ink sketches (Dharker 2006, 1)<sup>172</sup>. Imtiaz Dharker thinks that her drawings should not be kept separate from the poems, because “they amplif[y] each other” (Dharker in Astley 2006, 57). To her, they are “like crossing the same terrain by different forms of transport” (ibid., 58). She is also convinced that “the drawings don't illustrate the poems, they happen at the same time” (“Spiritual Journeys”). Her approach could be called transmedial, because she uses different means of communication to express her creativity and to reach her audience, creating a dialogue between poems and drawings, letting them intersect freely<sup>173</sup>. Drawings and poems in Dharker's books are in other words different ways of working around an image, of elaborating on a certain idea from different perspectives. Talking about her experience in making audio-visuals, she confirms this by saying: “there were a lot of things coming together [in making audio-visuals]: music, visuals, words, edit patterns, rhythms” (Dharker in A. Joseph *et al.* 2004, 136). Being a visual artist has shaped her poetry, as Sudeep Sen has observed in his essay on the directions of Indian poetry in the 1990s. Reviewing her first collection of poems, he writes that Imtiaz Dharker's poems “contain an inner force that is carefully etched, a sharp-line quality of sketches derivative from her own work as a [visual] artist” (1994, 276).

Another topic that needs to be discussed in relation to Dharker's style is the centrality of the line in her work. The line for Imtiaz Dharker is not only a unit of language in her poems, but also a trope and a graphic element that one should pay

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<sup>172</sup>Her latest book, *Leaving Fingerprints*, is the only one that is not divided into sequences. One could argue that the volume is one long sequence, with the *leitmotif* of fingerprints.

<sup>173</sup>The terms “transmedial” and “transmedia storytelling” are used – in media studies primarily – with reference to innovative forms of storytelling involving and intersecting different media. In the case of Imtiaz Dharker, it is perhaps misleading to talk of narratives and storytelling, since she is a poet, but I think the adjective “transmedial” is appropriate to describe Dharker's peculiar brand of intertextuality.

attention to. The line is an important component in her drawings: it is sometimes slant and often “branching off in all directions” (“Imtiaz Dharker: British Council, Literature”, n. pag.), for example in the portrayal of the hair of women or in the rendering of the veil and the garments. It is also a keyword in her poetry: the line can be drawn on the page, but it can also blend with the actual string of words of a poem, because for Imtiaz Dharker they are essentially the same thing, only expressed through different media. As a matter of fact, in “Dot”, she writes: “Line that is word, bird” (2001, 48), expressing how it is a metaphor for the act of breaking free from immobility, “the knowledge that things / can break out / of their outlines” (ibidem), as she writes later on in the poem. Furthermore, “Either Way”, a poem from her latest collection *Leaving Fingerprints*, begins with the following stanza:

A sheet of paper. On it I have trapped  
a line.  
The line could become a wrinkle  
a chain of words, a song,  
a lace of winter branches,  
this line could move in or move on. (2009, 113)

The length of the first and the last line in the stanza – Dharker usually prefers shorter lines that go straight to the point – calls back at the line on the sheet of paper. The poem continues with the image of a potter deciding what to make out of his clay, in order to explain how she perceives the interaction between the two media.

Unfortunately, not much critical attention has been devoted to Imtiaz Dharker, and especially not within the academy. In spite of being considered one of the foremost living poets in the United Kingdom and in the Indian subcontinent, there are very few academic articles on her work. What one may find on Imtiaz Dharker are a few reviews of her books, interviews published on the web or in Indian



publications, and a few articles on her work, almost always by scholars who discuss her in conjunction with other Indian women poets. In spite of that, Imtiaz Dharker has been included in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, in a chapter dedicated to interculturalism, and Eunice de Souza has included her in her book of interviews *Talking Poems: Conversations with Poets*, which focuses on Indian poets writing in English<sup>174</sup>. This work is, among other things, an attempt to fill this void, and to grant Dharker the attention she deserves.

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<sup>174</sup>De Souza's book focuses mainly on poets based in India, and particularly those living in the Bombay area. De Souza is herself an influential Indian poet, and has published several collections of poems. Among them, *Women in Dutch painting* (1988) and *Ways of Belonging* (1990). She is also the editor of *Purdah: An Anthology*. See note 26 in the introduction.

### 4.3 Body, Religion and Nation

*“The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic –  
These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.”  
– Agha Shahid Ali*

*“Papa and Pakistan” - Sara Suleri*

The most accomplished poems on religion and the body written by Imtiaz Dharker are included in her first collection, *Purdah*<sup>175</sup>. In the first two verses from the first poem “Purdah I”, a girl is told that she is “old enough to learn some shame” (1997, 14), as if the shame of one’s female body were something you learn at school, and therefore part of one’s education. There is tension in the poem between different configurations of the veil: the poem begins with the assertion “purdah is a kind of safety. / The body finds a place to hide” (ibidem). Something similar to a double consciousness of the veiled woman is presented here by Dharker: she has perhaps internalized many things, but also feels suffocated by the veil, which “fans out against the skin / much like the earth that falls / on coffins after they put dead men in” (ibidem). It is a strong stance against the practice of veiling women, but it is also one that needs to be understood and explained. In the fourth stanza, the poet denounces how women have been induced to feel “between the thighs a sense of sin” for a thing they do not even own, also creating a connection between veiled and unveiled women, both sharing “half-remembered things / from someone else’s life: /

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<sup>175</sup>For an explanation on the term *purdah* see note 26. What seems important to restate here is that *purdah* is not a practice restricted to Muslims, as Baskaran and Kathiresan (2008) or Madhurita Choudury (2006) imply, nor is Dharker’s sequence addressed to Muslim women only. “Purdah” is both the title of a collection of poems published by Dharker in India, the title of a section of *Postcards from god* containing some of the poems from that Indian collection, and the title of a sequence in said section.

perhaps from yours, or mine” (ibidem). The poem also suggests that this guilt and this perception of enclosure has been passed on from generation to generation. It is therefore evident that the the veil of the poem is metaphorical, a reference to a psychological situation of impairment that women feel in oppressing societies. As beautifully expressed by Madhurita Choudury, “more than the veiling of the body it is the veiling of the mind that Dharker objects to” (2006, 174). The real indictment is against that “curtain” entailed in the meaning of the Persian word *purdah* that divides and isolates women from the outer world. As Dharker puts it: “I use the image of *purdah* in this sequence of poems to look at what's shown and what's hidden. It is obviously much more than just the idea of the physical *purdah*, it was what you choose to hide, what you are harassed to hide” (“Spiritual Journeys”). There is an emphasis in the poem on one's inner self as a real space: “a light filters inward”, while “voices speak inside us / echoing in the spaces we have just left” (1997, 14). There are also images of alienation in the poem, as if the veiled body were distinct from one's own interior life and real self: “she stands outside herself / sometimes in all four corners of a room” (ibidem). The woman projects herself outside of the space she inhabits, between her skin and the veil, but this unexpected focus on the outside world is shattered by the last verse, because “the doors keep opening / inward and again / inward” (ibid., 15)<sup>176</sup>. In the aforementioned interview with Eunice de Souza,

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<sup>176</sup>With regards to the perception of the body of the veiled/unveiled woman, it is interesting to quote Frantz Fanon who, in “Algeria Unveiled” writes: “the veil protects, reassures, isolates. One must have heard the confessions of Algerian women or have analysed the dream content of certain recently unveiled women to appreciate the importance of the veil for the body of the woman. Without the veil she has an impression of her body being cut up into bits, put adrift; the limbs seem to lengthen indefinitely. . . . She experiences a sense of incompleteness with great intensity. She has the anxious feeling that something is unfinished, and along with this a frightful sensation of disintegrating. The absence of the veil distorts the Algerian woman's corporal pattern. She quickly has to invent new dimensions for her body, new means of muscular control” (1989, 59).

Imtiaz Dharker clarifies this and states:

Freedom is something inside you. Being able to stand outside a culture is freedom. I love being an outsider. I'd say 'alienation', being an outsider is a positive. Not alienated really, but outside. Being an outsider is my country. I value that. That's the country all writers belong to – standing outside the body too, outside the image. Inside we are so many different things. (Dharker in de Souza 1999, 114)

“Purdah II” is a poem set in a South Asian community in a Western country, where for the woman in the poem the muezzin's call to prayer and the time spent at the mosque are “a coin of comfort” thrown into the “tin box of your memories” (1997, 16), in a land that feels alien, full of strangers. In the aforementioned interview for the BBC, Imtiaz Dharker explains how as a teenager growing up in a Muslim family in Glasgow, religion was first of all comforting. She quotes her verses from “Purdah II” and says:

I didn't necessarily see myself as a religious person, but the rhythms of the Arabic, which is really what reading the Koran is about, almost meditational I'd say... “the body, rocked in time / with twenty others, was lulled / into thinking it had found a home”, but they were “words unsoiled by sense, / pure rhythm on the tongue”. (“Spiritual Journeys”)

Dharker here speaks of the fact that the prayers in Arabic were completely devoid of sense, as she does not understand the language, but on the other hand they were comforting for the familiar sound of the chanting, which is something closely connected to the sounds of poetry. It is therefore not a completely negative opinion that she has on praying in Arabic, and she confirms this in the BBC interview, when she confirms how praying and chanting in a language that is not your own “does

seep into the rhythms of your life” (ibidem)<sup>177</sup>. An alternation of images connected to the familiar and the unfamiliar is wisely weaved into the poem: Britain is perceived as a “strangers' land”, whereas the mosque, with its marbled floor and “familiar script” (1997, 16) apparently stands in opposition to it. This is repeated in other poems from that collection, such as “Grace”, where the mosque is “a space where fear is filtered out” (22). As a matter of fact, Dharker admits in an interview that as a teenager Scotland felt like an unfamiliar land and that she “malingered for years” (Dharker in de Souza 1999, 112)<sup>178</sup>.

In the third and fourth stanza of “Purdah II” the speaker, a teenage girl, has a crush on a new Hajji who is far from pious, his glances being lascivious and inducing her to make “pilgrimages to his cheeks” (17)<sup>179</sup>. In the poem, the girls, who have been taught to be modest and to endure without complaining, “in the purdah of the mind” (18), are “bought and sold” (ibidem), but while some of them rebel, some others adjust. This emphasis on modesty is present in several poems, also in extravagant ways, as in “Another Woman”, where the speaker visits a market and thinks of buying a white radish, but changes her mind because she thinks the other women in the family might consider it outrageous and strange. In that poem, the speaker is treated badly by her mother-in-law, and is forced to bend even lower to her husband. It is a poem that displays how women can be the perpetrators of their own “purdah of the mind”. “Nothing gave her the right / to speak” (ibid., 46), gloomily affirms the

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177R.K. Bhushan's assertion that “this is the shallowness of the traditional education with no light of knowledge” (2010, n. pag.) is an extremely polarized and monolithic vision of the topic. Dharker's point of view on the oppression of women and on the constraints of religion should be always considered together with its contradictions and ambiguities.

178She also says that returning to Glasgow in recent years feels different, that she likes the accent and “the rough edges of the city” (Dharker in de Souza 1999, 119).

179Hajji is a honorific title give to someone who has performed a *hajj*, the pilgrimage to the holy Mecca, and is therefore associated to being a pious and devout Muslim.

speaker. Here the bleak life of some women is portrayed cruelly by Imtiaz Dharker. She shows how sometimes “at microcosmic level family proves as the breeding ground of the oppression and suffering that women encounter as a result of masculine raving for domination and destruction” (Guleria 2007, 276)<sup>180</sup>. Sadly, by the end of the poem the woman commits suicide by throwing herself close to the kerosene stove. “We shield the faces from the heat” (1997, 47) recites the last verse, as if to imply that one needs to be very careful not to be burned, physically but also metaphorically<sup>181</sup>. Another possible meaning of this shielding action is a reaction on the part of everyone else, a refusal to see the predicament of those women who suffer these kind of injustices.

In “Pariah” – a poem from the sequence “The Haunted House”, also from *Purdah* – the speaker seems to be ashamed of herself in the streets of a country where she is perceived as foreign. She feels that she is “inconvenient”, “indiscreet”, “an untidy shape”, “a scribble leaked / out of a colonial notebook” (1997, 27) to the eyes of the locals. Once again there is a distinction between one's inner self and what the others see from the outside: “the skin is a safe boundary / that holds my landscape in, / carried tight against my chest” (ibidem). The focus is on one's inner self, on the landscape that one carries within, rather than on the outside world, fraught with

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<sup>180</sup>Dharker is careful not to fall into the trap of overdetermining the image of family relationships. In *I speak for the devil*, for instance, the family meal at the Pakistani restaurant in London is a moment when everybody is “bound together by the bread we break” (2001, 35), and the whole family seems to share a continent, to have found “a way of remembering” (ibidem). A path of self-discovery also passes through the realization that it is possible “to wear our past / like summer clothes” (ibidem). The constant negotiating of identities and affiliations here seems to have reached a momentary status of appeasement. The family here helps creating an atmosphere of serenity, rather than representing a threat.

<sup>181</sup>The white radish, also called *daikon* and often associated to Japanese cuisine, is also an ingredient of Pakistani cuisine, often used for salads.

hostility and inhabited by strangers. The irony is that “pariah” is a word of Indian origin, identifying a particular set of lower castes of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, but here it is applied to an Indian woman walking down a street in the United Kingdom, where castes should not be allowed. As a matter of fact, in an interview the poet says that *Purdah* deals “with territory, borderlines, the whole question of where you divide people” (Dharker in Astley 2006, 57). In these poems, the landscape of the Indian subcontinent, with its “good red soil / . . . / and sunlight delicately laced with flies” (Dharker 1997, 27) is the familiar and comforting landscape, whereas the cold environment of the present feels distant and alien. Strangely enough, even the insects one can find in streets all over the Indian subcontinent are evoked with nostalgia, cherished and almost praised. When the woman of the poem arrives at home, at least she has the reassurance of religion, of ritual. That also seems ambivalent, though, a painful comfort, calling back to the image of the coin rattling against a tin-box in “Purdah II”. Dharker ends “Pariah” with the following stanza:

There  
it is – the whiplash  
of a familiar pain,  
and from my back, the surge  
of wings. (28)

The women of Imtiaz Dharker's collection *Postcards from god* are “in a great struggle, trembling / on the fine edge between / being trapped, and being free”, as she writes in “Outline” (1997, 53). Images connected with struggling are present also in the four-line poem “Passage”, from the same collection:

Your history is a trapdoor  
that you must struggle through

blinking from the darkness  
into a shower of light. (63)

Another element that recurs in the poems from *Postcards from god* is light, especially filtered in or out. In “The Child Sings”, for example, the speaker says: “she is nothing but a crack / where the light forgot to shine” (39), pairing images of cracks and crevices with that of the light, in this case not shining at all. It is absence – expressed through empty holes – that dominates this early poems and drawings in the career of Imtiaz Dharker.

These patters of presence and absence are also present in “Going Home”, where the speaker, a girl in the early stages of puberty, returns to the landscapes that she considers familiar. There are hints at eroticism, and perhaps even abuse, in the verses evoking a man's white hand slipping down the prepubescent girl's back. The reaction of the speaker is the following:

Mummy put me in purdah  
or he'll see the hair sprout in my lap.  
Mummy put me in purdah quick  
or he'll see. (1997, 34)

In this poem the month of *ramadan* is rather awkwardly associated to the first menstruation and to a feeling of guilt, conveyed with the help of an image of children hiding behind a bush to eat bread. Religion, guilt and sexuality are therefore intrinsically linked. Allusions to violence are present also in the verses connecting prayer to a possible forced sexual act: “Get down on your knees. / There must be some tenderness / in the splinters of a violent act” (ibid., 35).

The poetry of Imtiaz Dharker challenges and questions religion, as a result of the encounter between her strict Protestant school education and her family



background. Her attitude towards religion is frustration for all forms of organized religion. As she writes in “Signals”, it is too easy to get rid of god, “cut [it] out of your heart” (1997, 81) and affirm that he never existed. In an interview for the BBC World Service, she says about her relationship with faith that what made her turn her back on organized religion was “the feeling that religion in the original form must have been wonderful and it promised huge things, but in the practice [she] found that somehow it was misused. It is kind of a drought, . . . a kind of misuse of the name of god” (“Spiritual Journeys”). Asked if it is a spiritual drought that she is talking about, she confirms, adding that she feels that the process is that of “taking the water of faith away from the things it should nourish, and making it something that doesn't feed anyone, making it something that closes the land up, that cracks and parches the earth” (ibidem). In “Greater glory”, a poem from *I speak for the devil*, she uses the metaphor of hostages and hijacks to suggest how a sense of god has been lost, writing:

God was hijacked long ago,  
held hostage in empty churches,  
desecrated temples,  
broken mosques. (2001, 98)

As these verses show very well, Dharker's critique is not directed only at Islam, but at all distorted forms of religion. In “Postcards from god I”, god feels like a visitor, a tourist in the land he once created. It is not the Muslim god that Dharker addresses, but rather a more general idea of divinity, which she interprets as goodness, or as Baskaran and Kathiresan put it, as “altruism and empathy” (2008, 34)<sup>182</sup>. God feels as if he were “in a disjointed time” (1997, 75), like a blank that needs to be filled with

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<sup>182</sup>This is illustrated in the poem “Face” (1997, 105), where god sees his face in many places, such as a Hindu procession dedicated to Ganesh, an image of Jesus, the calligraphy in a mosque, and so on.

whatever a given person desires. In the second poem from the sequence, “Postcards from god II”, god is tossed around, his words misinterpreted, places of worship turned into luxurious palaces, and his word is spread with satellite dishes. The sequence “Postcards from god” is enriched by images of old men and women behind cages, their faces carefully divided in many squares by both horizontal and vertical bars. The faces look sad, decrepit, wrinkly. In “Imprint” the poet tells of a life that seems to be built with the left-overs of other lives, and compares it with a house made of discarded materials:

each piece of corrugated sheet  
and wood and plastic  
bearing the deep imprint  
of alien memories  
and puzzlement. (1997, 113)

The gods in the poem are bewildered to be “confined in one crack / of a hand-me-down world” (1997, 113). One again, god is put aside, left in a world he no longer understand. “Wedged between the bucket / and the stove” (ibidem), god in this poem is something that has been forgotten.

The recurring theme of religion and of its distortions is resumed in *I speak for the devil*, Dharker's third collection of poems, published in 2001. The first sequence in *I speak for the devil*, called ““They'll say, 'She must be from another country'” starts with an epigraph that recounts how a Pakistani woman was shot by her relatives in her lawyer's office for wanting a divorce, and how the Pakistani Senate refused to condemn the crime, calling it an “honour killing”. It is therefore the nation, in Dharker's poem, that enters the private zone and the private body of women, leaving them without privacy and without power. The nation is in other words represented as the ultimate masculine entity, as Anglo-Pakistani writer Sara Suleri also postulates

when she entitles one of the chapters from her memoir *Meatless Days* “Papa and Pakistan”<sup>183</sup>. As Jenkins observes (2011, 122), Dharker's idea of bodies as borderlines incarnates what Adrienne Rich has called “the geography closest in” (Rich 1986, 212), which Jenkins enriches by quoting from “Battle-line”, where Dharker uses the expression “when the body becomes a territory” (Dharker 1997, 55). The relationship between one's body and space, one's location in the world, is developed by Adrienne Rich in an essay called “Notes Toward a Politics of Location”, where she refuses Woolf's idea that as a woman, one does not have a country, and locates a woman's body in specific geographic, social, racial and political coordinates. One could argue that Imtiaz Dharker is preoccupied with the same topics: how to speak about a body in relation to borderlines of all kinds, not only geographical but also religious, racial, social and above all emotional and psychological.

In the first poem from *I speak for the devil*, simply called “Honour Killing”, the speaker compares her faith to an old coat that she can finally remove, after wearing it for a long time, “more out of habit / than design” (2001, 13). She takes it off as if it were her country; gender restrictions and national affiliations are therefore associated to the coat hampering her movements. The oppressing side of faith in the poem is a black veil that makes the speaker “faithless / to [herself]” (ibidem). For the woman in the poem, taking off the veil is therefore tantamount to getting rid of a faith that she considers numbing, even “beggar[ing]” (ibidem). In spite of what may seem at first sight, “Honour Killing” is not an indictment of Islam, since the speaker is still able to speak of “my god” (ibidem), albeit denouncing how his face has been

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<sup>183</sup>Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* is a memoir that intersects the private and the political involvement and experience of nationhood from the point of view of Pakistani and diasporic women. As a matter of fact, Suleri's father is a Pakistani journalist obsessed with Mohammad Ali Jinnah and with his nation, while her mother is of Welsh origin. As Sandra Ponzanesi writes in her analysis of the novel, in Suleri's memoir “Third World female subjects positions . . . can only be established as tangential to official history” (2004, 66).

turned into a devil's face by other people's distortions. Critics say that Imtiaz Dharker's “life and poetry make a fascinating study in the crushing indictment of the suppressive prescriptions against the freedom, dignity, and respectful living of women, especially in the Muslim society” (Bhushan 2010, n. pag.). This is certainly true, but what is important to understand about the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker is that she does not reject Islam and that she keeps believing in the existence of god, albeit questioning how organized religion use it as a “blank canvas”, where people can paint whatever appeals to them in that moment.

In “Honour Killing” the speaker takes off her rings and *mangalsutra* first, then her skin and flesh, getting rid of everything connected to her body<sup>184</sup>. The woman is now naked, deprived of a face, of her skin, of everything in summary. By the end of the poem, boundaries of religion, nationality and gender no longer exist. In other words, the speaker removes what Arundhati Subramaniam calls “layers of superfluous identity” (n.d, n. pag), and tries to find out what there is underneath. The layers the woman is taking off are emphasized by the extensive use of anaphora:

I'm taking off this veil,  
...  
I'm taking off these silks,  
...  
I'm taking off this skin. (13)

The woman in the poem must now rely on her “new geography”, yet the reference to finding out what she really is – “past / the easy cage of bone” (ibidem) – is

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184A *mangalsutra* is a necklace that Hindu brides receive during the wedding ceremony, and that they are expected to wear for all their married life. Contrary to common assumptions, many Muslim women in the Indian subcontinent wear it too. The removal of the *mangalsutra* therefore equals getting rid of one's own identity as a wife.

disquieting, because it suggests a liberation that sadly seems to come only together with death. The woman is more vulnerable, perhaps, when she has refused all her layers of identity, of gender, nationality and religion. As fellow-poet Tishani Doshi writes in her review of *I speak for the devil*, “always [in Dharker's poetry], there's the effort to get at what's underneath; tear away the cloaks, the veils, the skin, the parts that can be stitched on, ripped off, traded, worshipped” (2004, n. pag.).

The poem foreshadows an ambiguity that pervades Dharker's whole oeuvre, and that is particularly visible if one compares her poems to her drawings, and particularly those from *I speak for the devil*. The latter often represent women with hollow eyes, staring at the reader with their bodies either enveloped by dark garments or during the act of removing them<sup>185</sup>. There are nonetheless also a few sensuous images of women, where the veils add to the charm of the female body, rather than conveying a negative image of impairment. Moreover, the devil in the title of her collection is not necessarily a mephistophelian figure; he is neither satanic nor evil, but rather an expression of the rebellious seed that grows in some women after years of passivity and endurance. Tishani Doshi is right in asserting that in Dharker's collection *I speak for the devil* “there is no Faustian struggle with the devil” (2004, n. pag.): the devil takes possession of women's bodies, but this does not necessarily come with bad associations. In Dharker's poems, women sometimes let the devil invade them.

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185In the second and third stanza of “12 noon” the poet describes the hollow eyes in following way:

“Here the light falls / heavily, pressing shadows / in where eyes should be, / lifting a cheekbone / burnt to white. // My eyes are in another hemisphere. / Behind the eyelids, / it is night” (2001, 24).

The hollow eyes in the drawings thus translate as an extreme representation of displacement, but it is a displacement eerily close to death. As a matter of fact, in the last stanza of the poem, death is conjured up when the speaker expresses her desire to “reach out” (ibidem), and even “to press myself into this earth / six feet or more” (ibidem), as if to become closer, in death, to the other hemisphere.

In “The djinn in Auntie”, the speaker recounts how her aunt supposedly came to be possessed by a *djinn*, in a rather ridiculous situation, that is to say while she is “in the middle of her business” (2001, 57), sitting on the *khassi*, which is a British Punjabi slang term for the toilet (Pinto 2004, n. pag.)<sup>186</sup>. The presence of the *djinn*, the demon, is thus demystified through such comical circumstances. The episode seems to be connected with the passage from childhood to puberty: in the first verses of the poem the speaker's young aunt is shown as a happy child having fun with the village boys, but a moment later she is told to sit down and be silent. Only when she becomes possessed, though, people listen to her. The last verse in the poem – “At last, possessed” – is indicative of that. As Dharker explains, “freedom to the woman is the *djinn* inside her, the voice that people can't control” (Dharker in Astley 2006, 57.) In “All of Us”, the speaker relates the story of several women who are accused of having the devil inside, for daring to answer back to their mother-in-law, or menacing to burn one's husband in his own bed. The speaker admits that “this is a narrow road / but we are on it, / more of us every day”, emphasizing that this might be seen as losing control. The women are nonetheless “laughing, screaming, / singing / with one mouth” (2001, 61). With this poem, Imtiaz Dharker avoids the portrayal of women as constant victims of patriarchy, also eschewing monolithic, overdetermined discourses on women in the Third World, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty encourages to do in her theoretical essays on feminism and its implications in the Third World<sup>187</sup>.

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186A *djinn*, also called a genie in the Western world, is a creature mentioned in the Koran and in other Islamic texts and can be either good, evil or neutral. Throughout the Muslim world, there are stories related to *djinns*, and they often acquire the form of folk tales or superstitions. The comical situation in the poem is enhanced by the fact that the composition is dedicated to Ayub Khan-Din, a Pakistani British actor and the writer of plays such as “East is East”, also made famous by the film adaptation.

187In her influential essay “Under Western Eyes”, Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes about the fact that there is not one Islam, but many. She discusses the overdetermination of the veil, and writes:

Dharker reminds us that, as Brinda Bose writes in her essay about censorship in South Asia, “feminism is of course everywhere today, even deep in the dark of Third World darkness, but feminism wears as many faces and veils as there are women in the world” (2007, 15). The women in “All of Us” are not all necessarily Muslim, some names being ambiguous, like Sarah, and other usually given to Hindu baby girls, like Dhamayanti. In “Power”, Sujata is possessed by something while she is worshipping god (2001, 62-63), while in “Breeding Ground, Chicago” Christine feels like she must “mask the stink of evil / lurking right inside [her] pride” (ibid., 64). In “Learning to speak in Birmingham”, Ella goes out with a man, but is disappointed: “maybe I struck a bad bargain, / imagined the taste of poetry” (ibid., 67). In “Being Good in Glasgow” Farida respects all the precepts of Islam, but what she wants for real is “to open the front door / in the middle of the morning / and let the devil in” (ibid., 8). Dharker's poems explore the perception of boundaries between goodness and evil. As a matter of fact, in “Lines of Control”, the persona of the poem wonders why god and the devil chose her as the battleground for their fight (2001, 72). In “The Location”, instead, the persona of the poem has the perception that the devil was “living in my clothes, / owning one half / of my heartbeat” (ibid., 74), while in “In the djinn alternates between being inside and outside of the woman in the poem

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“as is well known, Iranian middle class women veiled themselves in the 1979 revolution to indicate solidarity with their veiled working class sisters, while in contemporary Iran, mandatory Islamic laws dictate that all Iranian women wear veils. While in both these instances, similar reasons might be offered for the veil, (opposition to the Shah and Western cultural colonization in the first case and the true Islamicization of Iran in the second) the concrete *meanings* attached to Iranian women wearing the veil are clearly different in both historical contexts. In the first case, wearing the veil is both an oppositional and a revolutionary gesture on the part of Iranian middle class women; in the second case it is a coercive, institutional mandate” (1984, 347). Other good insights on the relationship between the veil and colonialism are given by Frantz Fanon in his essay “Algeria Unveiled”, included in his book *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*.

(ibid., 75). Once again, divisions, conflicts, and the boundaries between one's inner self and what is perceived outside of one's skin dominate the imagery of the lyrics. Apart from showing her concern for the fight between good and evil, these poems also demonstrate that the signs of these struggles are left on the bodies of women. In the poems from *I speak for the devil* the bodies of women are possessed, not owned by themselves but by other imaginary entities or by other people. There is no absolute right and no absolute wrong in these poems: “In bed with the devil” and “Saviours” give the perception that “it's hard to say / who's on which side” (ibid., 80): businessmen make their deals and count their money while they defend their faith, and politicians are portrayed as “murderers . . . wearing / masks / with god's face painted on” (ibidem). They decide to wage a war on somebody, and to call themselves saviours. Here Dharker is commenting on how politicians use the name of god to start wars that are only made for business and interest. The black-and-white drawings associated with these two poems show an old man, fat and bold. In the first drawing, connected to “In bed with the devil”, where a businessman makes his way through deals and corrupted journalists, the old man is naked and portrayed in half-face while he is staring at the reader with a cynical eye. While these two poems comment on politicians and their use of the name of god, “Guardians” deals with religious leaders. The drawing on the next page is rather explicit: a naked woman sits on her knees, her long black hair springing in all directions. Two old, supposedly-religious men are around her: one is a bearded man wearing a crochet *taqiyah*, a prayer cap, and has his arms outstretched, as if he wanted to encircle the naked woman, while the other holds a briefcase and has a robe buttoned up to his neck. The men's black garments seem to be willing to cover the woman's naked body, and form a stark contrast to the woman's white skin. In the poem, the guardians have “jellyfish mouths / and jamun eyes” (ibid., 88)<sup>188</sup>, dip their fingers in strange juices,

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<sup>188</sup>*Jamun* is, in the Indian subcontinent, the name for the blackberry, but it could also be a reference to



and preach abstinence while showing off their pot-bellies.

The way Imtiaz Dharker speaks about the predicament of subaltern women in oppressing societies recalls the arguments made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. It can be argued, though, that one difference between Spivak's opinion on the silencing of the gendered subaltern and Imtiaz Dharker's point of view on the same topic is that the latter is not as pessimistic, in spite of what it might seem at first sight. In her poetry, Imtiaz Dharker offers some examples of women who manage to break free and speak up for themselves, or of women who find a way to speak, for example in the form of the possessed women of *I speak for the devil*. According to the poet, this is one of the strategies used by women to find a voice in situations of oppression, even if that entails giving up their own voice – and thus their personal agency – in favour of what the others consider to be the devil's voice. In “I need”, a poem from *The terrorist at my table*, there is a sort of counterpoint to bleak poems like the aforementioned “Another woman”, where the speaker craves to see a young boy bathing at the well, and boldly says:

I need to go to Crawford Market  
through the piles of fruit  
  
and buy a whole sack  
of ripe mangoes  
to suck and suck  
till nothing is left but dry seeds (2006, 104).

The poem ends with an enigmatic “I need you to come back” (ibidem), where desire

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*gulab jamun*, a popular dessert served in India, Pakistan and other parts of the world. In the context of the poem, it could be a reference to the shape of the guardians' eyeballs, rounded like a *gulab jamuns*, which are syrupy balls of brownish colour.

for what seems to be a lover is intermingled with the flavours from both Britain and of her other country, Pakistan. The speaker longs to eat *sarson da saag*, and hot *makki di roti*, but also bacon and eggs, claiming that “my greed has no nationality” (103)<sup>189</sup>. The last poem of *I speak for the devil*, “Exorcism”, is a sort of liberation, almost a cathartic moment, where the persona tries to get free from the impression of being possessed:

I'm letting all the bad things  
fall away. I'm no one  
but myself,  
no one possesses me. (127)

She names several cities, not only in Pakistan or India, but all over the world, liberating herself from the claims of other people: sons, lovers, fathers, siblings and even from someone else's erotic fantasies. The woman in this last poem is finally free to dance, “flying [her] feet / over the rattle and clunk / where the drums thump thump” (128). The poem, and the collection with it, ends with an assertion of power, of agency, of finally belonging to something: “This is how we belong” (ibidem), recites the last verse, claiming the power of poetry, its rhythms and its music. It is therefore incorrect to consider, as Madhurita Choudury does, that Imtiaz Dharker “essentializes all women through pain and suffering” (2006, 177). She tries instead to offer an overview of different kinds of women and of their attempts to be heard: while some of them manage, some of them give in. This is also evident in the image of the pomegranate from the sequence “Remember Andalus”, where Dharker writes:

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<sup>189</sup>The leitmotif of this sequence from *The terrorist at my table* called “The Habit of Departure” is absence, with thoughts about death.

I scatter pomegranate seeds,  
and from each seed springs a woman.

There is the one who sits  
in the window, day and night,  
rapt in the life on the opposite hill.

There is the one who slips out  
into the garden, and comes  
back with her hair undone. (2006, 71)

In these poems, Imtiaz Dharker offers an example of female sensuality that does not seem to be penalized or suppressed. After all, Imtiaz Dharker's life choices are an example of self-assurance and thirst for independence, thus it is only natural that some of her poems offer empowering portraits of women. In spite of her status, Dharker does not consider herself privileged, and she does not put any distance between herself and those women who do not have the strength to create a space for themselves<sup>190</sup>. She says about it:

I don't see myself as separated from them: I was there. I see myself as one of them, so it's not writing about other people. I'd say, you know, there are billions of me. It's not just about women in oppressed societies, it's about anyone who is in 'a purdah of the mind', anyone whose mind is narrowed by lack of opportunity, or lack of facilities, or even lack of nutrition, lack of nutrition for the mind by narrowness of various kinds.  
("Spiritual Journeys")

It needs to be clarified that Imtiaz Dharker is by no means misandrist: with her

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<sup>190</sup>Imtiaz Dharker does not envision herself as women's spokesman, as Baskaran and Kathiresan write in their brief study of Dharker's poetry (2008, 28), but she is rather those women conjured up in the poems.

poetry she does not imply that women are only and always oppressed by men, but she also spells out that women sometimes use a metaphorical *pardah* to protect themselves, “a slow internalization of the mechanisms of oppression” (Bose 2007, 16). Dharker therefore manages to avoid overarching generalizations, speaking through the many voices of her poems, also evoked in the many women of *I speak for the devil*. In “Purdah II” for example, more or less in the centre of the long poem, Dharker exposes the multiple and heterogeneous voices of her poetry by writing:

There are so many of me.  
I have met them, meet them every day,  
recognise their shadows on the streets.  
I know their past and future  
in the cautious way they place their feet. (1997, 19)

Some women in that poem come out of *pardah*, in a way or another:

tell me  
what you did when the new moon  
sliced you out of *pardah*,  
your body shimmering through the lies. (ibidem)

In “Not a muslim burial” the speaker does not want to be associated to any nation and hopes that instead of a Muslim burial, her body would be burned, and her poetry together with it. The poem continues with the exhortation to leave her ashes in a country she has never been to, or on a train. The poem ends with the following stanza:

No one must claim me

On the journey I will need  
no name, no nationality  
Let them label the remains  
Lost property. (2001, 37)

Rather than worrying about her homelessness, Imtiaz Dharker here expresses the desire not to be owned by anyone, or by any nation for that matter. The link she feels between her own religion and her nationality is still very strong, and needs to be cut out.

In “Compromising positions” the author provocatively suggests that women should have a sack instead of a body, so that they would not be tempted to adorn themselves. Like god in the section “Postcards from god”, the women described in this poem are “filled, emptied out / refilled as required” (2001, 105), used as recipients of contents created by other people, thus once again possessed and deprived of an agency. The poem proceeds with the realization that a sack would not be adequate, because “a sack with a head / and a tongue in the head / is still dangerous” (ibidem). Women are therefore allowed to keep their own bodies, but are conscious that

the thing  
is quite distressing to the public,  
moving in mysterious ways  
flaunting its disgrace  
through centuries, in stone and paint  
in photographs, on video tape... (ibidem)

*The terrorist at my table* is a collection of poems that deals with a Muslim person's awareness that terrorist and freedom-fighter are fluid categories, and that it

is not always clear whether someone – a friend, a son, a relative, a lover – is either one or the other. Once again, boundaries blur, and the borderlines are not clearly defined. In “The terrorist at my table” – the poem that gives its name to the whole collection – a woman is slicing onions in the kitchen and listening to the news. The journalists on television are speaking about a bombing that took place on a train, and about hostages. The speaker starts comparing the act of cutting and chopping vegetables to the task of writing poetry in a world fraught with violence:

I slice sentences to turn them into  
onions. On this chopping board, they  
seem more organized  
as if with a little effort  
I could begin  
to understand their shape. (2006, 22)

The speaker has the impression of being the object of the violence in the news, that she is the terrorist they are referring to: “I don't need to see, / through onion tears, / my own hand power the knife” (ibidem). She imagines that the violence she is seeing on television enters her Scottish home in Pollokshields, near Glasgow<sup>191</sup>. She serves food, cut and chopped in pieces, or sliced, as other people would serve the news, over a fine tablecloth “sent from home” (ibidem). Gaza is compared to “a spreading watermark” (ibidem), thus emphasizing problematic borders that are seen in a way or the other according to one's perspective<sup>192</sup>. It is the same concept developed in

<sup>191</sup>In “Still”, the speaker affirms that she has never been tortured or abused, but that violence marks are appearing on the body nevertheless. Violence, apparently distant from the speaker, has therefore crossed borders and reached her.

<sup>192</sup>The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is mentioned or referred to a number of times in this sequence. It is in the background in “Mine. Yours”, especially in the fourth stanza that recites “When did a handful of mud / turn to god? / When did sod / turn to promised land? / We are standing at the

“The right word”, where it is impossible to distinguish between freedom-fighters and terrorists, because the line that divides them is impossible to see. “Are words no more / than waving, wavering flags?” (ibid., 25), asks the poet with an alliteration, thus questioning the fixity of things. At the end of the poem, the speaker lets a child, a potential terrorist, enter her home. In this poem, the private and public spheres of life are blurring, and one's everyday life is set against the political instability of the present time.

The theme of violence connected to religious extremism is also present in the cycle “Bombay: the name of god” from her first collection *Postcards from god*, where the divisions between religious affiliations are again presented in connection with one's body. In “6 december 1992” the persona wakes up and everything, including her eyelids, are turned into glass, easy to break. Through closed lids she can now observe the new world: the glass door, the glass window, the people made of glass, with blood seeing through their translucent bodies<sup>193</sup>. The thin borderline of skin is now made of glass, and it is see-through. In this new world that the speaker has imagined, it is possible to see that some people are circumcised and some are not, but that they are all made of glass, and thus fragile. The date displayed in the title of the poem is a reference to the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, an episode that led to communal riots between Hindus and Muslims all over India, with more than 2,000

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beginning / of what has already happened” (2006, 16); and mentioned twice in “The terrorist at my table”, in the aforementioned image of Gaza as a watermark and towards the end of the poem, when the speaker asks “Who gave the gift of Palestine?” (2006, 22). The topic of a shared land is resumed in “Hand of Fatima, Hand of Miriam” from *Leaving Fingerprints*, where two women – one is Mohammed's daughter and the other Moses' sister – share the same hand, pointing at the same origin of the two religions. In the next poem, “Eye”, Dharker also seems to talk about the supreme goddess, worshipped before the arrival of all Abrahamic religions.

<sup>193</sup>For Ranjit Hoskote, the closed glass lids also represent the “permanent wakefulness” that acts of violence and religious extremism have forced her to (qtd. in Astley 2006, 54).

dead people<sup>194</sup>. In an interview with Eunice de Souza she confirms that post-Babri Masjid fragility is what she wanted to convey in this poem (Dharker in de Souza 1999, 115). As a matter of fact, Imtiaz Dharker has lived intermittently in Bombay – one of the epicentre of the riots – for many years, thus her poems relating this are very personal. “6 december 1992” is a critique of the politicians and influential people involved in the ethnic violence: as they are also made of glass, it is possible to see that their tongue is black, burnt with their foul speeches. The communal riots that followed the events are also described in “The name of god”, from the point of view of a woman who is washing her daughter's hair and is interrupted by people banging at her door with sticks and swords, setting her house on fire. The small family is then forced to leave, and the epiphany of the poem comes when the woman realizes that both the rioters and her family are whispering the name of god, only in her mouth it has a different sound, “of children whispering, / water lapping in a pot, / the still flame of an oil-lamp” (1997, 145). The gesture of washing the hair of one's daughter is a woman's gesture of daily routine, almost sacred, but it is interrupted by a violence that seems absurd and out of place. It is impossible to discern which is the woman's religion, as she uses references to god that are not directly connected to any organized religion.

Jerry Pinto has observed that the tone of “Postcards from god” – the section from the book published in India, as opposed to “Purdah” – is written in a “casual

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<sup>194</sup>The episode had a big resonance in India, both in politics and cultural imagery. The Babri Masjid was a mosque in Ayodhya, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It was built in the sixteenth century by order of the first Mughal emperor Babur. Whether or not the mosque was built over a pre-existing Hindu temple destroyed by Babur's architects is disputed. Violent incidents between Hindus and Muslims had been recorded on the site for over a century, but in 1992 the mosque was destroyed after a religious ceremony organized by the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, turned violent. The destruction of the mosque triggered communal riots all over the country, causing 900 deaths in Bombay only.



register” and with an “overtly politicised language” which he considers “the only way to confront the enormity of late 1992 and early 1993 when India was rocked by the riots that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid. . . . The events at Ayodhya changed many things for Indian Muslims” (2004, n. pag.). It can be argued that the “ornamental” quality of Dharker's poetry (“Imtiaz Dharker: British Council Literature”, n. pag.) can be linked to this need to cling to objects and everyday gestures in the face of this unspeakable violence.

#### 4.4 Layers, Lines and Fingerprints

*“but still you might peel back one face / to retrieve another /  
and another, down to the face that is / unbearable, so clear /  
so complex, hinting at nations, / castes and sub-castes  
and you would touch it once” – Moniza Alvi*

In *Postcards from god*, skin is a thin layer that separates what one is and what the others see, a borderline of some kind that one needs to recognize. In “A Woman's Place” the speaker asks: “how can I touch you through / the strangeness of your skin?” (1997, 40). She goes on explaining that all the reader can see are the marks left on the page, mirroring the marks left on one's skin, but she would like the reader to feel her tongue, also evoking the skull “that lurks / inside your head” (ibidem). The poet scratches paper, in the hope of drawing some blood, so paper is like layers of skin, underneath which so many things happen. In “Battle-line”, a poem that compares the act of making love to a battlefield, skin is the borderline people retreat behind when “there is nothing, really, / left to say” (1997, 55). The bodies of the two lovers are compared to two different countries, separated by barbed wire, turning their back on each other. The two countries/bodies, nonetheless, change utterly during the night:

in sleep, drifted slowly  
in, moulding themselves  
around the cracks  
to fit together,  
whole again; at peace (55).

The poem is filled with almost onomatopoeic alliterations of s and sh (“*shifting*

across uneasy sheets”), and of b (“when the *body becomes*”, “*behind*”, “*borderline*”, “*barbed wire*”), associated to the body and the borderlines, the battlefield and perhaps even the bombing that happens in wars. The metaphor of bodies like countries at war mirrors the relationship between India and Pakistan, as well as the author's own location at the interstices between the two countries, and between Britain and the subcontinent.

The web-page dedicated to Imtiaz Dharker created by the British Council says about her drawings that their main feature is “seemingly chaotic lines branching off in all directions” (“Imtiaz Dharker: British Council, Literature”, n. pag.). The website dedicates a whole paragraph to Dharker's drawings, writing about them that they feature “blurred, scribbled, indistinct faces peering at us through blackened, and lifeless sockets. Sharp lines and chiaroscuro appear set against smudged lineless features, while textiles and skin overlap or become interwoven” (ibidem). In the poem “Living Space”, included in *Postcards from god*, the speaker illustrates these contrasts by creating the image of an indefinite structure, a living space, where “beams / balance crookedly on supports / thrust off the vertical” (1997, 109) and where “there are just not enough / straight lines” (ibidem). The poet implements this by adding the image of

eggs in a wire basket,  
fragile curves of white  
hung out over the dark edge  
of a slanted universe. (ibidem)

The eggs retain light, “as if they were / the bright, thin walls of faith” (ibidem). This image conveys a sense of belonging and comfort that religion can bring in a world that appears dark and hostile, crooked and precarious. They also convey the fragility

of survival, of coping with horrible facts such as terrorism and extremism. Dharker explains: “it's an image of supposed fragility and yet there's survival” (Dharker in de Souza 1999, 117). The line here is oblique – “nothing is flat or parallel” (1997, 109) – and set in a dangerous colliding trajectory, mirroring all the tensions and contradictions that the author's multicultural heritage entails. The eggs, nevertheless, with their “fragile curves of white” (ibidem), represent a comforting shelter in the “dark edge / of a slanted universe” (ibidem). The image of eggs is resumed in “Shell”, but here the egg might be about to etch. It is associated to borderlines and thin walls through objects that divide one thing from another:

thresholds, windows, floors  
shutters, tiles, a room,  
...  
Stacked one upon the other,  
back to back,  
tacked on sideways. (1997, 112)

Moreover, on the cover of *The terrorist at my table*, there is a drawing made by the author: the close-up of a woman's face with columns from a newspaper article sticking to her skin. The topic of the newspaper article is British Islam and extremism. A few words, in careful handwriting, recite: “see through the writing / look through the image”. What Imtiaz Dharker wants to convey is how easy it is to read through the words of a newspaper article about religion and see a woman's body, and look through a woman's body and see the words used by other people.

Strings of words, lines either written on the body or scattered in the landscape are recurrent in Dharker's poetry. In “the devil's valentine” from *I speak for the devil*, for instance, the persona of the poem recounts how every night she writes on the devil's skin, “bits of words . . . / lodged in crevices, / tucked under your armpits”

(2001, 119). This is a metaphor for a form of guilt that takes place at night, in bed, and therefore has to do with sexuality and with one's female body. It has nonetheless an obvious connection with writing, as it is words and letters that are written on the body by the woman on the devil's shoulders, on his back and his spine. The persona of the poem feels disappointed and surprised by the fact that in the morning she never finds signs of the devil's own writing – no infamous devil's mark – on her body. The woman in the poem ends up feeling like an abandoned lover complaining about a lack of communication in a long-distance relationship: “not a line from you, though. / Not a word” (119). It is evident that in this poem the act of writing is a connection to the devil, to the act of rebelling against a set of rules that a woman in a conservative society feels obliged to respect. The devil is nonetheless present also in apparently less subversive acts, like guiltily drinking a cup of coffee, or “slurping it up” as she writes in “Squatter: left shoulder” (2001, 120). In that poem, the devil is there, chipping at her shoulder, also when she greedily reads poetry, or she wanders alone through the streets of Venice, peeling an orange. During the night, nevertheless, once again the woman feels like a forlorn lover, the devil disappearing “like a showy magician” (ibidem).

In “Tissue”, the first poem from *The terrorist at my table*, the subject is “paper that lets the light / shine through” (2006, 14), so thin that it appears to be “transparent with attention” (ibidem). The poet connects this to a Koran, its “pages smoothed and stroked and turned” (ibidem). She also speaks of maps, introducing the image of layers of thin paper laid on the land:

the sun shines through  
their borderlines, the marks  
that rivers make, roads,  
railtracks, mountainfolds. (ibidem)

Maps are not made to last according to Dharker, exactly like buildings made with paper. Maps bring to mind contested lands, as in “Mine. Yours”, where the speaker and its opponent pick up the same piece of mud and call it theirs. As a matter of fact, the whole collection, as mentioned in the back cover, revolves around “distorting screens” through which things are observed: maps, but also the television, or the thin page of a revered book. Once again, as in the image of *pardah* used in *Postcards from god*, it is a borderline, a distorting curtain that she points her finger against. In “Tissue” the thin paper becomes “living tissue”, and it turns “into your skin” by the end of the composition (2006, 15). Here the author intends to highlight how such distortions can enter one's body, and deeply influence the lives of people.

The drawings from *The terrorist at my table* often include portraits of men and women, with clothes that look layered, crossed with undulated lines, as if to underline a stratification of the inner and the outer self. In an interview with Alexandra Hamlyn released in 2005 Imtiaz Dharker explains:

I am trying to look at the face not as a portrait but as an unfolding landscape; and then come to the inner landscape, the hidden self, the fragmented self, the mask, the veil, the cloth unfolding, cloth as concealer and revealer, cloth as an instrument of seduction, cloth as a threat. (qtd. in Astley 2006, 58)

The veil and the garments enveloping the women in the drawings can be menacing and oppressive, as in the image at page 46 of the Penguin Books India edition of *The terrorist at my table*, where the veil over the woman's mouth recalls a hand with long threatening nails in the act of silencing her. In other occasions, nevertheless, the veils can add to their charm, as in the image on page 77 in the section dedicated to a visit to the Alhambra in Granada<sup>195</sup>. In the first case, the words printed on a newspaper

195That sequence, entitled 'Remember Andalus', is particularly full of positive associations,

article seem to cover the woman's mouth and muffle her, while the word 'terror', written in bold, is highlighted. In the second drawing, the woman is instead enveloped with a striped cloth that gives the impression of harmony with her body.

In “Leaving Fingerprints”, the title poem of Dharker's most recent collection, the landscape becomes benign, and the poem begins with “I know this frosted landscape / better than it knows itself, its layers / a busy clock of history, still ticking” (2009, 49). She is offering her readers a very different landscape from that portrayed in the previous collections. In “Here”, a poem about forceful dislocations included in *I speak for the devil*, trees turn into creepy images of “urgent arms, / hands, fingers,

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particularly with regards to some of the good things Islam has created, like the Alhambra in Granada. The cycle begins with a poem “Alif, Anar” recounting how the speaker's parents came home with an exotic fruit enveloped in tissue paper, “a whole idea of life / concentrated into one thing” (65). In the next poem, “How to Cut a Pomegranate” it is revealed that the fruit in question is a pomegranate, a fruit that is associated with the Arab world and the Middle East, and that in Spanish is called *granada* like the town. This fruit is described as “a magic fruit” (66), and when one opens it “jewels of the world . . . tumble out / more precious than garnets / more lustrous than rubies” (ibidem). In another poem she specifies what one of the things she associates to pomegranates are: “bodies lush, generously-hipped. / Bodies like pomegranates, / bursting with promises” (69). Pomegranates are mentioned in the Ku'ran as growing in the gardens of paradise. In the Hindu tradition, instead, the pomegranate is a symbol for the woman's fertility. In the sequence the gardens that look like paradise are also a reference to Eden, with the pomegranate being of course the forbidden fruit. In “Aixa at the Alhambra” a woman is seduced by the garden, and starts to take off layers of clothes. The water in the pools – we are in a garden very similar to the inner courtyards of the Alhambra – invites the woman in: she lets the water slip over her body, until she eats a pomegranate and is stung by a bee. The interesting combination of temptation, lasciviousness and sin is also present in the poems that follow, “What the Moon Saw”, and “What the water knows”. In all these poems water seems to have its own will, as if it were a lover that seduces the women. In spite of all the good associations, the sequence is haunted by a disjointed sense of time and place: in “What the water knows” a princess looks on the opposite hill into another century.

blossoming fingernails” (2001, 16), while “faces burn / their way out of the sides of hills” (ibidem). “Here” is fraught with images connected to fleeing: “the top comes off my head. / All the light flies out”, and the poem ends with the speaker having the impression that “the colour keeps sliding / off my face” (ibidem). The memory of the partition of India – an event that has disrupted the poet's home city, Lahore – pervades this short poem, but memories from the speaker's own personal dislocation from a Pakistani home in Britain to her new Indian family are also present and haunting. Instead of images connected to fleeing, in “Leaving Fingerprints” the impression is that the speaker is more attuned to the land, to the slow ticking of time, and to the names of those who have inhabited the land, fingerprinted it. The connection to the act of writing is evident, so much that the land seems to acquire the quality of paper: the names of the people who walked the land – who have written before Dharker – are “written and rewritten in the calligraphy / of roots” (2009, 49). Moreover, the poet conjures up the image of a worm, an earthy creature that works underground in invisible ways. The worm summoned by Dharker in the poem “delivers messages up, // scribbled in folds of soil and mud” (ibidem). An ancestry is therefore found in writing, in an underbrush of words and poetry that the dislocated writer must look back to<sup>196</sup>. This is also evident in the drawing at page 52, where the layers of the land are made of written words, undulated lines of verse or prose. In

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<sup>196</sup>In another poem, “Road-map”, she reiterates the idea of a layered landscape that she has come to know very well, writing: “I know this lost lane / as well as I know my mother's face / or the veins in the back of my hand” (2009, 80). In the poems from *Postcards from god*, the fingerprints were left on the battered sandals left outside of the mosque, as if an identity or an ancestry could be found in religion. As a matter of fact, in “Prayer” the image of the impression of one's soul on the leather and plastic of one's sandals is rather strong. Moreover, in “Grace” a woman enjoys going to the mosque because “you can at last lay down / your own name, and take another on / a bright mantle / that will fold itself around you / God the compassionate, the Merciful”. In this case, God seems to take the place of the woman's own individuality.



“Keyboard”, another poem from *Leaving Fingerprints*, while the computer is down and the speaker has no possibility of connecting to other parts of the world, the roots of the trees seen from the window, in a midwinter landscape, offer a form of solace, an anchor to reality that the internet and the long-distance conversations with relatives and friends on the other side of the world do not seem to give. Dharker ends this poem with the following verses:

Down through all the layers of frozen ground their fingers  
are holding on to messages from people who are not my ancestors.  
Their mothers were not related to mine. But the messages are still  
for me and I am still trying to send a message back to them. (2009, 67)

The dislocated writer must try to connect with the new landscape, and with the people who have written about it, leaving fingerprints on the land. In “Someone else” the speaker envisions her fingertips slipping off her finger, observing how “they rolled themselves across a field, / dug down, came back as furrows / in the ground, grew up through trees” (2009, 124). The fingertips mingle with the landscape, also fingerprinted. In this poem, any kind of writing – “a letter a road sign a recipe a poem” somehow brought “the ridges and valleys of other countries back to fall across / the fingertips, still mine, but changed / as if they were glass, as if they were water” (2009, 124).

These images of trees and roots may seem to clash with the idea of rhizomatic thought developed by Deleuze and Guattari (and also later used by Glissant to speak about postcolonial Caribbean societies). As a matter of fact, the images conjured up by Imtiaz Dharker in her most recent collection of poems are linked to the author's completely independent and personal ideas of how connections and rootedness work for a dislocated woman writer. Roots and intersections are recurrent in *Leaving*

*Fingerprints*: they are portrayed for instance in “Three ways” (2009, 69), a poem dedicated to Teenbatti, which is an intersection of three roads in Bombay, and in “My friend the poet says he has become a tree”, where a friend of the speaker, a writer, is apparently compared to a regrowing tree:

And you are on the threshold,  
  
a few pages fallen at your feet, rooted in the thought  
that you will feed the earth,  
  
that you will grow into a tree and that the words  
will come back green. (ibid.,70)

The drawings associated with this part of the collection portray details of the architecture of the Indian subcontinent, especially protruding balconies with timber beams sustaining them. All around, trees are growing and climbing the walls, so that straight lines are set right next to curved ones. Roots reaching down and reaching up, in other words, reclaiming space. For Imtiaz Dharker, the city landscape – and that of the city of Bombay in particular – is made up of this constant claiming and reclaiming, as she explains in “Hand-me-down”. In that poem she specifies how “everything here has come / from somewhere else” (2009, 73). The penultimate stanza further explores this concept:

The city has been taken and given,  
named, renamed, possessed, passed on,  
passed through many hands,  
my hand-me-down.  
One day when I am ready  
I too will hand it on. (2009, 73)

Dharker envisions this city structure as a metaphor for what she and other diasporic writers should value, and of how the process of writing works. She writes:

These lines have been written  
and written again in different  
times with altered names in other tongues  
to repeat the old story in fumbling words.  
Just for today I'll call them mine. (ibidem)

The process of making culture – and therefore also the process of writing poetry – is envisioned as a constant burying and resurfacing of things past, as a sort of possible resurrecting, like the fallen leaves/words that are reborn green in “My friend the poet says he has become a tree”<sup>197</sup>.

Furthermore, lost, buried things that surface from the earth recur in the collection: in “When they walled her in” the speaker narrates the legend of Anarkali, a slave girl who was supposedly buried alive behind a wall by order of Mughal emperor Akbar as a punishment for having a love affair with his son Salim, later to become emperor with the name Jahangir. In the poem, Anarkali, which means “pomegranate blossom”, brings with her inside the wall the poetry she has enjoyed

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<sup>197</sup>Regrowth is also a theme of “Green spiked hair”, where the poet recounts how she met her father by chance in an airport lounge ten years after he had rejected her for marrying a Hindu man. The man does not recognize her, but years after during a second meeting he has no recollection of the incident. The poem ends with the speaker's father recollecting some lines from a book of Faiz he thinks she took from him: “but in the arrival hall the lines come back to him, / *Give some tree the gift of green again, / he says, smiling at the words or me, / Let one bird sing*” (qtd. in Dharker 2009, 79, italics in the text). These are also the words of the epigraph at the beginning of the whole collection. Regrowth an rebirth, coming back to life is therefore one of the main themes of *Leaving Fingerprints*.

in life, and the speaker anachronistically lists some twentieth-century poets: Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Ahmad Faraz, Mahmoud Darwish, and Agha Shahid Ali, some of Dharker's major influences. It appears evident, through these references, that Anarkali represents the contemporary subaltern woman who uses art, poetry in this case, to survive. Slowly, Anarkali starts cracking the wall where she is enclosed<sup>198</sup>. Once again, the image of breaking barriers is central to Dharker's imagery. Even though Anarkali has been silenced, she is alive in other ways. As the poem “Anarkali, inside” makes clear:

her name is  
spoken aloud  
...  
in the open marketplace  
in the courtyards and in bedrooms,  
in darkened cinemas. (2009, 57)

The power of a story, of the traces left behind, are responsible for making Anarkali resurface from the earth, in a different form.

Furthermore, imagines connected to resurfacing of old things are offered in “Gaddi aa gayi” (2009, 75), where the memory of Partition is evoked through the image of a broken china cup that is forgotten and never spoken of again. In the fourth stanza of the poem, the speaker's mother digs up the broken cup while she is

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<sup>198</sup>According to the legend, Anarkali, protagonist of a few consecutive poems in *Leaving Fingerprints*, was buried alive under a wall in a ditch in Lahore, Dharker's native city in Pakistan. The story is also narrated in the popular Bollywood film *Mughal-e-Azam*, made in the 1960s. Anarkali bazaar in Lahore is named after a mausoleum thought to be that of the legendary slave girl, and it is the oldest bazaar in the city. There are many versions of the legend, and in some of them Anarkali either manages to escape from her tomb, or survives alive behind the wall.

planting potatoes, after many years and in another country<sup>199</sup>. Suddenly, memories of Partition resurface, but they are now almost healed, perhaps made less painful with the passing of time and the resurfacing in the other country:

She said the neighbours from the other side  
were kind. They took her in and hid her.

*Gaddi aa gayi tation the*

*Gaddi aa gayi tation the*

to the country with a different name  
to the station on the other side  
on another train. (2009, 76-7, italics in the text)

Bombay's tiffin-boxes are yet another thing in Dharker's latest collection that leaves traces behind, what she calls fingerprints in the title<sup>200</sup>. The theme of traces left

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199“Gaddi aa gayi tation the” means “the train has arrived at the station” in Hindi/Punjabi, and it is a reference to the trains that on the eve of Partition carried refugees from one side of the new border to the other. In Punjab, Dharker's region, the trains were assaulted by violent gangs, and people of the opposite community were massacred, arriving at Lahore station with only dead bodies. The episode is portrayed in books, such as Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* (1956), and in movies, such as Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998).

200Tiffin-boxes containing lunch for office workers are delivered every day in Bombay and in other cities of India through a complex yet efficient system. The tiffin-boxes (also called *dabbas*) come from employees' homes or from a caterer, and are marked with colours of symbols, since many of the *dabbawalas*, the deliverers, are illiterate. The boxes are then sorted and delivered to the working place of each client with the help of public transport, mainly local trains, buses and handcarts. As Imtiaz Dharker notes at the end of the prose poem “What did they leave behind?”, “only one box in eight million is ever lost” (2009, 61). In “Error”, the speaker takes notice of how you can have problems with technology like the internet or the telephone, connect to a call centre in India, and still not be able to solve your problem, while the tiffin-boxes – a low-technology enterprise – are still being delivered.

behind by every human person on the earth is also resumed in the sequence of poems dedicated to Indian fortune-tellers, only here the fingerprints are legible in the palm<sup>201</sup>. In “According to the palm reader” Dharker writes:

This cross is where the past is buried,  
that mound shows your appetites,  
from this ridge strong trees will spring  
and these creases here are all the children  
waiting to be born.

Your thumb shows you will be  
difficult, headstrong, stubborn.  
You have a strong life line. (2009,117)

The second section of this poem offers images connected to gushes, the pouring out of life from the allotted lines:

That must be the slash through the middle,  
like curtains torn apart  
or earth split open, when all the prayers  
I meant came pouring outstanding. (ibidem)

The drawings of the section called “The Habit of Departure” from *The terrorist at my table* are of undulating pieces of cloth that sometimes look like hills. One could argue that the crooked lines of the broken umbrellas of *I speak for the devil* or of the precarious shelters of *Postcards from god* are almost gone, in favour of the leitmotif of

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<sup>201</sup>Superstitions and old popular beliefs that supersede organized religion are a recurring theme in *Leaving Fingerprints*. In “Talisman”, for instance, the speaker, a woman walking alone at night in a Western city, needs protection, and wishes that she had a talisman with her. She calls upon one that she saw at the British Museum, of Roman origin.

the curved line. This style is resumed and amplified in *Leaving Fingerprints*. Here she develops the concept even further: the layers on the hills become the lines forming fingerprints that are attached to the land, as if to leave their marks on it. In the aforementioned interview for the BBC World Service Dharker explains the image of fingerprints in the following way:

it felt like a homecoming because I discovered, when I started writing, that there was a whole army of other writers behind me, and they were my real family. And that's what a lot of *Leaving Fingerprints* is about. The other people who leave their fingerprints on you, not just the people you love, but the people you meet every day, the people on the street, the conversations you hear, the poets you read, the songs, the lullabies, the food you eat, all of those things leave fingerprints. And my suggestion is that that is the ancestry in the end. (“Spiritual Journeys”)

In *Leaving Fingerprints* alienating landscapes and poems about disconnection and puzzlement are replaced by the realization that an ancestry can be found in fingerprints, in the traces that everyday things leave behind. It needs to be clarified that for the poet the image of fingerprints does not convey the idea of fixity of one's identity, but rather that of fluidity. In “Capturing the latent”, for example, she writes:

Take something that changes constantly,  
say water. How could you ever hope  
to replicate the way it feels?

So too with the fingerprints. Don't  
imagine it is fixed. (2009, 101)

Dharker also expresses the idea that this fluidity is hard to represent:

For a true image, a single frame  
will not be enough. You must  
change the light source, angle and  
exposure, build the picture up in many  
layers. (ibidem)

The last few poems from *Leaving Fingerprints* establish the image of rivers and streams as a metaphor for the author's ever-changing identity, those fluid fingerprints of the title. In “What she says now”, a very short poem, the persona reveals what she has become, saying: “unfixed at last, I become / the tumbling stream” (2009, 138). The collection is, in other words, an inquiry into the nature of the poet's identity as a dislocated woman, as a writer at the interstices of several literary traditions, and a person unhinged from any religious affiliations yet still a believer in the existence of greater things. As a matter of fact, Dharker confesses that in her last collection questions like “what is a person” have changed, “from notions of national identity or geography to really 'what is a person?', 'what am I going to be?', 'what am I after death?', 'what am I going to leave?’” (“Spiritual Journeys”). Thus, the fingerprints of the title need to be understood as traces people leave on geographically, historically and socially-demarcated landscapes after they are dead, independently of one's own personal geography and ancestry. Conversations, objects and scraps of paper are all building up to form the fingerprinted landscape each of us lives on. This is an interesting re-articulation of concepts such as belonging and marginality, and one that is clearly independent from any theories.



#### 4.5 Movement and Transition

*“The trick to deal / with a body under siege /  
is to keep things moving” - Arunndhati Subramaniam*

Dharker's poems are often about a life of transitions: two bodies merge one into the other in the act of making love in “Battle-line” (1997, 55-58), and women are described both behind and outside of the veil and of one's own skin (ibid., 14-21). It is no wonder that skin is described in “Battle-line” as a “bright, sharp line / that I must travel to” (ibid., 56). If the first poems in *Postcards from god* focus on a woman's inner self, on what happens behind the barrier of skin, other poems are about physically crossing borders from one country to the other, or about projecting oneself outside of the border that skin represents. One's inner self is for Dharker a safe retreat, but women must inevitably venture outside of this comforting zone – the “easy cage of bone” of “Honour Killing” – to look for freedom, for their own voice in the tumult. “Front door”, a poem from *I speak for the devil*, begins with the following stanza:

Wherever I have lived,  
walking out of the front door  
every morning  
means crossing over  
to a foreign country. (2001, 26)

It is not only the physical journey between a Punjabi-speaking house and the English-speaking outside world that the poet is referencing to: she is also discussing how certain women – used to reticence and self-seclusion – feel that to project oneself out of the borders of one's own skin, to confront the outside world, is a difficult task.

The movement in *Postcards from god* is a colliding trajectory, of crooked beams

(“Living Space”), with comforting images appearing here and there: the curved whites of a basket of eggs, or the idea of god “wedged between the bucket / and the stove” (113).

Dharker observes in interviews that she often writes while she is travelling, on a taxi ride or on the train (Dharker in A. Joseph *et al.* 2004, 136; “Spiritual Journeys”), and on bits of paper, as she recalls in “Thrown Away” (2006, 107). The fragments of her poetry mirror her own fragmentary identity as a Muslim woman grown up in Scotland, married to a Hindu man and adopted by India, always crossing borders between nations and cultures. In *The terrorist at my table* she also has a section entitled “Worldwide rickshaw ride”, where almost every poem's ending is resumed in the next composition, as if the whole sequence were a long rickshaw ride through several poems.

If in the aforementioned poem “Not a muslim burial” the poem's persona expresses the desire that after her death the ashes were placed on a train directed to a city she has never been to, in “Announcing the departure...” Imtiaz Dharker offers a similar image of rootlessness and shows a persistent desire not to be associated with any nation. The persona of the poem says:

Yesterday I put my name  
inside a parcel, and sent it off  
by courier, marked 'Urgent'  
to some address

unknown. (2001, 20)

Not unlike “Not a muslim burial”, where the ashes will be labelled “Lost Property” (2001, 37), in the last verse of “Announcing the Departure...”, in spite of the apparent freedom of not having a homeland, the reader perceives a sense of loss throughout

the whole poem. The uneasiness is both towards her country of origin and its bigotry, towards some habits the poet cannot get accustomed to, and also towards her adopted country, where she is also perceived as a foreigner (“They’ll say ‘she must be from another country’” is the title of the sequence).

There are several poems on travelling: border crossings, airport lounges, passport checks, and jet lag are common in her poems from *I speak for the devil*. In “12 noon”, “The Umbrella” and “Announcing the departure...” the disorientation one feels after or during long trips is compared to that of dislocation: “I think my body is asking / to be in some promised place”(2001, 20); “my eyes are in another hemisphere. / Behind the eyelids, / it is night” (ibid., 24). It is a disorientation perceived by the body, sensuous and tangible. Even walking out of the door every morning feels like going to a foreign country, a “daily displacement, / speeding to a different time zone” (ibid., 26) (“Front door”). In “Announcing the Departure...” it is not a celebratory approach to rootlessness that the poet wants to convey, but rather one that also involves frustration. The speaker is in fact haunted by the impression of always going back to a waiting place, with the ground being pulled away from beneath her feet.

In *The terrorist at my table*, written during the panic following the terrorist attacks and the bombings by Muslim extremists around the world, the passport checks become a torture. In “These are the times we live in III” the speaker has the impression that extremism and terrorism have erased the life of common people like her, and have replaced the names of the streets where they live, their photographs with a fake identity, as if she were a possible terrorist. “I don’t belong inside / your cage of coverage. / I’m not in the news” (2006, 47), says the speaker of the previous poem, “These are the times we live in II”.

Movement and transition in Dharker's poetry represent both the physical journeys of one's body through borders and continents, and the metaphorical

journeys of self-discovery of every woman. In “Call” the speaker is on the telephone trying to connect one home to the other home in another country. As she writes, “home moved house / to bring me here” (2006, 118). The poem also includes references to passageways and in-betweenness in the form of thresholds:

after weeks of hesitating  
at other people's doors,  
seeing their lives in lighted windows,  
looking in at basements, at dinner  
being made, smelling the food,  
all the tables laid. (2006, 118)

The poem is about home, and about how difficult it is to feel at home in one specific place. Sometimes, though, one can have more than one home. In other poems from the same collection, this same feeling of homelessness acquires more positive connotations. In “Halfway”, the last poem from *The terrorist at my table*, for example, the speaker ends the poem saying:

Halfway home or halfway gone,  
we have grown accustomed now  
to travelling on the faultline  
  
of daily miracles. (2006, 158).

The speaker is in other words aware that we are living in a “fractured time, / consulting ancient maps” (ibidem), but the journey on the rickshaws “through city centres, / down high streets and round centres “ (ibidem) equals one's life journey.

Yet, in some poems from *Leaving Fingerprints* things become more and more

complicated. In “Somewhere else again”, for example, the speaker mixes temporal and spacial co-ordinates, and the result is a moment of confusion. In the poem, the speaker arrives in a city she has never been to and is welcomed by the locals as if she belonged there: the man at the newspaper stall knows her and a child comes to hug her knees. At the end of the poem, the speaker enters a café and the woman at the counter greets her with an enigmatic “See you again / yesterday” (2009, 99). By the end of *Leaving Fingerprints*, the fortune-teller that was boldly reading the speaker's palm does not understand the situation of the dislocated poet: “Did she scatter the pages of her passport out /of a plane to be carried off in the beak of the wind?” (ibid., 141), she asks worried. The fortune-teller is also confused at the fact that the poet's handwriting “turned to sand” (ibidem). She sees more than a woman in one single body, but with only one hand to be read. This is a fitting image for a layered identity whose complexity should not be simplified. This poem is a hymn to the fluidity of identity, to the capacity of managing one's fragmented and confusing identity, the voices of many women all sharing one single body. The last poem of the collection is aptly called “What they think she said”, and it entails an open ending for the entire collection, and for Dharker's poetics:

Teach me to believe  
that nothing lasts,  
to wear my life  
like a skin of glass  
or water that will borrow  
my shape and pass (ibid., 142)

First of all, there is no full stop at the end of the poem, which is also the end of the collection. Furthermore, the title of the poem seems to contradict the fact that this instability of meaning and existence is the way to read the speaker's path of self-

understanding.

The inability to stay still, rooted in one single place, is a recurring element in Dharker's poems. In “Tongue”, a dentist is fighting with the speaker's tongue, which would not stay still. Keeping one's tongue still is, according to her, “a highly recommended skill” (2001, 22) even in other, less literal situations. The problem for the speaker is that she feels that she has many tongues, and not all of them were hers originally. In Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands / La Frontera*, which alternates prose and poetry, there is something very similar: at the beginning of the chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” she recounts how she was told by a dentist to keep her tongue still: “I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn” (75), the dentist says. Anzaldúa transfers the inability of her tongue to lie down in her palate to the inability to train and dominate her bicultural heritage: “And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down” (ibidem). In both poems the uneasiness with cultural identities is expressed through connections to the body<sup>202</sup>.

The impossibility of fixity takes the form of a continuous transformation, a constant self-refashioning, that careful “making, crafting, / plotting” (2001, 13) that Dharker considers essential for her own survival as a dislocated woman and as a writer. In “Stitched”, the poet draws on that same image of stitching and seaming used by Derek Walcott in his Nobel Lecture and by other dislocated writers. In the poem the speaker feels as if she were stitched with “some foreign stuff / that pointed out the parts / where I'd been mended” (2001, 19), to the point that she thinks that somebody would put her out with the garbage. Even though the stitched girl

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202Lee. M. Jenkins also recognizes a connection between Imtiaz Dharker and Anzaldúa, writing that Imtiaz Dharker's poetry “explores . . . borderlands, emphasizing as Anzaldúa does that 'to make the mind bleed / into another country' may be productive and painful in equal measure” (2011, 121).

survives, she still does not blend, and is tempted to make up for it by doing “dangerous somersaults / . . . jump and dance and run” (ibidem). The poem ends with the realization that perhaps she should start the process of self-refashioning all over again. In “Exile”, a short poem from *Postcards from god*, a parrot that “knives / through the sky's bright skin / a sting of green” reminds her of that other country, but rather than a simple thing that prompts a memory it is a tear on the memory, and the poem ends with newly-found awareness that “it takes so little / to make the mind bleed / into another country” (64)<sup>203</sup>. To her, the place where she feels that she belongs does not

look like a country,  
it's more like the cracks  
that grow between borders  
behind their backs.  
That's where I live. (2001, 39)

Yet, it can be argued that in the poetics of Imtiaz Dharker there is something more complicated and ambiguous than a simple “life at the interstices”, an image in itself very reminiscent of Bhabha's theories of the third space. In “Lost Word”, a poem from *Leaving Fingerprints*, the speaker gives instructions about finding freedom. The images provided are two: one is of a block of stone that one needs to chisel, “chip away / this corner, crack that letter / as if it were a bone” (2009, 42), while the other is a restyling of an old coat. Both images suggest that one should use its art and its imagination to fabricate one's freedom. By the end of the poem, the coat looks like a

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<sup>203</sup>Again, there is a similar idea in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*, where the poet and critic writes “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture” (25).

“black / hole, less coat / than sack”, thus the idea conveyed is that of peering through, of lifting the veil. A hole one has to look through in order to make sense of the world is perhaps, at least in this poem, Dharker's solution to the subaltern gendered subject. Interestingly, then, the interstices Dharker envisions are therefore cracks, holes, crevices, yet another personal re-interpretation of Bhabha's third space.



## CONCLUSIONS

It is beyond doubt that the three poets analysed in this work all have their personal approaches and their own point of view on what it means to write from a gendered and/or racialized positionality. No study can offer a monolithic theory on what are the connections and the frictions between postcolonialism and feminism, simply because there are as many points of view on these subjects as there are postcolonial authors and women writers. In spite of that, I think the three writers analysed here offer a great opportunity to observe from different perspectives what it means to write from ever-changing and blurring positionalities, in other words from those triple binds and that “question of priorities” (Trinh 1989, 6) that Trinh T. Min-ha described so well. There is nevertheless a certain friction between the terminology used by theorists of postcolonialism and/or feminism *vis-à-vis* the original and creative efforts of these writers, who express themselves through the metaphors and paradoxes of poetical language.

The work of Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Imtiaz Dharker certainly draws attention to the pulling and pushing in one or the other direction of the “allegiance axes” of gender, race and sexuality. These writers are nevertheless living proof that there need not be any anxiety in resolving the conflicts originating from such complex subject positions, and that to give prominence to one or the other aspect of one's fragmented identity is not an ideal way to tackle the problem. An acceptance of ambiguity and ambivalence is instead the way these writers have found to challenge assumptions about topics such as writing, identity, or location.

One thing that could be evinced from this study is that these poets draw strength from tumult, as well as from painful wounds and conflicts. Their poems and prose pieces often deal with wars, troubled borders, or gory stories, either set in the

real world or in a fantasy land. To find in poetry a way to work with rough and painful material, and from that to form something aesthetically convincing seems to be a cardinal point in their poetics. This concept is very far from Wordsworth's idea that poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (266)<sup>204</sup>. There is all but tranquility in the recollection of previously unexpressed thoughts in the work of these postcolonial women poets. As Jahan Ramazani writes in the coda of his book on postcolonial poetry, the most important achievement of postcolonial poets “lies less in announcing their hybrid experience than in forging aesthetic forms that embody it” (2001, 179-80). As he observed, “poetry – a genre rich in paradox and multivalent symbols, irony and metaphor – is well-suited to mediating and registering the contradictions of split cultural experience” (ibid., 6). While Ramazani writes this of postcolonial poets, without specifically including gender issues into the picture, his observations could also be applied to the postcolonial or displaced woman poet battling with fragmented identities and allegiances, as well as to many other intersections, including that of lesbian poets of colour. The “split cultural experience” of postcolonial women poets is manifold, not only from a geographical but also from a gender-related point of view, thus postcolonial women poets are particularly interesting to analyse for their intrinsic cultural ambiguities. Poetry, moreover, with its “swift territorial shifts” (Ramazani 2009, 53), offers the possibility to write about the intersectionality of postcolonialism and feminism in rich and innovative ways. The plurality of the poetic text, with its aporias and flexibility of meaning, is in other words a real asset for the postcolonial woman writer. As a matter of fact, the refusal to assign definitive meanings to their texts is one thing that Alexander, Namjoshi and Dharker have in common.

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<sup>204</sup>The romantic formula for writing poetry had already been contested, by T.S. Eliot for instance. As a matter of fact, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, he dismissed Wordsworth's ideas on the emotional origin of poetry.

Alexander, Namjoshi and Dharker offer their own contributions to what theorists of feminism and postcolonialism – or of any junction of both – have written, even modifying the theoretical starting points with personal elaborations on the different aspects of their composite identity. It can be argued that the intersections between postcolonialism and feminism seem to form a tangle of conflicting thoughts with no shape, something that even scholars can hardly give a name to. In a sense, it is appropriate to quote here what Wallace Stevens writes in *“The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”*: “a poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words” (1951, 32). It is the same point made by Audre Lorde who in *“Poetry is Not A Luxury”*, as mentioned in the introduction, writes that – according to her – poetry, especially in the case of women writers of colour, “help[s] give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (1993, 37).

A strategy that diasporic women writers seem to cherish and which they use to cope with the intricacies of their shifting positionalities is that of finding alliances in other writers who also cross barriers, of nationality, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, and so on. Alexander even writes that she needs to “flow into the sea of migrant memory” (2009, 120). What Meena Alexander calls “poetics of dislocation” can also be applied to writers that are not dislocated in the strict sense of the word, and it is for this reason that she can find space for Virginia Woolf among A.K. Ramanujan and Agha Shahid Ali in her book on dislocated writers. As a matter of fact, a situation of marginality akin to that of displaced writers can be found in women writers, or in lesbian writers for Namjoshi. Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Imtiaz Dharker all offer what could be termed “precarious affiliations”, something that is close to Gayatri Spivak's concept of “strategic essentialism” but perhaps even modifies it, through the characteristic ambivalence poets use in their art. Alliances in this case are precarious in the sense that they are continuously made and broken. For Indian women writers, drawing on Walt

Whitman, Adrienne Rich or William Wordsworth is equally important and problematic. Referencing Faiz Ahmad Faiz or Kamala Das, both poets from the Indian subcontinent, is equally fraught with anxieties. These “lateral holdings”, as Meena Alexander calls them, are not simply a geography of influences that the authors can cling to, but rather a real strategy for survival. Spivak's strategic essentialism seems to be practised by the poets I analysed in a more radical way than that expressed in theoretical remarks on the gendered subaltern subject: here the markers crossed are not only within the axis of gender, but across various and constantly-shifting axes, thus Meena Alexander can draw on Walt Whitman, Suniti Namjoshi on Adrienne Rich, and Imtiaz Dharker on Faiz, forming temporary and strategic alliances that prevaricate boundaries of gender, class, race, ethnicity and so on.

These alliances are nevertheless also problematic. The study of postcolonial women writers is certainly important in order to make clear that when discussing issues connected to feminism it is important to include reflections on the perception of race *vis-à-vis* gender, and that gender-related topics need to be addressed for a more nuanced and complex assessment of postcoloniality and of its impact on the contemporary world. The study of the oeuvre of Suniti Namjoshi – a writer with a complex positionality as an Indian lesbian living in the West – further enriches the problem of intersectionality, because it also brings sexuality and queer studies into the picture of postcolonial feminism. Yet, it is not by chance that Chicana poets and theorists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa called their collection of writings from radical women of colour *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981). In “The Bridge Poem” written by Donna Kate Rushin and placed between the preface and the introduction of the book, but also in the intention of the entire anthology, the women writers of colour who congregated to write this anthology feel that they ought not to be used to form connections in the sense of mere bridges that can be walked over on the way to

something else. What these women writers of colour strongly feel is that they should be “the bridge to nowhere / but my true self” (Rushin in Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981, xxi-xxii). In other words, women writers of colour, or dislocated women writers for that matter, should not be considered only as a way to put white feminists and postcolonialists in communication, but they need to be studied and valued for the sake of their art.

The “back against the wall aesthetic”, as Meena Alexander beautifully calls it, where the dark-skinned woman writer needs to steal but at the same time subvert a given aesthetic, is a confirmation of the continuous and sometimes overwhelming effort to negotiate between positionalities, a strategy that the postcolonial woman writer has had to learn in order to deal with the restrictions imposed by a world dominated by malenormative, eurocentric and heteronormative writers. Interlocked discriminations and hierarchical structures are everyday bread for these writers, who attempt to challenge fixity of meaning through a poetical language that is naturally rich in multivalent images and paradoxes. Patterns related to layering and juxtaposing are a feature shared by Alexander, Namjoshi and Dharker, but in general by many of the writers who feel and reflect on the pushing and pulling of any kind of intersectionality.

It can also be observed that both Dharker and Alexander find inspiration in the city landscape, in its continuous change and in the interstices between buildings. The metropolis – with its constant and frantic movement – reflects their own existential situation of perennial evolution and self-refashioning. Suniti Namjoshi appears to be the outsider here, as she does not seem to pay much attention to the landscape of the Western cities she has lived in (she does not write much about Toronto, for example). In spite of that, she looks back at the landscape of Maharashtra, or uses the forests of Indian folk tales. In *Goja: an Auobiographical Myth* she also lingers on the Canadian forest, finding ways to connect the alien yet familiar

Canadian landscape to the forest of words which she feels she is constantly extricating herself from, as an Indian woman writing in English and a lesbian writer in a world dominated by heteronormative writing. Namjoshi is not less cosmopolitan than Meena Alexander or Imtiaz Dharker, but she does not employ realistic settings for her works. In *Building Babel* or *The Mothers of Maya Diip*, the societies she creates are nevertheless multicultural. The landscape and the location, then, acquires a particular importance in the negotiation of complex identities: it is not a mere trope, but a way to make sense of one's past and heritage through the concreteness of a present and hybridized landscape, whether fantastical or real.

Moreover, in the works of these dislocated women poets who chose to write in the language of the colonizer, English is appropriated, made suitable to describe their own dislocated world. It is often the only language in which they can write, because it is that of their formal education. In a way, it can be argued that the English language takes the charged power of previously unexpressed thoughts about the conflicts in their lives. These writers challenge normativity in writing because they are dark-skinned women writing in the tongue of the colonizer, and also lesbian women writing in the language of the heterosexual colonizer, in the case of Suniti Namjoshi. Using the English language is for them yet another possibility of subverting conventions, and a way of drawing strength from an internal conflict. Rather than giving in to the liability of having to write in English, they make it their strength, using once again that “back against the wall aesthetic” that allows them to steal and appropriate at the same time. The back against the wall aesthetic which dislocated women writers are forced to use therefore becomes a strength rather than a constraint, and it is this evolution that is the best achievement of the dislocated women writers I have examined.

Furthermore, one can observe that both Alexander and Dharker draw inspiration from mystical poetry: while Alexander writes about Mirabai and Kabir,

Dharker references Sufi poetry and music several times in her poetry. A refusal of organized religion and of the established order of things, together with the embracing of a different form of spirituality, are characteristic of the mystical poetry of the Indian subcontinent. Mystical poetry is also connected with the opening of social barriers, and with a passionate poetic performance. It is not by chance that Andrea Sirotti's introduction to an anthology of Indian women's poetry begins with a praise to Mirabai's "'performative' compulsion" (Sirotti 2000, 7, my translation), which he also attributes to the women poets included in the collection. In the case of Namjoshi, the refusal of the order of things comes via the recovery and the subversion of the fables in the *Pañcatantra*, which are supposed to teach the right conduct in life to Indian people of all kinds.

One last reflection on the attention devoted to location in this work needs to be done here. First of all, one could argue that the plurality of the religious confessions of the Indian subcontinent, each of them with its groups and schools of thought, along with its many languages, the intricacy of diverse past influences, not to mention its widespread inequalities and social contrasts, have somehow facilitated, rather than complicated, the work of these writers. As a matter of fact, they seem to feel already at ease with diversity, contradictions and ambiguities, because they are the daily bread of Indian society.

When talking about Indian women writers one always needs to remember that traditionally Indian women are the bearers of values that are hardly compatible with the life of a writer. To expose one's personal matters, to speak about one's sexuality and one's femininity are still a taboo for many Indian women. Incidentally, it is the reason why many of Suniti Namjoshi's and Meena Alexander's works were not published in India for many years. In India, perhaps more than in other Third-World countries, women are forced to be the bearers of traditional values that end up conflating with those of nationalism and anti-colonialism, in order to highlight the

moral difference with the former colonizers and with the Western world. Scholars concur that it is desirable for Third-World countries to achieve modernization and innovation through a path which is different from that leading to neo-colonization and hyper-globalization. This can nevertheless be done only if gender, as well as other marks of difference or forms of marginality, are included in the process of innovation. As Nandy writes in his study on the recovery of self after the scars of colonialism, the gender and the hybrid carry what he considers to be a transformative potential. In other words, their counter-hegemonic views are of great value for the formation of new layered and multivalent identities.



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Stefania Basset

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