

**Global Ethics and Postcolonial Lucifers**

By

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## Abstract

This dissertation unites four literary accounts from four different parts of the world under the concept of extraterritorial literature – literature by and about exile. Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (India-England, 1988); Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence* (Zanzibar-England, 1996); Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* (Antigua-US, 1990); and Hector Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier* (Guatemala-US, 1998) are brought together under the claim that transnational, extraterritorial literature is not a superior discourse but a momentous analysis of contemporary imperialism. A central argument in this dissertation is that writers who cross borders and who relocate from formerly colonized places to imperial metropolitan centers in the West use the transgressive figure of the exile, an unaccommodated, resistant *other*, in order to provide immanent critique – to put histories, cultures, and ideologies face to face. This literary figure helps us understand that the alliance with people not only of the same kind but fundamentally different from us is necessary in reaching the real height of the self that exile promotes.

The dialectic of the imperial mind – the Western fascination with the exotic *other*, the European Project of describing itself by way of describing the colonized; and also the dialectic of the colonized mind – that which has become “parasitically obsessed” with the West as a colonial power – are central terms to this project. The social and literary subjects that this dialectic produces must be seen in relation to an ideology of hope surrounding the exiled secular intellectual whose role is to promote a democratic ideal. Through these postcolonial Luciferic characters, the authors offer a meditation on global ethics, a cosmopolitan discourse that is not only necessary but also inevitable in today’s age of increased multiculturalism.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>Chapter I: Salman Rushdie from <i>The Satanic Verses</i> to <i>Joseph Anton</i>: Satans, Ethics, and Cosmopolitanisms</b> .....	17
<b>Chapter II: Cosmopolitanism and Exilic Consciousness in Abdulrazak Gurnah's <i>Admiring Silence</i></b> .....	51
<b>Chapter III: The I and the Other. Ethics of Recognition in Jamaica Kincaid's <i>Lucy</i></b> .....	82
<b>Chapter IV: Sorrow, Wretchedness, and Evil. Fateful Encounters in Hector Tobar's <i>The Tattooed Soldier</i></b> .....	103
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	127

## **Global Ethics and Postcolonial Lucifers**

Satan exalted sat, by merit raised  
To that bad eminence; and from despair  
Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires  
Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue  
Vain war with Heav'n; and, by success untaught  
His proud imaginations thus displayed:

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 2

## Introduction

*Damn the vessel on which my life depended*

Olaudah Equiano

This dissertation was born out of my interest in literary exile as a contemporary postcolonial category that rests on the idea that poets and writers in exile and who write about exile “lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity – to deny an identity to people” (Said, *Reflections* 138). As this quotation suggests, a great deal of this work is engaged with notions and interpretations of exile as promoted by Edward Said in conversation with other intellectuals of his age, who argue: one) that exile is compelling to think and write about but unhealable and terrible to experience; and two) that the position of writers and intellectuals associated with postcolonial studies provide a link between migration and the loss of hope in anticolonial nationalism, together with a shift in notions of authority with respect to anti-systemic movements.

My main concern is with the larger category of postcolonialism, particularly with the different meanings and positional reasons postcolonial studies takes on in relation to transnational writers whose *inside-outside stance* can either provide immanent criticism of Western modes of thought in the most radical way, or become complicit with those same imperial presumptions. It is not only the dangers but also the uses of that complicity between transnational authors and global capitalism that drives a large part of this dissertation, in particular the notion of compromised arguments within the field of postcolonialism in its effort to make sense of the current crisis of migration and to reflect real changes in the order of the world. Since this is, in effect, an extension to Andrew Smith’s arguments formulated in his essay “Migrancy, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Studies,” my starting point was a central question in



Smith's essay, which comes from postcolonial critic Timothy Brennan. Brennan asks: "How is it possible to divorce the near unanimity in humanistic theory of the tropes of traversing, being between, migrating, and so forth from the climate created by the 'global vision of a capitalist or technocratic monoculture'?" (qtd in Smith 259). What I am suggesting is that divorce is neither attainable nor desirable; the writers and intellectuals that I am addressing here produce most of their work in a Western corporate climate, and we have to acknowledge that complicity; yet, what we also have to acknowledge and eventually, firmly, turn our attention to is what these writers have to say about the conditions involved in the production of the globalized world and especially toward the possibility that they are best equipped to answer the demands for multiculturalism. They provide accounts about different parts of the world as writers who cross borders and who relocate primarily in metropolitan centers in the West. Yet, they endlessly emphasize how these cross-cultural narratives are easy to write while cross-cultural encounters are difficult to experience. This position is worth scrutinizing: a key aspect of their writing involves the claim that just as Europeans once learned to think of themselves as fundamentally different from the rest of the world, so today Westerners, more largely speaking to include newer empires, can learn to think of themselves as *different yet alike* to the rest of the world. Undoing the European project of describing the colonized and dealing with the problematic legacy of foreign rule in terms of colonized identities remains the ultimate task of these authors, and that may be the most difficult task of any intellectual engaged with the idea of global ethics.

Multiculturalism deals with the increasing placement next to each other of diverse practices of different cultures, and suggests that the entreaty to love one's neighbor is more urgent than ever before. Taking this central exhortation of multiculturalism seriously does not allow us the luxury to look too long at the postcolonial fascination with migrancy, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggested, as that which creates "an *alibi* erected in place of a genuine confrontation with the lives of those at the receiving end of global capitalism's polarizing action"

(*Critique* 361). Nor should transnational authors who celebrate the wider world by embracing their own identity as cultural frontierspeople be accused of being more the beneficiaries than the victims of global capitalism, as Arif Dirlik insists, postcolonialism thus “designed to *avoid* making sense of the current crisis” (“Postcolonial Aura” 353). Even as they might find it easier to live with and within this system, the writers treated in this dissertation have chosen the writing of political novels as a profession that is becoming, if not increasingly reviled and obsolete, at least still poorly compensated and increasingly dangerous. They have chosen novelistic writing, which, traditionally speaking, is deeply involved both with the idea of failure – the struggle to find verbal form for life, playing with the limitations of language - and fondness for life – a most crucial component of exilic writing, for which the ethics of the Other is a vital concept. Most of the time, at the center of their writing are some of the most marginal people in the world, including in the writing of someone like Salman Rushdie, whose main protagonists tend to be bourgeois and aloof, yet who are also often put face to face with social subjects from different, ‘inferior’ classes, whose history Rushdie thus re-examines. This dissertation builds on the notion that transnational novels are not superior discourses, but momentous analyses of contemporary imperialism in its different guises.

In addressing Abdulrazak Gurnah and Salman Rushdie, I wrote in light of Smith’s comment that “much of the hope and optimism that had been invested in the new nations at decolonization is being transferred to a traveling cosmopolitan position in which the nation no longer seems to be a vehicle for any kind of social historical process” (247). In questioning the work of Kincaid and Tobar, my argument is that this cosmopolitan position becomes especially important because “class- or race- or sex- based anti-systemic movements are seen to have lost their authority: oppositionality is now seen to consist most sharply in an individualist cosmopolitanism (Chambers and Hennerz qtd in Smith 248). This is why cosmopolitanism and the ethics of the Other have become central terminology to my dissertation. Within the last

decade, philosophers, geographers, economists, and as I am arguing here, postcolonial novelists, have been trying to resurrect cosmopolitanism – the old tradition of moral and philosophical reflection – to show its relevance to our current condition, an effort that not only draws closer together different disciplines involved in the idea of quality of life, but which brings these compounded forms of investigation closer to the wider range of obligations we must feel to other human beings.

Cosmopolitanism, described better as an attitude than as a movement, is treated today as a norm for intervention in what Marxist geographer David Harvey repeatedly calls “a violent world of geographical difference” (“Banality” 12). It comes into play through processes of translocation and intellectual manifestation in addressing issues such as lived geography, nationalism and ways to overcome it. Resurrected by philosophers such as Kwame Anthony Appiah and Martha Nussbaum, the task of the cosmopolitan is not merely that of being a citizen of the world, but of understanding our responsibility and of developing tolerance for others. For these philosophers, it is about the importance of looking at ourselves through the lens of the Other. For David Harvey, the position of the cosmopolitan can be used as our own attempt to pay closer attention to historical-geographical processes of place and community construction.

It is these postcolonial authors that I primarily treat as cosmopolitan intellectuals, while their writing deals with the character in exile in relation to the possibility of radical change, to the possibility of becoming *cosmopolitan*. In doing so, these authors insist that true cosmopolitan dialogue (moral disagreement between opposing identities) is the way to resolve the conflict among our values; as Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, this type of dialogue must be conversational rather than didactic, seemingly mild mannered, yet radical. Seen as such, exilic cosmopolitan writing appears not as mere disjunction - a way of interrupting Western master narratives - but a juncture whereby intellectual work can broaden the scope of politics. This dialectic constitutes the core of (and perhaps the answer to) all investigation into the meaning of

exile, and it is the chief reason why a pan-cultural treatment of these writings will prove productive.

The novels addressed here –Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (India-England, 1988); Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence* (Zanzibar-England, 1996); Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* (Antigua-US, 1990); and Hector Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier* (Guatemala-US, 1998) give voice to characters for whom exile, in the words of Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño, is “that which shakes the nonsense out of us.” It is the *condition* of exile as defined by Said in conversation with Bolaño that became crucial to my understanding of these novels. To be exiled, Bolaño writes, is to be banished to the *tierra de nadie* – to a barren land, a dead land; yet, exile is “not to disappear but to shrink, to slowly or quickly get smaller and smaller until we reach our real height, the height of the self” (1). The loneliness that these characters experience in their removal from their national settlements is coupled not only with nothingness, but most importantly with Western figures who further alienate them and who force them into a moment of ethical transition, of understanding their past, and of dealing with their future. This dialectical aspect of exile suggests that self-definition depends on an uneasy alliance with a Western Other, which results both in a possible questioning of metropolitan dominance and in a fragile understanding of how to reject tribalism and nationalism in favor of a wider embrace of human community. These authors ultimately offer a meditation on global ethics, a discourse that is not only necessary but also inevitable in today’s multiculturalism, arguing that the alliance with people not only of the same kind, but entirely different and opposed, remains necessary in reaching the “real height” that exile promotes.

The definition of exile that shapes out of each chapter – as involuntary, but more often seemingly voluntary gestures of departure from one’s native land or familiar situation and onto some strange lands that can be either objective geographic realities or mental constructs – is meant to arrest exile’s political nature, turning it instead into a state of mind, a condition at once

metaphysical and ideological. These characters are not refugees, nor political exiles. They flee their homes “under a cloud,” as Teju Cole poetically suggested in his novel *Every Day Is for the Thief*, and they always have the option to return. That they don’t (with the exception of Rushdie’s *Saladin Chamcha*), speaks for the deeply ambivalent nature of any exile – the double vision (thinking of home, thinking about the new home, obsessing over national belonging), but what it speaks of primarily is the condition of living among other people “for the duration” – a prolonged visit to the imperial space that involves learning its history, as necessary in giving substance to exile, its potential lying as such in what Edward Said calls *contrapuntal awareness*.

In the latest edition of *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, editors Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin claim that their updated glossary is the univocal outcome of recent debates on “the problems of global culture and the relationships between local cultures and global forces” (vii). Their introductory statements put forth the idea that the passage from the phenomenon of colonialism to the more contemporary events surrounding the wider topic of globalization (the authors here cite the place of the ‘glocal,’ the role of imperialism in globalization, and the connection between imperialism and neoliberal economics) has facilitated acquisition of a new language in postcolonial analysis, one that continues to address and challenge imperial power. Accordingly, the revised glossary reflects pressing and controversial topics in contemporary politics, with particular emphasis on the ‘environment’, the question of borders and borderlands, the issue of the sacred, and the ‘transnational’ problem. Given my interest in the role of the intellectual and the literary representation of *exile* in the age of late Empire, this dissertation focuses on a set of writers whose literary acts originate in and represent ‘location-related’ environments, and who address questions of authority and exilic identity. They treat migration as an unsettling contemporary fact of life and use literature to reflect on our age of refugees, displaced persons, and mass immigration, conditions resulting from what Said

indicted as the “modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rule” (*Reflections* 137-8).

As heterogeneous as these writers might be – coming from four different geopolitical regions – for all of them, exile starts with Said’s definition as “the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (*Reflections* 137). All of the texts are supported by Said’s claim that exile is predicated on the existence of one’s native place, not in the sense that home and love of home are lost, but that “that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” (“Mind of Winter” 440), and also by Amy Kaminsky’s more recent argument that the exiled subject is marked by “a loss that he or she does not want to let go of” (17). Accordingly, I see these novelists as trying to give adequate expression to that loss, to correct it, to change it into some positive attitude: that loss manifests itself under Lucy’s youthful rejection of her mother, in Rushdie’s concept of disaffiliation, in Tobar’s cultural displacement, and in Gurnah’s effort to recover local history.

The world has never abounded more in migratory and displaced writers or in narratives that more clearly embody the symbiosis between literary practices, history, and the political, than it does now. I chose these authors because of their cultural heterogeneity, but also because of the homogeneity of their treatment of the concept of *exile*. Socially and economically mobile, these writers consciously implicate themselves in the production of political and cultural knowledge. Stylistically, they share a tendency to delineate characters that serve as the matrix for all prerogatives of exilic living. The protagonists of *The Satanic Verses*, *Admiring Silence*, *Lucy*, and *The Tattooed Soldier* are exiles of one sort or another, and while they reflect no single obvious prototype, they all speak to the pitfalls and the blessings of being “away from home.” They are literary portrayals of a new *enfant du monde* whose interloping among geographies and social spheres produces a story about the permanence of cultural, physical, and intellectual homelessness. Without a doubt, the issues treated in these novels are a reflection, ethical in

nature, of the increasing fluidity of global populations, and thematically they don't reflect solely the move away from one's homeland. Such texts fall under the category of *transnational* literature about exile, or what George Steiner once named *extraterritorial literature*, their scope extended to an analysis of the relationship between nations as homelands, of the perennial status of in-betweenness, of hybridity as an exile's permanent identity, of dislocation from one's nation and land, and of the rights and wrongs of multiculturalism.

These texts have never, to my knowledge, been treated together, but their authors and their characters engage the same intricate set of dialectics, one of the most dynamic ones being the dialectics of the colonized mind as that which problematizes binary thinking and blurs ideological distinctions, and which is based on the complex mix of admiration and disaffection with the West. Postcolonial resentment mixed with fascination can be seen both at the textual level through characters who make the move to the West (or North, in the case of Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier*) and at the authorial level by writers who have to publish their works in the West and who have had to borrow this narrative form from European writers. At both levels, this shows how that fixation with the West lies in the history of colonialism, but these writers also show us more seriously "how the limited horizons of the colonized mind and its fixation with the West – whether in resentment or admiration – has to be overcome" (Sen 88). As Amartya Sen further argues, leading "a life in which resentment against an imposed inferiority from past history comes to dominate one's priorities today cannot but be unfair to oneself. It can vastly deflect attention from other objectives that those emerging from past colonies have reason to value and pursue in the contemporary world" (89). It is this difficult process of overcoming both the resentment and the fascination with a West that for centuries defined itself against the colonized that I see central in each text. Each of the writers treated in this dissertation delineates one or more central characters who struggle with this unsettling obsession and which fails to be a good basis for self-understanding. Two of the more optimistic writers, Kincaid and Rushdie,

suggest that such obsession can be overcome by a radical change, itself possible in these texts either through Lucy's total rejection of home and of the Western values, or through Saladin's long-term living among the British culture and his return home as a cosmopolitan with renewed global values – a believer without borders, as Appiah would undoubtedly call him. Gurnah and Tobar on the other hand show us both how difficult that ethical transition is: impossible, in Tobar's case. The struggle to overcome adversities imposed by a colonial system – Longoria's effective elision from his culture, enforced by U.S. military interventionism, Antonio's own moral debasement – point towards the need to revisit local histories not only from a distance but also from the writer's double perspective as a migrant writing about both his homeland and his adoptive country in order to place in the forefront of his narrative the complex history of imperialism that they share.

If as characters they are invisible but struggle for clarity, it is because they are part of an existentialist aesthetics, absurdist approaches running along ontological considerations of the human nature, characters existing in their most abstract and subjective moments. As such, they act as "hommes du midi" mediating the relationship between the author and the reader from the crossroads of cultures and geographies. Each one of these characters suffers a particular form of exile which makes claims at a universal humanism not from a transparent position of intellectualism, but rather at an extradiegetic level, through the function of their narratives as critical and methodological events. Coincidentally outsiders and insiders, absent and present, normal and abnormal, many of them function as unreliable narrators and are identified by the singular mark of *morbus melancholicus* – an affliction of the heart that the 17th century scholar Robert Burton describes in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* as "the malady that beleaguers the pusillanimous." The German Romantic philosopher Friedrich von Schelling called it *sehnsucht*: a "yearning for the infinite" as a type of melancholy caused by the poet's distancing away from a state of innocence, happiness, and perfection. A common motif in contemporary literature of



exile, this malady is an odd mixture between the morbid and the melancholy; we see it introduced metaphorically in *Admiring Silence* as the narrator's "buggered heart" and in his sardonic speech acts. We see it in Lucy's obsessive hold on her mother's letters which she keeps hidden in her brassiere until the day she burns them. We see it in Longoria's unresolved traumatic cultural experience, in his chess games that reveal his intellectual stasis. We see it in Saladin Chamcha's missing chromosome, in his inability to procreate, a metaphor for his impotence – a mixture of need and desire – in reconstructing the Indian nation.

As the exiled intellectual has been the focus of a good number of cultural critics, Edward Said in particular, I often touch upon the complexities entailed in the consciousness of the exilic writer, and on the postcolonialist view that the expatriate, marginal artist is necessarily confined to an un-accommodated, resistant position. Said makes the claim that the exilic writer must succumb to "the terrors of being a leper, a social and moral untouchable" (*Representations* 47); this condition, according to him, admits exilic writers to the sphere of counter-discourse and grants them unassailable success in their symbolic resistance. Said here invites many questions about class, gender, and race divisions, but an immediate question regards the status of the writer who is culturally de-territorialized, a status that I see as ambiguous and anxious. Hardt and Negri have argued that separation from the nation-state produces a new political category, heterogeneous and servile, and aptly called "people without a nation." In that light, the questions I wanted to address became: What kind of literature does the detachment of the writer from the nation-state produce? Whose *will* do writers in exile serve? How do they receive and imagine the new cultural formations of exile?

For other writers caught in the vise of transculturation, exile has never been and will never be a celebration. And yet, travel writing and the European Project of describing the colonized are closely linked to the development of different forms of economic and political domination. Indeed, the project of writing back to the Empire has come primarily from writers

who straddled and continue to straddle the borders between the colonized and the colonizer. If I am only prolonging what Andrew Smith calls “the fascination of postcolonial literature with migration,” I must also remind us that postcolonialism remains a trend on the move, with migration as one of its most important factors; all the while, I try to prevent the risks in promoting some postcolonial terms such as traveling, exile, diaspora, and transculturation as mere catchwords in global theorization of diversity. This is in part because central to my reading of these texts and of the multicultural experience is the idea that the colonized mind has become “parasitically obsessed with the extraneous relation with the colonial powers” (Sen 89). I acknowledge, as Partha Chatterjee argues, that this obsession was created by “anticolonial nationalism as its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society” (qtd in Sen 90). For Sen, this important aspect derives from and continues to lead to a misreading of the intellectual past both of one’s own culture and of the culture that becomes the object of his or her fascination.

The efforts to resist Western imperial attitudes then are complicated by a tendency to think that we are quintessentially different from others, and thus we define our identity primarily in terms of that difference. Being different from Western people both informs Lucy’s resistance to Western metropolitan discourses and impedes it. It is this reactive view that has informed the fundamentalism that we see at work today. Trying to get even with the West is also a central theme in Rushdie’s and Gurnah’s fictions. Both Gibreel Farishta and, albeit to a lesser extent, Gurnah’s nameless narrator seek justice in the contemporary world by invoking past offenses of the Western world. But that is also why I take a bigger interest and empathy in Rushdie’s mild, subservient Saladin and then in Gurnah’s narrator, who is making a more sustained effort to explain rather than indict that past. As for Tobar, I insisted on adding his voice to the chorus of exilic writers even though he is not an exile in the same manner that Rushdie, Gurnah, and Kincaid are, all of whom were born in their native countries and migrated to metropolitan centers in the U.S. A second generation Guatemalan immigrant, Tobar’s speaks both for our global need

to make unbiased comments on a colonial past that involves the U.S. as an interventionist force in the politics of Central and South America, and also for the disappearing notions of belonging, shared national identity, and security in the story of his characters.

The delineation of exilic, eccentric figures caught in the moment of cultural crisis has led me to recreate the category of postcolonial writing in which the migrant figure as an unaccommodated Other has his or her provenance in the Romantic figure of the exile, a disobedient, transgressive artist as the only social subject who could turn against dominant discourses of his or her time. In the novels treated here, this figure becomes recycled in order to give voice to modern, temperamental postcolonial subjects meant to complicate our liberal conception of the common good in the age of multiculturalism. As I argue in the chapter on Salman Rushdie, the transgressive figure of the exile, the mutant and the delusional Other, helps these writers put conflicting histories and cultures face to face in order to introduce the reader to an ideology of hope surrounding the role of exiled secular intellectuals whose aim is to promote a democratic ideal. I call these characters postcolonial Lucifers. However, unlike Milton's Satan, on which many are modeled, these postcolonial Luciferic figures are meant to be only temporarily diabolic, and not unalterably evil. For the central image in these novels is that of a transgressive figure who can overcome life's difficulties and achieve cultural maturation, the real height of the self, which Satan never did.

The text that complicates exile's potential and spiritual maturation is Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier*. The only text written in a strictly realist mode, *The Tattooed Soldier* builds on the habit of violence to suggest that achieving the true height of the self is no longer possible, that the lines between good and evil are blurred so that indeed we have to distinguish between different kinds of evil the same way we have to distinguish between different kinds of good. The most pessimistic novel here, Tobar's narrative takes on the postcolonial notion of a romantic

hero that may have derived from the romantics, but who can no longer perform autonomously, outside of a collective.

Tobar invites us to take a step back and “disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of [this] directly visible subjective violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent (Žižek 2) and to better understand systemic violence – a more fundamental form of violence, as seen “in the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (Žižek 2). While Tobar is invested in the same goals that the other authors are, his sober contribution to postcolonialism is to remind us that social recovery and democratic progress – the ideal of a better life – were put under question mark when American presidents started calling on “America” to lead the cause of freedom in the world. The perpetuation of local violence through external, imperial discourses is what worries both Tobar and the rest of these authors, who have experienced colonial life firsthand, and whose fight through their cosmopolitan ethic is to perform the crisis of cultural identity, using conflicts and contestations to keep democracy alive.

As Ania Loomba argues, postcolonial scholarship now has an even more urgent role to play in making the links between cultural forms and geopolitics visible in the contemporary world. In literature, this has to do with what Chinua Achebe argued about the relationship between Western writers and postcolonial authors. In his view, postcolonial writers cannot appear autonomous and detached from reality and community in the way Western postmodern authors often portray themselves and their characters. The postcolonial author needs to transcend his or her egocentrism, work through his or her confusions, and become one with ordinary people. Thus the degree to which his or her characters are heroic has to do with their understanding of transcendence and redemption, and with their possibility to move beyond a state of revolt.

What these texts teach us is that we too have to acknowledge and work through our attachments – family, culture, home – and that understanding the different dimensions of cultural

difference has become our most urgent task. That can be done through what I call, following Lawrence Buell, a literary ethic: the belief that literature is the dream of philosophy come true, and that postcolonial, extraterritorial fiction, is best equipped in addressing some of the ways in which we can face states of rising social incivility everywhere.

Chapter One

**Salman Rushdie from *The Satanic Verses* to *Joseph Anton*:**

**Satans, Ethics, and Cosmopolitanisms**

Have ye thought upon al-Lat and al-Uzza

Manat, the third, the other?

These are the elevated cranes: truly their intercession is dearly hoped!

*Quissat al-Gharaniq*

Have ye thought upon al-Lat and al-‘Uzza

And Manat, the third, the other?

Are yours the males and His the females?

That indeed were an unfair division!

They are but names which ye have named, ye and your fathers, for which Allah hath revealed no warrant. They follow but a guess and that which (they) themselves desire. And now the guidance from their Lord hath come unto them. *The Qur’an*

Not all mutants survive.

*The Satanic Verses*

When Salman Rushdie discovered the *Quissat al-Gharaniq*— a discovery that was to become known as “the incident of the Satanic verses” in the West – in the dusty archives of the King’s College library in 1967, he was, as he confesses years later in his memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012), an undergraduate student and already a Godless man, but “fascinated by gods and prophets” (40). The highly disputed history of Prophet Muhammad’s life involves Al-Lat, al’Uzza, and Manat, the three Goddesses worshipped by the people of Mecca before the arrival of Islam; as Laila Lalami has recently argued, in his interest to establish a new religion, Muhammad first accepted them as equals of God, then immediately rejected them, thus setting in motion what Lalami calls “principles of authenticity” (proclaiming the one and true God) as contrasted to “principles of expediency” in the propagation of Islam (2-3). As Rushdie in his turn explains in *Joseph Anton*, Islam has remained a fascinating object of inquiry for him, not only because of the nostalgic affiliation it offers (connecting Rushdie to a lost homeland), but mainly because the birth of Islam was “an event inside history” (24) that needs to be recognized as such if we are to build a more just society. Thus, Rushdie’s more general approach to Islam is to continue to historicize it, not so much in order to question a divine presence, but always as an attempt to make us understand contemporary society based on its cultural and economic foundations.

Released more than two decades ago, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) brings together notions of ethics, evil, and cosmopolitanism, all through Rushdie’s exaltation of migrancy, his unruffled poise towards deranging conventional categories, and his commitment to radical change. The novel has maintained its status as one of the most interesting and important works of our contemporary times, particularly for postcolonial studies, which treats it as a foundational modern discourse on the politics of migrant identity. Moreover, it has succeeded in preserving this status despite and against a deeply polarized audience, divided between those who see it as a willful insult to Islam brought on by an egomaniacal apostate, an adherent to Western depravity and imperial ambitions, and those who treat it as an important and entertaining work of fiction, intended both to delight the reader in

its depiction of Satan-like characters and to prompt discussions about Rushdie's reading of the contemporary culture through his deconstruction of Islam and through a rigorous approach to the mythology of good and evil. It is fair to assume that no other book has been able to exercise with more poignancy what Lionel Trilling in 1942 called the ever unsettling fact of ideas lighting up "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet" (Kristal 1).

Although he recognized that in his early discovery lay a delicate political topic, it is precisely that recognition of the relationship between politics and literature, and the germinating opportunity it entailed, that Rushdie embraced in order to become the writer he had always wanted to be – a postmodern, cosmopolitan writer, with an interest in history and in the language of common people. Thus, as Mark Davies argues, *The Satanic Verses* "is by turns oriental tale, dream vision, migrant saga full of Dickensian eccentrics, Joycean exploration of father/son relationship and Lawrentian analysis of the obstacles to love between the sexes, drawing extensively on both high art and popular culture in its pursuit of the grotesque (53). This undeniable postmodern quality of the novel seems to contradict its political tone. Postmodernism's value for the marginal or minoritarian, its penchant for nuance and textual playfulness sit comfortably along Rushdie's belief in his monopoly of truth, a thing which postmodernism fiercely denies. As a text produced in English and in Margaret Thatcher's England by a writer from another corner of the world, *The Satanic Verses* is the work of a dissident outsider whose main role is to reflect on the social consciousness of the postcolonial age, and who combines his dissidence with a conservative will to belong.

As such, what is too often left out in serious conversations about the novel, and which became entirely crystallized with the publication of his memoir, is Rushdie's broader investment in the concept of a *cosmopolitan ethic through literature*, or in Lawrence Buell's phrase, of a *literary ethic*. Rushdie's marriage to the concept of a cosmopolitan ethic is his support for cosmopolitanism as an urgent ethical framework in the modern world, and he embraces 1) *ethics*



through its main implication of right conduct in relation to all other forms of existence, and 2) *cosmopolitanism* as the practice of living among other people in order to get to know them both culturally and individually in view of forming a more solid society. Rushdie's cosmopolitan ethics is a manifestation of his unswerving commitment to radical socialism, one which is based on his unsentimental views on cultural diversity. For Rushdie, cultural difference cannot be a virtue in itself. As Terry Eagleton writes in his memoir *The Gatekeeper*, "it is only when cultural difference can be taken for granted, rather than defiantly affirmed, that it will have ceased to be a source of conflict" (34). In the same vein, Rushdie affirms human difference while also reckoning the terrifying price we have had to pay for it. With this attitude, he lacks the liberal sensibility which holds plurality as a virtue in itself and which has become a cliché for many of today's theorists and politicians. That uncompromising view has made Rushdie "an oddball to the left" and turned him into 'a real man' as Eagleton, following Raymond Williams, would call him. Rushdie's unease about cultural difference translates into what some postcolonial critics have rightly identified as his strange, extreme exaltation of the diasporic condition, but his is a type of ethical attitude towards cosmopolitanism as a clear affirmation of human difference, as that which wishes everybody thought the same about inherent values and human justice, albeit acting in their own heterogeneous cultural ways. To that end, cosmopolitanism appears to be a re-burgeoning movement and ethical attitude within postcolonial studies, employed by Rushdie as a more meaningful struggle to investigate the ways in which we can face a state of rising social incivility.

The best definitions for ethics come, not surprisingly, from two academic ecologists, Aldo Leopold and Lawrence Buell, both of whom suggest at different points in time, what ethics is defined as today: not only a praxis but also a principle, "a process of formulation and self questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries, norms, selves, and 'others'" (Garber et. al, viii). In Aldo Leopold's definition, "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (1). That Leopold used

this as the adage to his definition of community in “Land and Ethics” speaks for the broader uses of the term ethics, its expediency, and in particular its use as a process in ecological evolution. In Leopold’s view, all ethics rest on a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts and that “his ethics prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate” (60). The idea of competition is central in Rushdie’s novel: Gibreel is in constant competition, but his competition is without co-operation (unless one takes into account the end of the novel, when Gibreel commits suicide, “freeing” Saladin, and paving the way for a different kind of competition); all the while, Saladin is detached from cultural roots and is shown the need to co-operate with others, a way to maintain both his place in society and a sense of commitment to others. He has to leave behind his egocentric attitude and move beyond a mere state of revolt. Thus the hope and potential of exile that Rushdie embraces must be seen ethically, through the relationship between Saladin’s exilic identity and his potential for cooperation.

According to Lawrence Buell, identifying ethicity with acknowledgement of the Other should remain at the center of one’s intellectual enterprise, in any discipline or project in which ethics can be involved. Buell remarks on the “protean ductility” of today’s heterogeneous ethical projects, produced by specialists of different disciplines, from medical to legal, from business to literary ethics. But he singles out ethics and literature, revealing that the most consistent attempts at different points in time have been to define *literary ethics*— the relationship of reciprocal equality between reader and text as surrogate personhood. Buell takes on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1838 speech at Dartmouth College, in which Emerson does not make a concrete definition for literary ethics, but appeals to a version of Foucault’s “care for the self.” Buell extends that conversation to insist on the evaluation of the aesthetic merit of literary texts, of reading them for moral reflection. For Buell, as for Rushdie, artistic practices have a radical potential as they, more than any other practice, can represent proposals for thinking the Other, reenacting different events in history with

renewed force. As Beatrice Hanssen reminds us, Marx once said, misquoting Hegel, that all events in history happen twice: “first as tragedy, then as their comic, parodic reenactment, or farce” (qtd in Garber et al. 127). Thus, Rushdie insists that the reenactment of history in literary practices depends both on the aesthetic value and radical potential they entail but also on “the ethical life-world of obligations to students and colleagues and institution and society” (Buell 10).

Everything that followed the publication of *The Satanic Verses* was the result of Rushdie’s rewriting *Paradise Lost* from a postcolonial perspective, his deployment of a type of writing that Timothy Brennan called “a migrant’s theodicy.” Modeled in part on historical figures such as Prophet Mohammad, iconic Indian film star Amitabh Bachchan, on the author himself, and in part on propagandistic evil characters in Western literature such as John Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* or Jean-Paul Sartre’s Lucifer in *Lucifer and the Lord*, Rushdie’s central characters together with his Faustian narrator are shaped as ‘monsters’ who attempt to turn against dominant discourses of the modern age. To an important degree, Rushdie’s “vanishing on the front page” and his subsequent penance (including through his latest act of confession, *Joseph Anton*) stems out of his interest in writing historical accounts with what Theodor Adorno called complete externalization: he “leaves nothing in obscurity” in his rendering of the public sphere into literary form and in his addressing moments of identity and cultural crisis. This rich, carnivalesque mode of writing is seen in relation to Rushdie’s belief in a type of literary ethic centered on the rewriting of modern history through eccentric and exilic Satanic figures caught in a moment of cultural crisis and who explain who we are today as a result of imperial and colonial history. His fascination with satanic figures stems in part from his ethical interest in portraying humanity in all its guises and in deconstructing evil in relation to different forms of violence on the ground, and to different ways in which a collective is formed. But for Rushdie, the satanic is a narrative pretext above all; Rushdie’s satanic monsters, like Frankenstein or Dracula, are meant to “make us realize that in an unequal society they are not

equal. Not because they belong to different races but because inequality does score itself into one's skin, one's eyes and one's body" (Moretti 68).

Rushdie's sympathy for the devil is a sign of his adherence to modern postcolonial literary theory from a historical materialist attitude, one which "takes the figure of the modern global migrant as its own self-portrait" (Smith 260). As Andrew Smith notes, the migrant is an emblematic figure in postcolonial literary theory's trope of migrancy, its traces continuing to re-emerge in contemporary postcolonial fiction (Smith 259). A Romantic figure, the literary migrant is often imagined as that familiar archetype in Western culture: the anguished outsider, the sensible *poète maudit*, Matthew Arnold's scholar-gypsy, or Wordsworth's wandering youth. These archetypes on loan from Western Romantics alter their form in postcolonial literary writing; they are shaped as eccentric subjects lying at the intersection of the psychic and the social, acting therefore as potential sites of agency in relation to the order of their own world. This is where Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy and Abdulrazak Gurnah's nameless narrator can be found taking hold of their own voices in an attempt to resist Western imperial discourses, thus representing "the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization," and whose *newness* and *untranslatability*, to use Bhabha's terminology, "dramatize the flaw in the pluralist dream of a multicultural society where difference is smoothly assimilated" (Smith 246). In this respect, even Tobar's characters with their split cultural Latino identity insist on appearing as particularly symptomatic figures of the "migrant" to show that culture in an abstract sense is "constituted from the edges rather than by virtue of a closed and coherent center" (Smith 249) and, therefore, that unassimilated difference speaks primarily of the uncomfortable feeling of national and personal identity, of cultures being split, anxious, and contradictory (Bhabha 162).

This is also why *cosmopolitanism*—the movement that is international in organization, all comprehensive in its ideological scope, global in its political spectrum—remains the best tool in addressing Rushdie's work from *The Satanic Verses* to *Joseph Anton*, having everything to do with

Rushdie's imaginative effort to construct agency against the hegemonic discourses of the imperial world, and most crucially, to re-enact new beginnings in relation to national identity and reconstruction. Rushdie's conceptualization of the migrant figure as the *cosmopolitan-in-becoming* stands out among methods of interpreting his work. Arguing that today's writers have to write about "the whole goddamn globe" in a popular, pragmatic, and scientific manner all at the same time, as he suggested in a lecture he gave in 2005 in Lawrence, Kansas, Rushdie appeals indirectly for the revival of a cosmopolitan morality in which the critical role is that of the writer as an educational, disciplinary intellectual interested in the performativity of the cosmopolitan practice. For him, present-day cosmopolitanism has an intimate connection with colonialism, imperialism, militarism, and racism, being constantly shaped by their remaining traces and institutional frameworks. But he also acts on an ethical expediency best formulated by Lawrence Buell in his essay "What We talk about When We Talk About Ethics": that "one must sooner or later grant what literary theory has been most reluctant to: a model of artistic representation as surrogate personhood, whether of authorial agent or fictive utterer or evocative text" (7). Rushdie's primary task lies in cultivating knowledge about past events and in writing against the cultivation of ignorance about demonized cultures and peoples as backward, trying as he does to shift the focus in the way knowledge is orchestrated both politically and scientifically on to the transnational writer with an interest in global knowledge.

Rushdie's cosmopolitan project is best seen in his deployment of central characters in many of his novels. It started with Saladin Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses* and was perfected with one of his most intriguing characters, "Niccolò Vespucci" in *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), a character modeled after Sir Richard Francis Burton, the 19th century explorer, writer, geographer, translator, diplomat, and more, whose biography figures in the novel's own works cited page and who is most often used as an example of cosmopolitan practice in contemporary scholarship on the subject. In both these novels, and in his work in general, Rushdie uses a mingling of history, fable,

and vivid imagination to deliver a vision of the writer as the real enchanter of the world and of the power of the exiled subject, who, “totally cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from [one’s] place of origin” (Said, *Reflections* 48), can mediate between the world and the text, and also between national and cultural affiliations.

To an extent, Rushdie puts into literary practice what Edward Said meant by the *voyage in*: the exiled, secular intellectual’s liminal crossing into the metropolis, one which presupposes not complete detachment, but a mixture of “half involvements and half-detachments,” and which results in a responsibility of contrapuntal mediation, a capacity to bring together disparate social practices, of culture and empire, of past and present (*Representations* 49). For Said, the hybrid cultural work produced in exile is contingent on what he calls the double vision of the critic: “because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation” (*Representations* 60). This double vision, Said implies, enables transnational exchanges and may lead to alliances across nations and cultures; defined as such, this is an attribute of cosmopolitanism, and Rushdie compliments it with another central notion within contemporary cosmopolitanism, that of *moral disagreement*, insisting on how difficult and urgent at the same time it is to put East and West face to face through their different and antagonistic ideologies.

To another extent, cosmopolitanism has to do with Rushdie’s defense of reason, the ideal of clear and intelligent thought as his urgent task to intellectualize humanity, and which he delineates not only through “migrant” figures broadly speaking, but through those migrant figures who can in practice represent “the removal from *old* foundations and from previous *grounded* ways of thinking about identity” (Smith 249). In this respect, the dialectical pair that makes up the dramatic structure of *The Satanic Verses*: Gibreel Farishta - Saladin Chamcha, serves to bring to the forefront the figure of Saladin, whom Gibreel often overshadows in discussions about the novel. If cosmopolitanism is indeed an attitude and not only a movement, it is embodied by Saladin

Chamcha, coming into play through the process of his translocation from India to London at an early age, and then through his intellectual manifestation and growth, as bolstered by the novel's narrator, himself a Satanic figure and a prop in Saladin's education. As the novel's central character from beginning to end, Saladin Chamcha is best defined by the moment of intellectual transcendence into which he is forced both by the narrator and by historical circumstances, and he remains Rushdie's own aspiration for an organic intellectual who could bring together national sentiments and international solidarity as a political philosophy of the future. This remains the primary definition for cosmopolitanism and must be seen as the foundation of Rushdie's philosophy in all of his work, including in his memoir *Joseph Anton* which deals with what it means to be living "at the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender" for a cosmopolitan subject in a position "to translate *the differences between them* into a kind of solidarity" (Bhabha 170). That solidarity is hard to achieve – Rushdie's depiction of Saladin as an Indian subject who expresses contempt for his own culture is not Rushdie's own contempt; yet, Saladin's transnationality and his detachment from patriotism and national interests are used to explore borders, both personal and national, in order to examine what good may come out of this experience when a postcolonial individual is constantly reclaimed by opposed cultural forces. For Rushdie, this forceful pull between East and West in our age can have a critical effect: beyond one's imagined association with certain cultures, there remains for some of us the hope, the possibility to transgress cultural systems, to put to practice the undifferentiated difference which would lead to a morally reputable future.

In his fiction, Rushdie displays at once a Proustian ambition to write tales of lost cities in order "to unlock the gates of lost time so that the past reappeared as it actually had been, unaffected by the distortions of memory" (*Imaginary Homelands* 429), and a Sartrean intellectual position, one which seizes the public intellectual's moral obligation to explain the concept and the use of evil in humanistic terms. Like Sartre, who in *Lucifer and the Lord* delineates a human Lucifer who

challenges an absent God only as a means to transition from what Paul Ricœur calls religious *fakery* to an atheistic *authenticity*, Rushdie re-appropriates the figure of Lucifer in order to contemplate religion as one of the earliest impositions of true evil on society and as a perpetual enemy of the intellect. Describing religion as political repression and as international terrorism, Rushdie argues for the need “for blasphemy as a weapon refusing to accept the power of the church to set limiting points on thought” (*Joseph Anton* 177) and calls on us to experience doubt in an attempt to free ourselves from religious excess. It is under this theme of excess that he wrote *The Satanic Verses* and years later, *Joseph Anton*, where the notion of dissent is marked mainly by his Lucifer-like narrators who act through an authorial voice in their urgent role to make visible important links between cultural forms and geopolitics.

Like Sartre, Rushdie does not see the existence of evil only as essential for the building of a moral, authentic character. As Terry Eagleton argues, good can sometimes come from evil, as in the idea that evil is a necessary disruption or resistance, offering one the chance to show what living in the real world is like. But not always so, Eagleton argues, taking as example Sartre’s fiction which ultimately deals with evil as “simply out there” (133). That argument is valid for both Sartre and Rushdie and it suggests that evil is not always a chance to do good in the hope to build a tidy world, but unremarkable, unintelligible, a thing in itself, impossible to transgress. This is what Gibreel Farishta, ultimately stands for, suspended in that dark space which Jennifer Szalai defines as “between necessity and excess” (2) or which Eagleton sees as the interstice between *character* and *social conditions*. In *Gibreel Farishta*, evil is a manifestation of social conditions, or a postcolonial necessity, but after amassing all the root causes and structural factors in his development, what we are left with is his pessimistic character: evil is his parochial attitude, his desire to punish, a malignant behavior made to resemble good. In a binary opposition between two different Indian nationals, Farishta operates dramatically in opposition to Saladin Chamcha who is his main antagonist not only in that he is more bourgeois or more worldly, although these



distinctions are crucial to his emancipation, but in that he is, fundamentally, an optimist, representing in this position Rushdie's enactment of meaningful cosmopolitanism. Rushdie parallels Gibreel Farishta's narrow, ethnocentric and exclusivist conception of the Indian national identity to a critical need for a detachment from roots if they all represent a parochial past, while he links Saladin's lack of national pride to a potential for a cosmopolitan education. Rushdie's urge to reclaim the past, therefore, is not only a nostalgic drive for the exile to restore a lost homeland by creating "homelands of the mind" but also, more crucially, a way of "thinking our way out of our past," a practical vision for the nation's future, which Rushdie first formulated in *Midnight's Children* and which has remained his main concern. But for those who have accused Rushdie of being a cosmopolitan bourgeois with no interest in local forms of existence, it must be noted that Rushdie finds middle classes, both in India and England, irresistibly amusing, and that his otherwise cosmopolitan position stems from a Patrician hauteur that he can easily convert into radical change, and even employ at the service of the political left. This is the main reason why the two main characters in *The Satanic Verses* are plucked out of their comfortable bourgeois existence, turned into unconcerned monsters, then forced to arrive or attempt to arrive at a more enviable care about human existence.

As a novel about human nature in its complex division between good and evil, *The Satanic Verses* uses that moral investment to link the disobedience of its characters in exile to a potential for ethical transcendence: Saladin Chamcha is a sycophantic Indian migrant whose 'good nature' prevails against his vulnerability and many transgressions, while Gibreel Farishta has a temperamental, earthy character, a reflection of his 'bad nature' circumscribed as the very antithesis of an ethical behavior needed to create a more just society. In the middle, a Faustian narrator who justifies the ways of God and of men to the reader, and whose role, too, is largely ignored in discussions about the novel, sets the aesthetic, ethical, and political conditions for the delineation of the main characters in order to complicate our understanding of the liberal

conception of the common good in the age of multiculturalism. Through them, Rushdie employs ethics in line with Lawrence Buell's definition of it as "a central term of reference" in "setting the conditions that would enable and regulate rational interchange within a discourse community"(Buell 8). As such, when we invoke the relationship between ethics, literature, and cosmopolitanism, we, by and large, have to invoke Rushdie's work as an enduring model of ethical paradigm in relation to the prospects for dialogues of tolerance across what Homi Bhabha defines as "landscapes of estrangement" of the multicultural existence (185).

### A Good Story

The prophetic testimony inspired by "Satan" and corrected by "God" was a good story, a young Rushdie decided, and twenty years later, after the success of *Midnight's Children* (1981) and by the power of his exilic consciousness, he produced a novel that rests heavily on issues of personal narrative, cultural and intercultural knowledge, the unreliability of memory, and the unknowability of history. For the book to follow its course, Rushdie took the beloved mode of magical realism and invented a plot involving a plane crashing mid-flight in order to leave two survivors struggling with midlife, cultural, and spiritual crises. Two actors of Indian nationality, one a famous Muslim actor, Gibreel Farishta, used to playing various Hindu gods on Indian television, and the other, Saladin Chamcha, a radio actor in London, meet aboard a plane flying from Bombay to London. Hijacked by Sikh terrorists, the plane hovers above the English Channel, "just before dawn one winter's morning, New Year's Day or thereabouts" (3). While the plane falls from the tropological altitude of twenty-nine thousand and two feet, the height of India's Mount Everest, Gibreel and Saladin fall "like titbits of tobacco from a broken old cigar," Gibreel already too loud, too coarse, obsessing over a parody of Bertolt Brecht's "The Whisky Song" (later renditioned by The Doors as the "Alabama Song" ) – "I tell you, you must die, I tell you, I tell you," to suggest the idea of rebirth and renewal as conditioned by a great fall, by dying, by a moment of transcendence; Saladin goes

down head first “in the recommended position for babies entering the birth canal,” to suggest a more meaningful process of metamorphosis; his will be a story of true revival and renewal as he learns to question himself, his relationship to England, and his commitment to home. Gibreel, his alter ego and his antagonist, will fall on his feet, in a simulation of arrogance and obstinacy, announcing his failure to become the better man; in contrast to Saladin’s urgency to be reborn, Gibreel’s effort to transcend will fail because of his inability to overcome that which must be overcome, the autonomous self.

This beginning is remarkable in several ways: it introduces the mode of magical realism in an abrupt, completely externalized way, thus fulfilling its most immediate prerequisite, that of combining reality and fantasy “organically,” as it will be shown later in a more elaborate definition for magical realism. It sets up the parodic structural universe for the novel, with the postmodern idea of historical truth as unreliable at its center, being simply marked by the indefinite “thereabouts” on page three. The beginning also announces the presence of the narrator, one with “the best tunes” and with the best use of truth’s unreliability in a moralistic sense. This narrator will show that universal truth exists, is necessary, and often reliable. Thematically, it introduces us to Rushdie’s conceptualization of modern Evil. In their fall, Gibreel and Saladin viscerally confront Evil in its absolute, totalizing, human form, with the Sikh terrorists first as seemingly knowing, politicized figures, then as awoken and terrified minor subjects, led by the unbending Tavleen, who pronounces death sentences in flawless English, and who is the only one who “means business” until the very end, when she activates everybody’s curious detachment from reality by blowing up herself and the plane above the English Channel. As Stephen Morton notes, “for the narrator [...] the political cause of the terrorist group is less significant than the performance of the hijack, and its representation in the global media” (96). Motivated by a desire “to be on television” and with political demands that mean “nothing new” such as “independent homeland, religious freedom, release of political detainees, justice, ransom money, a safe conduct to a country of their own

desire,” they are a symptom of life in the 20th century. But, as Morton notes, for the narrator, “the motivation for the hijack and the destruction of Air India flight 420 has more to do with philosophical questions about human will and agency in the twentieth century than with the violence committed against the Sikh community by the state in late twentieth-century India” (97).

By introducing the main characters and the plot through this first-page implosion that invokes evil in a totalizing way, Rushdie takes up Hannah Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil, a concept which for Arendt and Rushdie shows that what might be one of the most egregious crimes in history, and especially of our present times, is the administration of evil “not by panting sociopaths but by unthinking buffoons” (qtd in Berkowitz 2). The element of arbitrariness involved here is that violence is both systemic, objective – a manifestation of power – and subjective, a more obscure one, equally difficult to resolve. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s understanding of violence in its diverse forms of manifestation, one that is rarely touched upon is through a banal instinct for domination; as Sartre once wrote, “a man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will ... which gives him incomparable pleasure” (qtd in Arendt 36). This, or what in Freudian terms is called the *death drive*, is a sadistic force whose vindictive nature is delightful as well as deadly. Rushdie’s characters, including Tavleen in that initial scene – as the sexualized female suicide bomber – often operate through their own philosophy of unbending desire, thus reflecting that human evil originates from “a failure of thinking, not a failure of goodness” (qtd in Berkowitz 2). This failure of thinking and the expression of evil through the unthinking buffoons is seen in relation to the creation of totalitarian movements which in Arendt’s explanation are different from other kinds of regimes of power in that the totalitarian state does not replace older forms of law with its own sense of legality but works through defiance, believing that it can do without any *consensus iuris*. This is why it operates only through fear; it is a *movement*, Arendt insists, because it is totalitarian in power alone and it approximates the state without actually becoming the state. In Rushdie’s work, symbols of this

religious totalitarianism are not only Tavleen, but also the exiled Imam in a later chapter, who dreams of returning to his Eastern home in order to conquer the world and produce a homogenous entity ruled fearlessly by a male force; later on, again, the visionary Aisha, surrounded by magnificent butterflies, insists on fulfilling a utopian fantasy through an impossible walk to Mecca; finally, Gibreel reiterates the same impossible figurative expressions in his failure to relinquish his past, in his inability to recognize the plurality of our affiliations.

As Amartya Sen writes, “violence is promoted by a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique (often belligerent) identity that we are supposed to have and which makes extensive demands on us” (xiii). How, Rushdie seems to meditate, can one take a stand against the mad project of current totalitarian movements? Where are the prospects of peace if we all live in that conceptual disarray where an allegedly predominant identity “overpowers any human sympathy or national kindness that we may normally have?” (Sen xiii). For Sen, the prospects of peace lie in the recognition of identity plurality and in the use of reasoning “as common inhabitants of a wide world.” For Rushdie, dissent through literature is a central solution, in particular through the literary investment in the co-existence of different forms of evil. *The Satanic Verses* was Rushdie’s effort to “reckon with the fact that the existence of evil is an extremely powerful argument against the existence of God” (Eagleton 143). Thus his hope is delineated through Saladin, who for the most part of the novel is nothing but uneasily mediocre. Despite his golden voice, impersonating any possible human being on radio, Saladin is plain, uninteresting, merely sycophantic. Yet, even in the first pages of the novel, Saladin attempts and succeeds in forming intellectualized opinions, especially about the form of radical evil he was witnessing: “unbending,” he observes in silence about a threatening Tavleen, “can be tyranny, and also it can be brittle, whereas what is flexible can also be humane, and strong enough to last” (83). Saladin’s “false consciousness” and moral mediocrity is what we should be most thankful for, as this is what will

enable him to conquer his aversion to subjectivism and to emotional ostentation, and mark his return to intellectual clear-sightedness.

Gibreel and Saladin make the miraculous landing in the backyard of Rosa Diamond's beach house, thus marking their liminal entrance into British space. With this, the narrative subtext splits between the immutable theme of "the perplexity of ordinary life" through the characters' confrontation with their own various forms of evil, and the ambiguous relationship between the historical past and the historical present as a look into the possibility and the consequences of accommodating the migrant other into imperial London. Saladin falls "out of space into some kind of wrongness, some other place ... some counterfeit zone, rotten borough, altered state" and is assigned the proposition that "great falls change people" (137), while Gibreel's fall is already delirious and dislocating, a symbol of his unstable, fragmented self, and split identity. Their bizarre, satirical figures sit in stark contrast to old, respectable Rosa Diamond, who offers them shelter in her house of colonial remembrances and yearnings, with ghosts and her own phantom-sight epitomizing one of the first repertoires of 'Englishness' that the text has to offer: with her imperious erotic hold on the exotic Gibreel, Rosa speaks of past and present imperial desires, sensing "great things" to come, yet unable to "distinguish memory from wishes or guilty reconstructions from confessional truths ... because even on her deathbed, Rosa Diamond did not know how to look history in the eye" (155).

With this first stop in their incursion into the geopolitical space of Britishness, Saladin and Gibreel help expose Rosa's discourse as part of the project of Thatcherism, to show how, "these 'different repertoires of "Englishness" constantly reposition both individual subjects and 'the people' as a whole...contesting space in terms of shifting social, sexual, and ethnic identities, against the background of a crisis of national identity and culture, precipitated by the unresolved psychic trauma of the 'end of empire" (Hall 2). The project of Thatcherism as a form of "regressive modernisation – the attempt to educate and discipline the society into a particularly regressive

version of modernity” (Hall 2) moves in and out of Rosa’s house, in with Rosa’s fevered and hypnotizing reminiscences of Argentina, sempiternal reminiscences delivered to the delirious, belated postcolonial Gibreel, which act for her as a form of comfort in her fixed British imperial identity, and out into the immigration officers’ van, where the once “more English than the English” Saladin is now an imprisoned, horny, bleating billy-goat, a “Packy” forced to endure the taunts and kicks of policemen and immigration officers who keep enacting racist fantasies and falling back into the old debate of who is really English.

The text is a collage of flâneuristic adventures through London, culminating with a validation of the immigrant space as an important public arena through the confrontation of the main protagonists with places like the detention center for immigrants, the Shandaar Cafe, or Club Hot Wax, and with loud dissenting immigrant voices such as Uhuru Simba’s, Suffyan’s, or S. S. Sisodia’s, among others. Together, these places and immigrant voices form a community and converge into a heterotopic space where the consciousness of immigrant subjects is represented as heterogeneous and amorphous. S.S. Sisodia, a reputable independent Indian film producer, insists on talking about what he sees as the main trouble with the English, that their history has been written abroad (353), while Uhuru Simba delves into a materialist understanding of immigration: “we are other than what we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans, if our mothers and fathers had not crossed the skies in search of work and dignity and a better life for their children. We have been made again” (428-9). Towards the end of the novel, in one final implosion, immigrants at Club Hot Wax burn an effigy called Maggie, a sacrificial offering in demolishing Thatcherism (301, 325) in order to satisfy the need for cultural accommodation, to be made yet again in equal terms with the other British subjects, or to gain political agency through the authority of the exile. Through these marginal characters, Rushdie presents an unsentimental view of the problems of migration, describing London as capricious, unstable, a “locus classicus of incompatible realities,” where the general consensus is that “lives have no business mingling with

one another.” But despite its representation as a treacherous city that resists interpretation, with its unchartered wasteland and anonymous parks, London works under the principle that the metropole is an essential element in the construction of an alternative future.

Mistaken for an illegal immigrant with no right to approach England, Saladin is suddenly confronted with a form of punishment that he takes a long time to understand. Throughout the novel, he is presented as a creature of discontinuities, but who is also capable of willing re-invention through the loss of self, through the disfigurement of his figure once made of rubicund tones and the most envied of voices. Transformed into a Goatman as a temporary dream figure, Saladin starts as a sycophantic, aloof, and petty bourgeois Indian national in London, but in the course of the novel begins to move towards possibilities. He painfully learns how to fall out of love with his British wife, Pamela, and maintains a desire to remain untranslatable even as he moves back home, as a possibility for the reconceptualization of the modern Indian nation. Made diabolic yet transcendent, Saladin re-enacts the genre of romance as defined by Fredric Jameson as a magical narrative in which the struggle is “between the higher and the lower realms, between heaven and earth, or the angelic and the demonic or diabolic” (138). Rushdie uses as his dominant trait his “naiveté or inexperience... [a] posture of bewilderment” as discussed by Jameson in conjunction with attributes of reason and moral capacity tested in exile, Saladin is a hero of romance whose purpose is to be “an observer, a mortal spectator surprised by supernatural conflict” and who remains aloof even as he reaps the rewards of victory against evil forces in the end.

But what about Gibreel, as Bhabha rightly asks? A figure of excess, Gibreel offers a different kind of education: through his performances and his schizophrenic dreams, he educates us on the rise of Islam and on the satanic verses that complicate not only Prophet Mohammad’s divine existence, but also the meaning of collective construction through the figure of an “organic” intellectual. Rushdie takes the dreams of his neurotic and translocated character in order to re-



narrate the rise of Islam as part of a larger narrative about the rise of the Indian nation, centering on the postcolonial argument made by Lotman and Uspensky about the dramatized moment in nationhood when the “nation becomes conscious of itself, when it creates a model of itself” (qtd in Cairns and Richards 134). Gibreel’s tragic flaw is that he wishes to remain continuous with his dreams, joined to and arising from his national past, a history that haunts him, but one that is oppressive. His fear of altered states is his fear of renouncing the self as an ideally homogeneous, pure, non-hybrid entity. Soliloquizing over power while hovering over London, looking for clarity through his wounded pride, Gibreel is unable to shape up.

The involved transposition of contemporary space, gender, and ethnic identity in Saladin’s character stands contrasts with the transposition of time and space involved in the creation of Gibreel’s character. For what is also not a surprise is that the misogynistic Indian actor Gibreel Farishta exercises bad judgment from beginning to end, caught as he is in the past instead of the future, in his access to unmitigated power. An important question that the narrator asks is “When power becomes absolute, what then?” (381). Gibreel is unable to overcome the moment of religious crisis precisely because he is dominated by selfish dreams of higher power and control, especially over the female body and the foreign imperial culture. Through Gibreel, Rushdie voices his skepticism of religion avoiding the crude epistemology of rational scientism (of New Atheism especially) which suggests that religions are rigid doctrines whose followers obey uniformly. Contrary to this belief, Rushdie suggests that religious texts are, as Richard Seymour argues, “a labor of interpretation, of symbolic and ideological production from which agents derive meanings adequate to their life circumstances” (qtd in Savage3). Thus, for Rushdie, fundamentalism is not a product of the “doctrine of Islam” but rather a product of material and social circumstances, and for him, the focus must stay on the social ills wrought by unjust economic practices.

*The Satanic Verses* brings together two crucial elements of postcolonial literature with a postmodernist character: one is the mode of magical realism and the other is the postcolonial notion

of cultural identity in diaspora. Wendy B. Faris' defines magical realism as a narrative mode that "combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (163), and as an important component of postmodernist literature as fiction that is more youthful and popular than many of the hermetic modernist texts that came before it. To a marked degree, the magical realism of Rushdie's novel deals with what Faris calls "the irreducible element" – that which cannot be explained but must be taken for granted as real, or as that which we "cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know it" (Faris 167). Rushdie's irreducible element is to be found at times in the grotesque, devilish figures of his two characters and some of the experiences they go through, and at times in the grotesque, evil figure of the history that produces and enables such experiences. Yet, despite its function as a popular type of fiction, magical realism has at its center a metaphorical register "with images that take on lives of their own and engender others beyond themselves, independent of their referential worlds" (Faris 164). This process of mise-en-abyme together with its disposition for an ontological mode (what is at stake is the *being* of the novel's many characters, and also of the reader's) are central narrative devices in *The Satanic Verses*, and they point in two directions: one, they insist that the pervasive magic element in the text needs to be understood metaphorically and referentially, through ethical, psychological, and sociocultural approaches, and second, they suggest that the author be seen as a high modernist, for whom satire and political commentary are the highest markers of fiction.

In "Magical Archetypes," Steven F. Walker offers an interesting Jungian reading of *The Satanic Verses*, and posits that the symbolism at the center of the Jungian psychoanalytic approach links the study of psychology and literature. According to this, Gibreel and Saladin experience a middle life phantasmagoria through their fall, and Rushdie's imagination shows the way out of the midlife labyrinth into a new life. Gibreel is interpreted as a "high-flyer" – a puer whose fascination is with getting as high as possible through mountaineering, dangerous sports, etc., the symbolism of which is "to get away from the mother (Gibreel reveres his mother), from the earth, from ordinary

life” (Marie-Louise Von Franz qtd in Walker 354). His dream of remaining Puer Aeternus/Eternal Youth, explains Gibreel’s mother complex (and of the nation as mother figure, which Walker makes no mention of), his Messiah complex (Gibreel’s delusion that he has become the archangel Gabriel), and his don Juanism (all that is patriarchal in him, both innate and socially determined). For Jung, and for Walker, the encounter with one’s personal devil, Gibreel’s visions and Saladin’s devilish appearance, emerges through the psychological notion of coming to terms with “the shadow” (Saladin’s rejection of his Indian identity and Gibreel’s religious doubt). In Walker’s interpretation, Saladin is Iago-like, driving Gibreel mad with his satanic verses (little evil lyrical notes to inflict revenge on Gibreel and cause him harm). Yet, while Walker is right to call Saladin ethically suspect and the ending of the novel “total ethical confusion,” he misses on the political dimension of this ‘ethical aporia’ – Saladin is capable of both *good* and *evil*, or he is a *recovering* puer (recovering from his postcolonial Anglofilia), and needs more than symbolic interpretation.

In reading Saladin, one needs the ethical dimension of philosophy and liberal politics with *contention* or moral disagreement as the essence and the promise of the democratic politics Rushdie is in search of. Because for Rushdie, being temporarily diabolic than unalterably and innately evil is a better idea; it can be transformed into a choice rather than taken as a given, an aspiration rather than an inescapable condition, a possibility as opposed to a constrained psychological defect. Temporarily diabolic means either wicked as in the case of Rushdie’s narrator (or the author himself) as a scribe who has a dream about a book or a about a renewed discussion about old debates when no one is watching (such is also the case of another character in the novel, a certain Salman, the Persian scribe of Jahilia, who writes the Revelation with nobody paying attention – nobody, the narrator seems to observe, could write a story like that unless he was an immigrant). As such, we can also contend, Saladin’s own Goatish transformation renders a more hopeful presentation of the theme of metamorphosis and the novel remains above all a novel about his need for and success at cultural maturation.

The presence of the nation under Foucault's ethnographic question: "what are we today" joins here another question: "where did we come from," as that which ultimately guides and defines the way we interact with the rest of world now. Like Gurnah's, Rushdie's migrant is depicted as a signifier undergoing a profound loss of identity and who is in search for the means to recuperate it; this is a metaphor for all humanity, but these characters speak, above all, of Homi Bhabha's notion of the "incommensurable perplexity of the nation's living," which finds expression in individual experience, in particular in a type of cultural identification that is poised on the temporary and unstable loss of cultural and national identity, and which is needed in order to rewrite a nation's modernity. The cosmopolitan vision of nationhood in Rushdie's fiction achieves its full dimension when the voyage is completed with a return and a look back at the point of departure, and when the dialectic representations reflect not only on the West but also on the homeland's history and culture. Without this, one cannot fully understand Rushdie's monsters and the particular systems (political institutions, ideological movements, including the national flag and anthem under which both India and England become personified) that produce them, and without which the question Rushdie makes central to his work: how does newness enter the world? cannot find answer.

Saladin and Gibreel stand both for the hollowing out of the nation state and the possibility for reconstruction, while the narrator inhabits a space of otherness as alternative explored not as a mere figment of imagination but "through contact with social processes already in motion" (Foucault qtd in Harvey 7). If we read the novel through Renan's definition of the nation's existence as a perpetual affirmation of life, it is not a surprise that the main character, the Anglicized Saladin Chamcha is unable to exercise his judgment until he is properly educated, back home, by Zeeny, an Indian female national of lower caste. It was through his reconciliation with his father and through his romance with Zeeny that Saladin becomes able to create a radically different self-understanding and to manifest the *will* to reconstitute the modern nation. Contingent on Saladin's slippage, on his disappearance and disavowal (leaving his nation, abandoning his father)

and dissemblance (as an actor in London, but especially as the Other, the flâneur he became through metamorphosis), the rebirth of the modern Indian nation is Rushdie's own will to reconstitute it by peopling it anew, and also his answer to the problem of multiculturalism. Saladin's story is about discovering attachments as a main constituent of identity. Acquiring and enriching identity is also the central concern in Amartya Sen's interpretation of multiculturalism today, Sen arguing against the advocates of the discovery view of identity, and insisting that we are not as imprisoned in our installed locations and affiliations as they seem to presume. Sen uses as his cosmopolitan archetype the figure of Lord Byron, noting how Lord Byron quintessentially identified himself as Englishman while living in and then leaving Greece, that his acquired identity "vastly enriched his own life while also adding some strength to the Greek struggle for independence" (36).

Insistence on the different ways of identifying ourselves in our given locations is also central to Rushdie's text. In London, Saladin is the site of a strange forgetting of a nation's history and past, and then becomes the site of reinscription of a new beginning in what Bhabha calls a state of emergence (230), a Fanonian reinscription of national consciousness, as opposed to nationalism, as "the only thing that will give us an international dimension" (qtd in Bhabha 230). While Saladin's "agency" is located in his slow acquisition of what Sherry B. Oner noted as "the ability to play the games of culture with wit and intelligence" (qtd in Smith and Watson 327), it is through an articulation of his national consciousness as dependent on his movement across political states and national borders, that his significance becomes available. Saladin's defining difference is that he is located within a nationalist discourse which treats him in the end, as Gramsci once noted of Bronstein (Trotsky), as superficially national and superficially Western or European. This "superficiality" or false consciousness in relation to nationhood is the essence of the cosmopolitan condition in Rushdie's deployment, while it is also the true mark of the organic intellectual "in any new intellectual order designed both confront questions of globalization and inform the drive to

build a more cosmopolitan ethic as a foundation for cosmopolitan democracy” (Harvey, “Banality” 3). Solving the conflict within multiculturalism, then, depends on a simple question: is it more important to decide what to be or what to do? The disparate conflicting pulls— history, language, culture, politics, profession, family, and comradeship— should not concern the choices over alternative identities, but, as Sen argues, a combination of identities(36); and as Rushdie suggests, a solid dedication to action.

The appearance on the first page of that initial implosion where the medium (the plane) and the real (late modernity terrorist attacks) implode in what Baudrillard calls “a sort of hyperreal nebula,” is a precondition for Rushdie’s carnivalesque critique of the modern world. The myth of the falling man joins the apocalyptic, “end of the world” theme, the plane as our modern heaven and the falling men as modern Lucifers, carriers of light and dark. But there is, on the same first page of the novel, another kind of implosion. Rushdie’s narrator corrupts the use of pronouns, changing Brecht’s “we must die” into “you must die,” and with it setting his authorial and satirical prescription regarding both subjective and cultural experience, both what is right and what is wrong, what is evil and what is good. Rushdie takes turns appearing in almost each one of his characters, but the one character who is closest to him is the invisible narrator, who borrows Lucifer’s radical dissent and Rushdie’s own antitheistic stance, who lacks prudence in his moral pronouncements in order to help produce a narrative under the principle that pushing boundaries in writing is not only an intrinsic part of controversial literature, but also the ultimate function of literature.

This narrator is the ultimate flâneur, the first ‘fallen man’ and secret spectator, who under the personification of urban modernity emerges as ironic critic of the same modernity, and whose ironic stance is mixed in with a pedagogical, authorial position stemming from his individualist cosmopolitanism. Through him, Rushdie uses ethics in ‘an especially stipulated sense’ (Buell 6-7) offering the vision of reading as an ethics of *difficulty*. Producer of texts and moral vision, he stands

in sharp contrast with the two main characters, setting in motion the antagonistic articulation between “the pedagogical and the performative” (Bhabha 220). Thus, the insertion of the narrative I such as in: “I, in my wickedness sometimes imagine the coming of a great wave...a tidal wave that would reduce these vain sandcastles to the nothingness, to the grains from which they came” (96) is a manifestation of Rushdie’s growing skepticism of religion as a solution to the social and political problems of our world. This Faustian narrator makes only a few appearances in an otherwise expansive text, but he seems nonetheless conditioned to operate under the principle of Foucault’s heterotopia, interpreted by Hetherington “as spaces of alternate ordering .... [that] organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things” (qtd in Harvey 8). He is a devilish middleman, an invisible, yet clearly urban cosmopolitan who is in charge of creating ethical confusion for us mainly in order to convey to us ethnicity.

The three main actors in the novel, suspended as they are in exile, are reflections of Deleuze and Guattari’s condition of being in the middle as a critical practice in resisting dominance, with their most important trait being their manifestation of agency through different spaces of action, what one may call different exiles, brought together to “allow choice, diversity, difference, incongruity, and incommensurability” (Marin qtd in Harvey 8). Following David Harvey, Rushdie recognizes that localized ways of life are “relationally constructed by a variety of intersecting socio-ecological processes occurring at quite different spatio-temporal scales” and that his task as a postcolonial writer with a cosmopolitan intent is to unfreeze existing geostructures of places and forms. As such, the novel offers a conception of the Indian nation as Rushdie sees it bound up with globalization and the construction of ethnic identity, while the narrator inhabits an imaginary space that is resonant of an ethical literary space of difference that exists outside the dominant order.

Rushdie’s adherence to a cosmopolitan ethical stance is delineated in *Joseph Anton* under the foundational claim that, “The act of migration [...] puts into crisis everything about the

migrating individual or group, everything about identity and selfhood and culture and belief. So if this [*The Satanic Verses*] is a novel about migration it must be that act of putting in question. It must perform the crisis it describes” (72). Rushdie operates through the proposition that to disagree morally through literature is to produce monsters who “live in the middle” both geographically and ideologically not only in order to bridge East and West or past and present histories, but in an attempt to provide a radical awakening from cultural lethargy and to shake the certainty we place on ideals of cultural choice, will to change, good nature and evil intent. Rushdie brings his contribution to the most recent turn to ethics in the public debate through his deconstruction of two ideas pertaining to evil as once discussed by Hannah Arendt: there is a propagandistic evil usually deployed in relation to the “undermined infinity of forms of human living together,” and there is a radical evil that perpetually undermines that infinity as an alternative operating under the principle of “all or nothing.” For Arendt, the conceptualization of radical evil in modern politics was the concentration camps system as the result of a totalitarian organizational power. For Rushdie, symbols of radical evil emerge out of a similar system of totalitarian power, communalism, Islamic fundamentalism, Thatcherism, who produce subjects that can only operate through an “all or nothing” principle.

In *Resistance, Opposition, and Representation*, Said claims that ideological resistance, defined as efforts “made to reconstitute a ‘shattered community, to save or to restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system’” is an alternative way of conceiving human history (97). Said defined ideological resistance in direct analogy to Rushdie’s earlier book, *Midnight’s Children* (1981), using the novel to discuss the method by which a marginal writer can work on the politics of resistance: “The conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories... I call this effort *the voyage in*” (97). With the publication of the *The Satanic Verses* seven years later, Rushdie established himself as a politically



engaged writer with a secular intellectualism set against the acceleration of what Aijaz Ahmad noted as the “global offensive of the Right” of the 1980s: the rise to ideological hegemony of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, as inaugurated by the Iranian Revolution of the 1978-9, and the ascension against the collapse of socialism on a global scale of two of the most reactionary ideologues in the West, Ronald Reagan in American politics and Margaret Thatcher in British politics (Williams and Chrisman 163). As Timothy Brennan suggested, a “hugely neglected political center of the novel is a solidly democratic demolition of Thatcherite Britain, its fatuous advertisements for a new middle class, its adventurist war in the Falklands, and its increasing police brutality and immigrant exclusionism” (108). And as Andrew Teverson insists, the satirical nature of the novel is used to condemn the abuse of power, shifting the interest from the abuses committed by South Asian leaders to abuses under Margaret Thatcher’s ministerial watch. Thus for many British critics in particular, Rushdie is important in the way he sets out “to explore (expose) the impact upon Britain’s minority communities of lingering Falklands-era jingoism, and of the systematic, institutionalized racism in organisations such as the police force and the media” (Teverson 26).

From his earlier historical-political novels such as *Shame* and *Midnight’s Children*, to his later, more experimental fiction such as *The Enchantress of Florence*, and most recently in *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie is crystallizing his vision of an ethical community through the formation of an intellectual who can shift the balance both from a conservative and a leftist form of knowledge production. In fact, despite Ahmad’s criticism, Rushdie’s writing must be placed in the context of an ever increasing global offensive of the Right against a global retreat of the Left, with his search for a new kind of intellectual determined especially by a larger anxiety in intellectual productions and receptions against the defeat of Social Democracy everywhere in the world (Williams and Chrisman 163). More specifically, Rushdie outlines a position within the philosophy of social

constructivism *against* what Ahmad discusses as “the ascent of a new kind of intellectual within the formation which continued to call itself a Left” in the 1980s. As Ahmad points out,

The characteristic posture of this new intellectual was that he or she would gain legitimacy on the Left by constantly and fervently referring to the Third World, Cuba, national liberation, and so on, but would also be openly and contemptuously anti-communist; would often enough not affiliate even with that other tradition which had also descended from classical Marxism, namely social democracy, nor be affiliated in any degree with any labour movement whatsoever, but would invoke an anti-bourgeois stance in the name of manifestly reactionary anti-humanisms enunciated in the Nietzschean tradition and propagated now under the signature of anti-empiricism, anti-historicism, structuralism, and post-structuralism... . Williams and Chrisman 163

Experiencing British culture as a foreigner, yet also as a dweller who lives there “for the duration,” if we were to use Walter Benjamin’s definition for the modern flâneur, Rushdie insists on reviving the very idea of class, albeit one, in his case, of intellectual literary production, its essence lying in the process of “immanent critique” as that which ‘explodes orthodoxy’s truth-claims from within’ (Harvey 4). Rushdie’s project was once Edward Said’s own project to recuperate the artistic voice of the intellectual in exile (Said’s case was Theodor Adorno, whose influential *Minima Moralia*, Said argues, would not be the social theory that it is without Adorno’s exilic experience and conscience), and to use that voice in the reconstruction of the community of intellectuals, trained philologists, proponents of cultural formation, Foucault’s so called universal intellectuals. As Said defined it in *Representations of the Intellectual*, such class of secular, outsider intellectuals “should be the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking, and a sense of class, racial, and gender privilege” (xii). Thus, while a delineation of historical fluidity and a radical celebration of the diasporic condition sets Rushdie apart from the other writers in this project, it is Rushdie’s own

secular, cosmopolitan identity that can be ultimately traced in his ethical task to reflect on the growth and the purpose of the intellectual in the postcolonial age, in similar fashion to Abdulrazak Gurnah, Hector Tobar, Jamaica Kincaid, all of them reflecting on the chaos of their protagonists' transmuted experiences while maintaining a special concern for the aesthetic presence of the novelist in relation to the ways in which his or her protagonists take part in the creation of an ethical community in the neo-imperial world. They all open up their writing to a historicist, hermeneutical mode of inquiry into the structure of the postcolonial world, suggesting as David Harvey does, that such inquiry "sooner or later had to be grounded in man's nature and in his interaction with the material world around him" (3).

Timothy Brennan pointed with precision toward a central ideological issue in Rushdie's work: as motifs of secularization at the level of form and theme prevail in the novel, they gesture toward an unambivalent need for the cultural critic to be a secular postcolonial intellectual, as the one most capable of addressing the questions arising from a text that remains secular in its bearings and syncretic in its cultural values. Thus, as Brennan suggested, a first urgent question about *The Satanic Verses* is what aims Rushdie's portrayal of an immigrant London seeks to achieve (Brennan 121). Produced under the unique circumstances of British politics of the 1980s, *The Satanic Verses* emerged as an unequivocal embrace of Ralph Miliband's critique of the "accelerated process of recomposition of class" forged under Margaret Thatcher's policies, and an attempt to answer Stuart Hall's urgent call for "an alternative conception of modernity." The novel was primarily set against the new discursive articulations that aimed to profoundly reshape the classes of British society of that time, with their focus on "transforming the material basis, the occupational boundaries, the gender and ethnic composition, the political cultures and the social imagery of class" and with their emphasis on the "organic conservative themes of tradition, family and nation, respectability, patriarchalism and order" (Hall 2). What Hall called the "left's historic incapacity to meet the challenge of Thatcherism on equal terms" (2) may find its answer in the type

of fiction Rushdie has been producing, especially in *The Satanic Verses* and then in *Joseph Anton*, where he ultimately sets to destroy the idea of Thatcherism as “popular” by articulating the contradictions within its authoritarian populism and by encouraging a particular form of anti-hegemonic struggle through the demonic image of the unaccommodated migrant Other.

In his memoir, Rushdie acknowledges that he moved to London willingly at an early age to go to school; there he later became interested in studying “the life of the Prophet and the birth of religion as events inside history, analytically, judiciously, properly” and learned that the best way to write novels is by using “the way people spoke [which] revealed much about them: their place of origin, temperament, their true nature, intellectual or earthy, and yes, good or bad” (40). This confession explains Rushdie’s investment in the principle of moral disagreement about larger cultural manifestations of justice. It is this concept of moral disagreement that has delivered characters like Saladin Chamcha and Gabriel Farishta in *The Satanic Verses*, and which now emerges as the central principle of contemporary cosmopolitanism, which rests on the unresolved tension “of the impossibility of a nonexclusive public sphere of rational argument where a nonconsensus can be attained” (Mouffe 93). Thus a Saidian reading of *The Satanic Verses* which offers the argument that to dramatize the crisis of cultural identity means to turn “the neurotic exile’s fear into an esthetic principle” in order to offer a “contrapuntal awareness” of spaces and history, attempts also to suggest that the *conceptual* impossibility of a consensus does not jeopardize a democratic polity, but rather, as Mouffe argues, reinforces it by indicating that conflicts and contestations keep democracy alive (93).

While *The Satanic Verses* was written in 1998 and preceded a much expected, albeit cautious, turn to ethics in the space of cultural studies and especially in literary criticism, *Joseph Anton* directly reflects and vitalizes that turn, which became especially prominent with the publication of *The Turn to Ethics* in 2000. The essays in this book explore the relationship between the ethic and the moral, the political, the humane, the literary, and the practical, and poignantly

conclude with Rebecca Walkowitz' argument that at the center of the ethical debate today is the cosmopolitan ethic as a rhetoric of ethical urgency and model of international affiliation in the context of cultural diversity, but that its different, often antagonistic applications need to be re-addressed (221). What emerges from this is the constant need for the critic to address the ambiguity of the concept of universal moral values in order to resolve, as Chantal Mouffe's essay in the same book suggests (93), the larger tension between the domain of politics and the domain of ethics in their respective efforts to keep alive democratic politics.

Cosmopolitanism, as the living among "others" or the imagining of others in order to understand them, has proven a complicated philosophy in its application. While most, from Jacques Derrida to Kwame Anthony Appiah, see it worth reviving as a philosophy reclaiming the universal values promoted by Kant and his contemporary followers, opponents of Kant's philosophy point out to its impracticability: in Harvey's interpretation, Kant and his modern adherents often counsel that we tolerate others but not intervene in the rules and norms of their societies, or worse, that we let them visit our culture but discourage them from staying too long. Both the original Stoic and Cynic cosmopolitan ideal, and the romanticized universalism of Kant and, in part, of his contemporary follower, Martha Nussbaum, maintain that the cosmopolitan's task is to regard all human beings as fellow citizens in the name of "universal values of justice and right" through the exclusion of "morally irrelevant" particularisms such as country of origin or religion (Walkowitz 222). Walkowitz calls this a philosophy of "even collectivity and comfortable 'understanding' as the presumptive universalism of universalism," while Harvey finds it guilty of not equipping us "to deal with the palpable but seemingly intractable problem of the banality of geographical evils on the ground" (3). Rushdie sets his own cosmopolitanism against the philosophical projects of Positivism and cultural relativism, and adheres to the cosmopolitan projects of modern philosopher Appiah and Marxist geographer David Harvey, who can be read together along Rushdie's work to reconstruct an ethical vision based on cross-cultural interventions and understandings under the

principle of a universal morality, precisely with regard to particularisms such as national and cultural roots. Following Appiah and Harvey, Rushdie suggests that disagreements about acts of cruelty and forms of oppression are of the *fundamental* sort; they cross cultures and histories, and enter a language of values that is most likely to invite people “to get things done *together*” (Appiah 28). As difficult a task as that sounds, in Appiah’s formulation, cosmopolitanism keeps this moral disagreement at its core and makes primary allegiance to local schemes of justice, while for Rushdie the basis for it is also the perpetual movement of the migrant between spaces of historical and cultural meaning, a movement of ethical transcendence. Rushdie does not take the immigrant condition in itself nor Kantian universal morals, but a cosmopolitan, albeit urban, immigrant condition that mixes the classical postcolonial notion of the “voyage in” with a deep awareness of historical-geographical processes of place and community construction. With London set against Bombay in the shaping of rooted cosmopolitan subjects, Rushdie’s characters start as bourgeois dilettantes but through them and through the highly perceptive narrator of the novel, the reader experiences a journey through the modern nations of India and England, both past and present, and towards an understanding of the potential and the limitations of exile.

Rushdie’s specific posture with respect to intellectual production gestures presciently towards more recent theories on ethics in relation to social justice in the post-Saidian multicultural world, echoing in particular Harvey’s concept of *rooted cosmopolitanism* as the intellectualized stance that uses a deep awareness of historical-geographical processes of place and community construction in order to act as “a norm for intervention in a violent world of geographical difference” (3). Harvey coined the term in order to explain *social justice* as ultimately “rooted in the distinct understandings of places, honors, jobs, things of all sorts that constitute shared life” and as ultimately created by a cosmopolitan ethic which makes an appeal to “appropriate geographical and anthropological understandings” (3). This is a driving force first in Rushdie’s revival of cosmopolitanism as an ethical literary project that is to be found both in the cultural and geographic

specificity of his writing, and secondly, in his attitude towards the concept of moral disagreement which produces characters like Saladin Chamcha and Gabriel Farishta, and which is the central aspect of rooted cosmopolitanism as a philosophy of social reconstruction.

A Marxist geographer like Harvey is especially important to any discussion of Rushdie's work, because he invites us to acknowledge the existence "of multiple forms of transgressive behaviour," normalized as deviant, "in urban spaces as important and productive" ("Banality" 9). In his asking how it might be possible to encourage political participation in the contemporary multicultural world where the question of otherness remains firmly opposed to the question of "people-as-one," Rushdie situates a split, postmodern Lucifer in the urban space of London, not so much as a figure of resistance but as the unlikely figure of a postcolonial flâneur who in Harvey's understanding, "maps the city's terrain and evokes its living qualities" (9) differently from the way a native would. Focusing on the transgressive, 'deviant' behaviors of Gibreel and Saladin, Rushdie revives rooted cosmopolitanism through the appropriation of the old art of *flânerie* as the emblematic type of urban, modern, migrant experience, its art no longer relegated to the past nor to the native form of dwelling, moved away from the Paris of Charles Baudelaire and from the Berlin of Walter Benjamin onto a contemporary London and Bombay, to show how these places have changed because of what Rushdie calls the unfinished business of empire. The imagined experiences of subjective and cultural translation of his characters, including that of Joseph Anton, help Rushdie render London's multicultural space "legible for us in a very distinctive way" (Harvey), in order to readdress the notion that we live in a time of hysterical debates about Good and Evil, debates which lead to increased forms of violence on the ground, and the answer to which might be in looking with a sharper eye at the functions and the uses of a literary Evil in relation to making social justice possible.

## Chapter Two

### **Cosmopolitanism and Exilic Consciousness in**

#### **Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence***

*We may come nearer the answer to the question what [human beings are] when we come to see [them] as the eternal meeting of the One with the Other. Martin Buber*

*Anyone can study, but learning is something you can only do if you are there for the duration. Walter Benjamin*

As Andrew Smith, quoting Walter Benjamin, notes in his essay “Migrancy, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Studies” (1997), the fascination in postcolonial literary studies with migration rises out of “the fact that the human acts of storytelling and travel are tangled together” (242). Smith’s argument is that the discipline of postcolonial literary studies stakes its claim in the idea that the relationship between narrative and movement takes on a *new* and *qualitatively different* significance in the context and aftermath of colonialism” (242, my emphasis). In their combined effort to describe the constant newness of the world of migration, postcolonial literature and criticism take on the puzzle of “how aspects of life and experience in one social context are impacting on worlds that are geographically and culturally distant,” managing thus to “disclose the hybridity of *all* cultural traditions *at all times*” through a “repeated summoning up of the place that is not here, the people who are not us” (Smith 242-5). Accordingly, in setting itself apart from previous endeavors and fields of academic inquiry today, postcolonial studies recovers and



reinforces the idea that “as people move, the cultural center also moves, not in any specific direction, but in a diffusing, outward spread” (Smith 245).

Under the sign of postcolonial writing centered on the blending between movement and narrative, Gurnah himself comments in “Writing Place” (2003) that “traveling away from home provides distance and perspective, and a degree of amplitude and liberation. It intensifies recollection, which is the writer’s hinterland. Distance allows the writer uncluttered communion with his inner self, and the result is a freer play of imagination” (27). Gurnah’s concept of distance from one’s homeland has been the subject of seminal postcolonial criticism, most notably in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, who argue that “the perspective brought ... by postcolonial literatures is their accentuation of the phenomenon of *distance*: they present us with readers and writers far more ‘absent’ from each other than they would be if located in the same culture” (186). Thus, one can argue that Gurnah’s work is part of a larger effort to unsettle the idea of a self-contained national literary tradition through literary acts that are hybrid – existing, as Smith notes, not in *one* specific place and time, but in *between* many different places at once.

The emblematic figure of the migrant at the center of postcolonial fiction depends on the broad argument that migration is “one of the most important factors in global change” (Castles qtd in Smith 242), and which Smith defines as “a new way of being” (246). The modern global migrant is the self-portrait of postcolonial literary theory in the same manner the rustic traveler was adopted by the romantics in the 19th century or the urban exile adopted by the 20th century modernists. It is a recycled image of the stereotype of the “poète maudit” endowed with “an ambiguous gift of sensibility which makes him at the same time more blessed and more cursed than the other members of a society from which he is ... an outcast” (Arnold qtd in Smith 260). All traces of this figure re-emerge in recent fiction not as mere recycling but within a position of “distance” and detachment from “the messy, muddied world of economic transactions” (Smith 260), private figures “linked to exclusion ... into a cognitive privilege” (Bourdieu qtd in Smith 260). In Gurnah’s

work, and especially in *Admiring Silence*, the exile appears as necessarily estranged, an outcast and a private figure, while also not entirely separated from the muddled world of ideological moves. Using the theme of exilic consciousness, Gurnah holds a mirror to the celebrations of hybridity and migrancy by showing how his protagonist's cognitive privilege is bound up with his political struggle and intimate desires. The careful delineation of this character through his disillusion, detachment, and sense of revolt, allows Gurnah to voice his concern for the absurdity of the exilic condition, an absurdity reinforced in equal measure by the excesses of late capitalist Western society with its grotesque figures of farce, and by the impossibility of return for a postcolonial subject whose exile is presented as irreversible. More precisely, according to Gurnah, a postcolonial narrator of East African origin living as an exile in London for many years serves to expose the limits of exilic experience in terms of its radical potential, as once exalted by Edward Said, exile manifesting itself less as celebration and more as impasse for the black African subject.

For both Gurnah and Smith, the Benjaminian entanglement between traveling and the telling of stories starts with “a historical link to social figures such as the journeyman apprentice, the pilgrim, the merchant sailor: all those who were able to leave their homes and return with narratives, straightforward and embellished, of the places and people they had seen in their wanderings” (Smith 242). Nowhere is this entanglement better seen than in some of Gurnah's stories, such as the novel *By the Sea* (2001) or his short story “Mid Morning Moon”(2011) which feature teachers and merchant sailors, maps and goods, and above all, the dissemination of knowledge to young minds, hungry for faraway places and fascinated with the idea of distance from their settlement. To an extent, so does *Admiring Silence* (1996), where minor characters such as uncle Hashim come to the exiled narrator “out of the midnight air” to engage his imagination, but also as a constant reminder that he is, in the words of Nigerian writer Femi Osofisan, “a disillusioned fugitive” (qtd in Smith 261). Through the image of the exile as a weaver of stories but also as a disillusioned fugitive, the entanglement between writing and traveling in *Admiring Silence*

has a historical link to a new kind of pilgrim: the novel's narrator straddles the borders between the colonized and the colonizers, but since he performs rather poorly in exile, he engages us once more with the broader question of exile, its specific uses in the modern age needing to be rearticulated.

The novel is a model for what Salman Rushdie once called "writing back to the Empire." Like Rushdie, Gurnah uses as thematic foundation for his fiction the Saidian concept of "the voyage in:" the move into the metropolis of a subject from a former colony, who, "cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from [his] place of origin," can mediate between the text and the world, and between national and cultural affiliations" (*Resistance* 48). His protagonist achieves a complete 'voyage in' not only by moving from the marginal Africa to the metropolitan center nor by the mere encounter with the Other, but by falling in love with a British subject who cannot renounce her enlightened European cosmopolitanism, and who borrows his Africanness as her temporary significant Other. The affective and intellectual dialogue between the two of them is symbolic of the relationship between England and Africa pre- and post- colonization, as a troubled communion involving a history denied, with no guilt or decadence to be admitted. So is the joint venture between an African and a European: a fully white with and against an "almost white but not quite;" a partnership, but not quite a marriage; love on one side, pride and prejudice on the other. During their time together, our narrator becomes a hindrance, a voice that needs to be silenced, a face with no right to turn subjective or narcissistic. Next to Emma, he realizes he is a postmodern Pocahontas, her story, "a moment to be repeated again and again in stories of imperial adventure: the beautiful native princess is smitten senseless by the European knight and recklessly risks everything for love" (6). His status as an exilic protagonist is thus defined by his familial, social and national belonging, and his desire to form himself as a particular human being involves a pragmatic struggle to discard the grand narratives that surround him as an exile, an effort to stand above and against British parochial views of the world. What problematizes the experience of a character like this is the final and total rejection he suffers at the hands of the culture whose

orthodoxies he stands against but whose realities nonetheless he embraces, a rejection that speaks for the social and moral untouchable he remains. This postcolonial narrating subject is an illustration of what Amartya Sen calls the dialectic of the colonized mind; what he tries to escape is what Sen, quoting Partha Chatterjee, has termed as the colonized mind's parasitical obsession with the colonial power (Sen 89). This problematizes any effort to resist British imperial attitudes, problematizing decolonization, and also self understanding.

In his deployment of this character, Gurnah rests on Edward Said's concept of exile's *neurotic fear* in an attempt "to reconstitute a shattered community, to save or to restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system" (*Resistance*48). In a Saidian sense, therefore, Gurnah builds upon the aesthetic principle that the exiled postcolonial subject offers a contrapuntal awareness of spaces and history through his or her antagonism and anxiety. Like Rushdie and Kincaid, Gurnah deploys his protagonist's neurotic fear to suggest that imperial desires are still alive and dangerous, and more specifically, as a response to what Robert Young called the fear of racial fusion of the 1990s London. Thus, his main function is to *dramatize* the crisis of cultural identity, to show how difficult that process is and what contributes to that impossibility.

As Smith notes, exile is always a terrifying option for most people in the world: "because our world is marked by [economic] disparities – because travel is price-tagged like any other commodity – migration can involve forms of domination as well as liberation and can give rise to blinkered vision as well as epiphanies" (246). It is this blend of liberation and blinkered vision that interests Gurnah and which defines his notion of exile. Becoming and staying mobile is of great importance, but it is complicated, as *Admiring Silence* shows, by the uncanny identity of the novel's protagonist and narrator: his thoughtful and active engagement with the decolonization process is contrasted with his effort to gain access to the colonizers' space. Like Olaudah Equiano, who is the subject of Smith's study on the condition of the migrant, Gurnah's narrator has a life

story “rife with the tension of having no choice other than to labor *inside* the very system to which he wants to see an end” (Smith 246) and despite the fact that more than two centuries passed between Equiano’s experiences and the experiences depicted in *Admiring Silence*, the restlessness and the disillusionment of the black African exile are very much the same. This can be most clearly seen in a comment later in the novel and delivered in a James Baldwin fashion, that, “for a few accidents of time and place, I could have been standing on Liverpool dock seeing off my slave ship as it set off for the Guinea coast” (18). At the same time, however, his lifelong partner is a white British woman, who leaves him at the end of the novel and for whom he cannot stop mourning; he fails to see himself anywhere but in London, despite both his poor job as a teacher and his encounters with London’s particular figures of farce; moreover, his detachment from home seems final even against his determination to make things work.

Gurnah employs his nameless narrator as the migrant individual whose refusal to remain in place is attempted as a radical gesture. The very title of the book and the motifs of silence and refusal that permeate it suggest a radical gesture announcing a protagonist who will go against the norm in redefining his identity, specifically by considering the critical uses of being silent in order to let others expose their imperialist attitudes. Said’s larger argument is that “by becoming mobile and by making narratives out of this mobility, people escape the control of states and national borders *and* the limited, linear ways of understanding themselves which states promote in their citizens” (Smith 245). This interpretation of mobility for Said enables the radical gesture of immanent critique— speaking against the empire from empire’s own center – and which turns exile into the ideal human condition. To an extent, this is certainly true of Gurnah’s protagonist, his migration understood through his continuous straddling between two cultures and two places, a shifting and ambiguous condition that supposes a reshaping of cultural and individual awareness. Moreover, his perpetual inscription in the moment of immanent critique happens through what Stuart Hall has termed “a dialogue of power and resistance, of refusal and recognition, with and

against *Présence Européenne*” (437), one that presupposes an understanding of specific colonial history and anti-colonial discourse. Yet, he constantly marks his own difference as a Lucifer-like hero who mixes pride and revolt with his neurotic mind, and emerges only as a maladjusted social subject prone to speak of and even to participate in the arrested decolonization that followed independence movements in Africa. As such, we have to interrogate Gurnah’s own position within postcolonial studies, who like other postcolonialists appears to be “positively cynical about decolonization and national liberation” (Lazarus 33), while also trying to look beyond the setbacks and defeats brought by independence from colonial rule. Shouldn’t we, Gurnah suggests, like and embrace this cynicism as we might see it at the end of the book, where the narrator, an educated East African teaching in London, resolves to take a class in plumbing in order to fix Zanzibar’s clogged toilets, and finds fit to direct his romantic hopes towards another exile who, like him, understands what leaving among the British means for a formerly colonized national subject? Can that ending be considered a metaphor for an ironic, yet more constructive, progressive even, goal?

Gurnah introduces a postcolonial hero with an unnervingly narcissistic narrative:

I can’t quite fix on the beginning yet, where it is as such. When I think I’ve found a good position from which to start, I am tempted by the possibility that everything would seem clearer if I began with what led up to it. In my mind, I take up various starting positions – some before I was born, some after, some yesterday, others in the living present – but after a few minutes of reflection I am thoroughly sick of each of them. They all seem calculated and transparent. I stumble about in this sullen thicket, hoping that I will bump into the moment of release. 17

A symptom of late twentieth century’s global migration, Gurnah’s protagonist is a storyteller whose ministrations and gestures point towards an exposé that struggles to but which simply cannot be perfected or wholly illuminated, thus leaving his condition unresolved and casting him in a failed

intellectual venture. He tries but can't fix on the beginning. In his fixation on an indescribable genesis, he takes up various starting positions, a gesture that can only be seen as a modern aesthetic mode describing the absurdity involved in the idea that he can or will ever belong to a post-national, borderless, colorless world. The major purpose he serves as an exile is just that – perhaps to constantly demand pity or attention, as Amy Kaminsky noted on the tendency of all exiles (15), but more importantly, to function as a misfit possessed by an anarchistic consciousness in order to establish the ultimate 'truth' about one's emergence as a postcolonial character with a language, hence existential crisis.

When he suddenly interrupts his own narrative after just a couple of pages, he does so in the most unfashionable manner: "Sooner or later," he pronounces, "I am going to have to go back to the beginning and tell this story properly" (17). This blunt avowal, following an episode in which our narrator visits a cardiologist to find treatment for his chest pain, seems designed only to confound the reader through its deep sense of foreboding and appearance as a candid confession, and will be just one in a long series of impulsive disruptions that the text offers. With his main character confessing, "I am not a failure. I am a tragedy," then, at the end, with his resolution to "join an evening course on plumbing," in order to "get to know what clogs up the works" (212), then melodramatically delivering his last sentence, "I am so afraid to disturb this fragile silence" (212), Gurnah uses a neurotic, nameless narrator to reflect on the darker aspects of exile and to argue that exile contains a tragic element that rarely can be transcended; his narrator seems stuck at the crossroads, embracing a condition of in-betweenness that is much celebrated in contemporary cultural studies, but which here evokes a more critical moment of stasis, of inability to mediate properly between the old and the new, between the present and the past, all the while invoking the need to move forward.

The act of narrating, or the telling of the story as such, is a stylistic feature revealing a form of entrapment that is rooted in more than just inner torment. This discomfiting search for "the

moment of release” corresponds also to a search for an adequate narrative mode, meant to signal Gurnah’s affinity for narcissism as a critical literary category invoked by distance and foreignness, and as a morally ambiguous area meant to bridge the gap between the narrator’s conscience and our own, as readers. It is the text and not the narrator, and certainly not the author that is being deployed as narcissistic, and it is in this sense that the narrator’s condition of in-betweenness works best. As theorist of metafiction Linda Hutcheon would argue, Gurnah offers a contemporary self-reflexive novel, which demands “that the reader participate in the fiction process as imaginative co-creator” while also distancing the reader by its textual self-consciousness (ii). Gurnah is to be recognized both in Andre Gide’s small convex mirrors that always reflect the scene described and in Diego Velazquez’ 1656 *Las Meninas*, the self-conscious work of art where Velazquez depicts himself where the viewer might be, positioned beyond the territorial space. The novel points directly at its reflection upon its own genesis and growth: “settling on the beginning,” “finding a good position,” are aesthetic conventions that are not only the narrator’s idiosyncrasies but also Gurnah’s, his penchant for metafiction actualized in the text through the filigrees of history and characters’ avid craving for narratives. Formal narcissism as described by Hutcheon works as a subdomain of metafiction, a figurative adjective designating *textual* self-awareness; as stated above, what is being described is the text itself and not the author or the character, despite the fact that psychological associations are inevitable (Hutcheon 9). Yet, these psychological associations are given a special emphasis in Gurnah’s novel as the neurotic behavior of the narrator specifically asks us to mediate between his negative, melancholy, self-generated thoughts and his effort to respond aesthetically to his surroundings. As such, what Gurnah intends on the part of his narrator is an aesthetic response that can be seen as action or as a mode of participation. The liberation and the blinkered vision that exile produces find their answer, and possibly their mediation, in the struggle for aesthetic experience as a form of communication between the protagonist and us.



Due to their structure, the three parts of the novel – the first a critical lament, the second an unrestrained confessional narrative, the short last one, an epilogue of beginnings – occasion that metafictional reading. Its formal irony and self-reflective nature are complemented by what Hutcheon calls ‘conscious concerns’ – character, action, morals, and representation of reality. The dualism of speaking subjects – author/narrator – and the dualism between the story told and the storytelling process, between form and content, are indisputable preconditions for the novel’s larger critical framework, and they require a close reading of the novel’s penchant for metafiction through stylistic concerns such as parody and mise-en-abyme. To situate his novel within the larger context of literary life, and in particular within contemporary British literature, Gurnah shapes the mimetic and parodic process through the uneasy invocation of *Emma*, a novel in which Austen warns against the perils of misconstrued romance, setting it against the banality of Georgian England. The mise-en-abyme in *Admiring Silence* is established not only through an invocation of Austen’s novel by means of character and situational similarities – rich domestic life, characters flawed by conceit and arrogance, etc. – but mainly through the complex and enigmatic process of gazing between the imperial subjects and our postcolonial narrator, a process turned parodic by an unrelenting display of power and resistance. The parodic images are replicated here in performative acts: ideological and aesthetic confrontations between East and West, a permanent and reciprocal gaze between characters, and clichés used to subvert parochial interpretations of the human nature. Here, Gurnah and Austen share more in common: an understanding of the world, a tactful depiction of characters subdued to passion while leading seemingly trivial lives, and a tendency to leave the reader soaking in the romantic irony provided by the characters’ strong emotional attachments. But the point of departure is also remarkable: Austen’s complacent view of the class structure of her times is set against Gurnah’s critique of social values and mores in imperial Britain and neocolonial Zanzibar, and in his ability to place opposing structures face to face, trying to make one illuminate the other.

The failed relationships and foul romances of *Admiring Silence* complement the dissenting voice of a negligible Other in order to subvert, through parody and satire, the metanarratives of cultural imperialism, but also to witness the dialectical literary progression from one mimesis to another, from one tradition to another. The mimetic nature of the metafictional process results in what Byron Caminero-Santangelo calls the “subversive, dialogic postcolonial hybridity” in which “the voice of the postcolonial author comes out not just through the revision of the European classic but, just as important, through its engagement with the larger social (colonial) text that supposedly speaks through the classic” (11). *Emma* is neither a colonial nor a metropolitan text per se; moreover, Gurnah doesn’t explicitly thematize or allegorize it, but *Admiring Silence* is remarkable in its generative function which could not take place without a conscious reworking of mimetic novelistic traditions. He invokes *Emma* in its quality of past aesthetic form as a creative challenge to the normative literary codes of British culture, without intending to destroy them, but rather to initiate a new literary convention, one that validates the new aesthetic hybrid created by postcolonial literary modes and the new modes of existence imposed by the abiding move between nations and borders. *Admiring Silence* becomes thus a methodological moment in itself, Gurnah’s aim being to question the function of the novel in the context of late 20<sup>th</sup> century non-canonical literature, and the worthiness of its effort to mirror and revise past literary traditions.

The unsettling linguistic impediment into which the novel’s narrator stumbles must be perceived not as a linguistic handicap, but rather as a humorless and unrewarding chase for a credible aesthetic form that could shed light on his exilic condition and end the larger loss that defines him. Throughout the entire text, Gurnah’s storyteller is prone to a self-reflective monosyllabic apathy, an attempt to rid himself of the landscape of decay in which he is stranded as an exile. As an exile, he is defined by a strong desire to embrace and be embraced by the Other, a desire that becomes part of his escalating sense of deterritorialization and which antagonizes his understanding of home and space. His ontological being and his role as a dissenting figure are

stylistic features that contradict traditional aesthetic norms and are contradictions in themselves. His namelessness throughout the novel is complemented by a line of epithets that only become important in the context of diasporic identity discourse, otherwise failing to function as true character denominators: he is African, Muslim, Wahhabi Sunni, black. His national identity would remain a mystery if not for the taunting clues provided: “strictly an Indian Ocean lad, Muslim, orthodox Sunni by upbringing, Wahhabi by association” (10). He suffers from a heart condition that remains unidentified and untreated. His unconventional marriage to Emma is a strange love generated by the fever of postcolonial idealism of the 1970s and rendered impossible by the postcolonial disillusion of the 1990s. Their child, Amelia, is a teenager trapped in characteristic adolescence frustration even as her problems seem exacerbated by her father’s uncanny identity. After twenty years of feeling abandoned and having abandoned his family, he finally makes a trip home – to an “island off the coast of Africa” – a trip that brings final disillusionment and a permanent acceptance of his detachment from his motherland, family, and national identity. In the end, significantly, the narrator enacts a clumsy new beginning, by inspecting his own desires, needs, and options: he considers taking a course in plumbing after becoming frustrated with the clogged toilets of his home island, and as a last step after being abandoned by Emma, considers telephoning Ira, the interesting and beautiful Indian woman he met on the plane back from home. Despite the bitter irony involved in this ambiguous ending, one must seize Gurnah’s attitude, deployed as it is in his portrait of the African narrator in the metropole, both skeptical and optimistic with respect to the exilic ideal.

Especially at the end of the novel, Gurnah’s narrator locates freedom, what can be called freedom, not in isolation, but in dialogic intersubjectivity, which always happens through participation and which does not need to rest on sameness or even agreement. This is why the narrative turns around moments of recognition sparked by his exposure to the idea of others. Gurnah’s character might not be what he is without his exile, without being forced to reveal himself

as a new type of postcolonial hero: one who is overly sensitive and overly absorbed in his contemplation of ridiculous situations triggered by his desire to make his presence as a colonized African figure in Britain felt, recognized, and admired, and against his sudden awareness that the British Other constantly denies and resents his intellectual capacity. Fixated on the genesis of his predicament, this is a narrator whose stream of consciousness forces out unnatural silences, double-edged lies, and suffocated truths. As a protagonist, he searches for but finds no comfort until the very last page of the book; as a narrator, he finds meager comfort with the invisible reader, feeling relieved in his newly discovered ability to comment on significant aspects of his life. Gurnah presents this postcolonial antihero as a demoralized and misunderstood exile in London, with little hope for the future. Many critics are bothered by his stubborn silences, by his tendency to create rather than deter the conditions of racialized and imperial discourses. And yet, what critics too often disregard is the way he oscillates between despairing insecurity and an ardent desire to live among others, between being fully present and wholly absent. With him, Gurnah continues a tradition of musing on the pitfalls and the promises of exile, of giving adequate expression to the possibilities entailed in an unbecoming character who struggles to be and to see things in the middle. It is not the *being* but the *arriving* at this middle position that interests Gurnah, one which takes time and resilience; only through that becoming can this narrator ultimately speak about the need for new beginnings and give his own individualism a special degree of concern. In that sense, he represents a model of cosmopolitan education, arguably an awkward one and arguably against his own derision for the term cosmopolitanism. But if we are to understand cosmopolitans as those interlopers between different worlds who do not give up local identifications, which in fact, as Martha Nussbaum argues, remains a source of great richness for them (9), and who make their primary job the writing of what Leela Ghandi calls “minor narratives of crosscultural collaboration” (6), then this neurotic, antagonistic narrator emerges as a true citizen of the world, cosmopolitanism’s primary subject.

In its contemporary form, revived by philosophers such as Nussbaum and Anthony Appiah, cosmopolitanism suggests that we think of ourselves as “surrounded by a series of concentric circles” – the self, then immediate family, extended family, local groups, fellow city-dwellers, and outside, the largest one, humanity as a whole – our task being to draw the circles somehow toward the center (Nussbaum 9); and, following Appiah, that we see our exchanges with others as valuable, even vital, even though they don’t lead to consensus (63). Within postcolonial studies, Timothy Brennan argues that cosmopolitanism is not a form of succumbing to national interests elevated into internationalism, but rather the application of universal principles to particular geographical instances (qtd in Harvey 308). Considered a serious “norm for intervention in a violent world of geographical difference,” as David Harvey defines it (3), cosmopolitanism invites us to look at ourselves through the lens of the other while also taking into account that becoming a cosmopolitan is a stoic ideal, a condition to consciously and continuously grapple with. Cosmopolitanism for Gurnah especially is contingent on the values of the stoic sage: it is a philosophy of grim endurance, of “carrying on rather than getting over, of tolerating rather than transcending life’s agonies and adversities” (Wallace 2). Determinedly passive, Gurnah’s narrator employs his own narrative as a kind of democratic deliberation of universal values, and suggests that becoming a citizen of the world always starts as a lonely business, as a kind of exile “from the comfort of local truths, from the warm nestling feeling of patriotism, from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one’s own” (Nussbaum 11).

No other characters than Rushdie’s and Gurnah’s show us more seriously how complex that struggle is. For *The Satanic Verses*’ Saladin Chamcha, cosmopolitanism was the result of a specific form of dwelling coupled with the authorial punishment of a highly cosmopolitan writer: Saladin is to be found in his *renewed* experience of the city (London) as a foreigner/migrant and in his regaining local (Indian) affiliations never present in his identity before. Likewise, Gurnah’s narrator and cosmopolitanism find each other in the idea of long term dwelling in an adverse culture (based

on the Benjaminian concept of living *there* for the duration) and not mere travelling or short-term cultural exchange, all the while keeping local (Zanzibari) affiliations alive. Gurnah's concept of distance from home is similar to Walter Benjamin's concept of prolonged dwelling as a process which leads to learning, and which Gurnah translates into the acquisition of the degree of amplitude, the perspective, and the increased imagination needed to intervene in a violent world of geographical difference. Both Rushdie's Saladin and Gurnah's protagonist live in London for the duration; they are both middle aged at the time of the narration, having arrived in London shortly after their countries gained independence from colonial rule; crucially, the "moment of release" which both authors try to instill in their characters happens at the end of a long tenure in foreign lands.

More importantly, they function through a renewed principle in postcolonial fiction, a revised understanding of place through the fragility of its concepts of filiation and affiliation. Carefully attended in critical discussions of nationhood and ideologies of belonging, the absence of a homeland is often contained within the absence of or distance from a fatherly or motherly figure; we see that in virtually every diasporic novel as the most prominent character trait in the long line of attributes and features of the postcolonial – Kincaid's Lucy disavows her mother, Rushdie's Gibreel and Saladin make their filiation their primary struggle, while the disorientation of Tobar's Antonio and Guillermo is overdetermined by their lack of familial backgrounds. Gurnah's character is cut off from the national and the familial body, a fact that speaks for the innate opposition embedded in his exilic condition: on the one hand, his desire to belong, and on the other, his rebellion against the established order that engulfs him. But his sense of expiation and banishment from his nation could not be made more profound if not through the metaphoricity of the literal absence of a father figure, an absence that looms naturally yet symbolically in the text, the power of which contributes to his feelings of hopelessness and lack of purpose.

As the handful of Gurnah's critics have observed, this novel must be understood through the politics of relation, through a theory of relationality which, in Edouard Glissant's words, is "linked not to the creation of the world, but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures" (qtd in Steiner 127). This relational identity, Glissant continues, is produced in "the chaotic network of Relation" without a sense of entitlement to filiation or projected territory; it rather sees land as "a place where one-gives-on-and-with rather than grasps" (qtd in Steiner 127). The motif of relational identity grounded in the idea of coexistence of people of different origins is a crucial component of cosmopolitanism, a philosophy which is both an offshoot of postcolonialism and the means to bring together exilic consciousness and local affiliations manifested without a sense of entitlement. As Tina Steiner argues in "Writing Wider Worlds: The Role of Relation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Fiction," one must read the novel against a background of Zanzibari history and diaspora, with Gurnah making an attempt to offer "an opportunity to engage with the heterogeneity of East African coastal regions and their place within the Indian Ocean World, which Gurnah traces through an imaginary geography of transregional/transnational movements and encounters" (124). As Steiner insists, "against a backdrop of 'colonial mapping,' Gurnah seeks to re-define East Africa, to re-orient it in the Indian Ocean World, through glimpses of relational spaces that escape the dystopic politics of exclusion and violence caused by nationalist and notions of ethnicity" (124). Steiner uses the lenses of relational theory as formulated first by Edouard Glissant and then by Martin Buber to argue that Gurnah's fiction insists on seeing others in relation to ourselves, an imperative in today's world of xenophobic acts of violence against immigrants. Gurnah takes the theme of intersectionality – the politics of relation rather than exclusion – to offer counternarratives to myths of nation, land, and language, and to draw attention first to the difficulty in offering such a narrative and secondly, to the need to understand East Africa not in nationalist and ethnic terms but rather as "an intercultural and interlinguistic space of geographical proximity, if it is to accommodate a politics of relation rather than one of exclusion" (Steiner 125). And, as

Erik Falk observes in the same vein, Gurnah's particular importance to postcolonial studies comes from the way in which he depicts "the complex meshwork of social codes, emotions, and narratives that shape subjectivity in a highly unstable and cosmopolitan social reality" (1), Falk arguing later on that his work is "thoroughly cosmopolitan" not only because his stories talk of migration and dispossession, but also because the leitmotif in Gurnah's fiction is always a diasporic awareness that "offers the basis for a reimagination of the extended family as a network with the potential to generate more enabling modes of being" (26).

Gurnah's work stresses the importance not only of movements and encounters across various African boundaries but more specifically across a particular East African coastal region and the specific remnants of the British Empire, the former in the image of Zanzibar as a former colony under the British Empire and the latter in the form of contemporary British metropolitan life. With this, he attempts to re-define East Africa post-colonially and to re-orient it not only in the Indian Ocean but also globally, by dissecting the narratives and the assumptions of the West, by attempting to counter them with a different view of the world. Gurnah is deeply invested in the setbacks and the defeats, as historian Basil Davidson called them, of the postcolonial states, in the failure of leadership that followed the great movements of independence from colonial rule; but of primary importance for Gurnah is the relationship between the trajectories of developments in the new nation-states and the larger powers and forces in the world system. He recognizes, as Neil Lazarus made clear in his introductory essay to the *Postcolonial Studies Reader* (2004), that "there is no contradiction between identifying the criminality and ineptitude of postcolonial rules and recognizing that they were and are at the same time the creatures of larger powers and forces in the world system" (20). While Gurnah does not refer specifically to the central roles played by powerful Western-based oil conglomerates throughout Africa, for example, he insists on commenting on the lingering European political hegemony after/post-independence through the particular attitudes of British subjects who interact with our narrator. He exposes the conditions of



possibility of Western discourse itself, problematizing imperialism, not as mere allegory, or as “power itself” but through its discursive ramifications, not in the least by suggesting that not one colony can occupy a privileged site of representativeness in critiques of imperialism.<sup>1</sup> His narrator gets inserted as the signifying ‘black’ into the discourse of exile and into the Other’s way of life in order to expose what Laura Chrisman termed as “the imperial unconscious” – imperialism’s confrontation with “an ambivalent desire for an absolute status to be the law of nature/life/evolution, rather than sanctioned by it” (507). Chrisman’s critique of the imperial unconscious works through her argument that “the imperial power remains, paradoxically, frozen in power, and repressed, an absent ‘center’, a hidden referent” (498) and in light of her theory that the empire always narrates itself in the colonies and never at home, conferring its name to the peripheries and remaining “intact by virtue of its very invisibility” (498).

The delineation of this narrator as an intellectual in exile who tries to rescue his vitiated rational abilities through his refusal to be a lapdog to Emma’s pedantry and to her society’s imperial arrogance is an effort to de-romanticize exile in the twentieth century. In her youthful fervor, passionate and idealistic, Emma falls in love with him, but all the while she uses him in a capricious revolt against her parents, against social norms, and against all the master narratives of the time: in her passion, she craves stories that would dismantle colonial prejudices, stories that would be genuine and glorious. But as her passion starts to dwindle, his stories turn into impossible narratives, absurd, infantile, and unjustified. Emma is the professional intellectual – she holds a doctorate in narrative theory – knowing everything about the West and the East, but especially about the self-sufficient modern sovereignty of the West: “What’s the point of dwelling on these things anyway?[...]We gave you individualism, the frigidaire, Holy Matrimony” (16). He is obsessed with neatness – his neatness symbolic of ideological openness and coherent

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See Laura Chrisman, “The Imperial Unconscious? Representations of Imperial Discourse” where she argues that analysis of colonial discourse becomes self-contained by way of generalizing others and disregarding the specificity of cultural identities. As Chrisman comments, in Spivak’s anti-imperialist discourse, “one colony, India, inadvertently begins to occupy a privileged site of representativeness, of conceptual supremacy for imperial ‘worlding,’ at the expense of other colonies such as those in Africa and the Caribbean” (498).

history, and less of the 'natural bourgeois' Emma misconstrues him to be. She loathes order – her disorder symbolic of a desire to obscure and discolor history. And when the epiphany arrives: “The damage was caused and I am not sure I was the cause” (24), so does his failure to materialize himself through an open dialogue with Emma precisely because he fails to understand how one can be both damage and cause. The false history she offers to him, he must treat as truth. Her white liberal attitude is set against his rising black consciousness, and in the end she leaves him just when his indignations and his grievances become too loud and wear her out.

Emma functions as a paradoxical fascination of abomination and thus, a precondition for his postcolonial identity and diasporic becoming. While Emma is to him what England strived to be to most of Africa: irresistibly attractive, the Holy Grail, he too is needed there so she can reassert her colonizing mind. “Of course they needed me there,” he says, aware of the role he plays, “It helped them know who they are” (154). Like Austen’s Emma Woodhouse, Gurnah’s Emma Willoughby is handsome, clever, with a happy disposition; she too purports to dictate the lives of those around her and takes an eternity to discover love. In rewriting Austen, Gurnah provides both a reminder of the commending force in African fiction carried through literary images measuring themselves against the Western canon, and a seeming hostility for the Western world. Eyes bright with cleverness, mind fueled by a capricious authority, Emma fails to understand the malady of the postcolonial exile, his longing to belong and his yearning, but also the imperialist anxieties and fantasies running through late 20th-century British culture. She emerges thus as one of the greatest apologists of Empire without being accused of racism, which along with political domination has been the dominant trait of imperialism. Emma shows us that “imperialism even at its most basic is capable of constructing itself as a contradictory process, of commenting upon its own self-mythologizing, and economic, imperatives, while in the course of pursuing them ... able to reveal a great deal of self-knowledge but doesn’t know what to do with this knowledge” (Chrisman 501).

Because he sees this resistance and subterfuge, Gurnah's narrator tells stories rife with anachronisms and discrepancies, and one can only guess that the semantic oddities peppered throughout the text reinforce his sense of tragic failure at correcting. Out of the compulsion to construct a narrative that fulfills the expectations of a Western audience, he translates his stories about the 'savage' Zanzibar into and for the master English, with Orientalist clichés insinuating themselves into the text under romantic images of Africa, stories of exotic people, noble and savage at the same time. Mr. Willoughby, Emma's father and a relic of England's period of high empire, is told, "Under the Empire, we had firm and fair rule, governed by people who understood us better than we understood ourselves" (73), and Mr. Willoughby would sparkle, oblivious of the bitter irony behind the narrated episode. Like one of Roberto Bolaño's exiled artists, he tells other stories misremembering them, complicating his memory, adjusting each story or keeping silent as if to reward his different listeners: "Uncle Hashim and my father came to me out of the midnight air" (63), he says, suddenly awakening from his mute contemplation and wondering about what comfort his fabulous acts of memory might bring him. The decadence of exile is exposed here by the unnatural reconfiguration of the margin-center dialectic, with dialogues between the narrator and Emma's father strengthening the relationship between the two; these create a symmetric pose where the narrator's position is used to show the attachments he builds while also responding to the empire and to the many anxieties the empire builds in him. The gaze is reversed in a subtle way as Mr. Willoughby's craving for another story of empire is satisfied by our narrator, who fulfills that need with stories that help him project his own desires. Reduced to the status of a prop, Mr. Willoughby remains unaware of the different layers of irony in the other's discourse, unaware that he makes it possible for the other to make room for his own voice in the stories he hears, but also unaware of his own unflinching and ruinous decadence. And that uneasiness slowly gives birth to what was earlier described as the deranged psyche of an emaciated intellectual who cherishes an idea that love conquers prejudice.

Stuck watching the repetitive landscape of imperial Britain, Gurnah's hero makes us wonder whether it is exile or the failed romance, or both, that completely upsets his mental and physical equilibrium. Nonetheless, his exile is inescapably wrapped up with European imperialism, and here, Fanon's 'dissenting native' turns into a dissenting expat with a fierce, yet unacknowledged, political stance: "This was where my narcissism lay, I suppose, in my desire to insert myself in a flattering discourse which required that England be guilty and decadent, instead playing my part as well and as silently as Pocahontas" (15). His narcissism, triggered by Pocahontas' abandonment and by other unworldly sods fascinated with the journey to England, translates from one end to another into a series of stubborn defenses of his own desires and of his intellectual potential. In his immanent critique, we might recognize Steve Biko's "black consciousness" – the moment of seizing one's identity as good and beautiful. But even Biko juxtaposed the beautiful and the good over the disruption, the shock that come with that condition, and Gurnah reveals to us that one sees the shock before seeing the beautiful, takes the shock to be repelling instead of dialectical. Indeed, what the narrator of the novel sees as dialectic becomes unrepresentable and dissoluble. He provokes and taunts the English with his made up stories and with his uncomfortable presence, making them feel insecure in their own home, and yet he finds it cruel to refuse them that enhanced and ruinous sense of drama, sensing in them an "over-confident, hedonist cynicism which passes for sophistication and street wisdom" (4).

Exile is introduced as the place where metaphor and literal meaning become articulated as one. Defined as the condition that "involves the idea of separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin" (Ashcroft et al. 85) – exile is produced by a special sort of distance, one that obscures notions of geography, national narratives, and border crossing politics. Given that we never find out what forced this character out of his homeland, the exile of *Admiring Silence* appears to be conditioned by a journey away from the domestic space and the familial nation, by a voyage into the imperial center in an attempt to achieve critical distance

that enables self-knowledge and resistance to what Foucault called sovereign modes of authority. Inextricably, exile entails a profound intellectual and metaphysical woe. Indeed, through his rehearsals for “a starting position,” Gurnah’s narrator enters a wide anti-imperial discourse meant to expose the idiosyncrasies of his diasporic adventure, including a critique of contemporary British society, but this critical distance does not translate into a celebration of exile. Against but also across the potential divined in it by intellectuals like Salman Rushdie or Said, Gurnah appears to think of exile as a critically important alienation from home without fully embracing the salutary value of that separation. Gurnah, Kincaid, Said, and Rushdie seem comfortable with their multiple homes and with the easy movement across borders and nations (although Said, whose access to Palestine was limited, insisted that New York City was, in fact, the only place where he could live), but the literary exiles they generate are multifaceted: Rushdie’s satiric wit has produced exiles whose metamorphosis and rebirth have been grounded in a curious philosophy of possibility, while Gurnah’s sardonic wryness has given voice to tragic exiles caught between racial lines.

Cartographical distance from home in the novel involves a more difficult type of longing. The book introduces us to a diasporic subject whose troubled heart is a fitting expression for his loss and overwhelming desire to return home. This acute pain translates less accurately as nostalgia than as nostomania: an abnormal pining for home and/or for familiar places. This, we rarely see presented in such clear terms either in Rushdie’s fiction or Said’s criticism. Whereas for Said talking about exile is typically an effort to reconfigure structures of power and warn against the perils of failing to produce intellectual work, writers like Gurnah, Kincaid, and even Tobar associate it more strongly with the vitiated memory and potential of the artist/intellectual or human subject as an inescapable exilic condition. It is the particular idiosyncrasies of the diasporic experience – the fractured memory in tandem with the absurd attachment to the idea of place – that re-accommodates a psychopathological notion such as nostomania into the definition of exile. As such, the first part of *Admiring Silence* is a lament dominated by the narrator’s admittance of

struggle: “I have found myself leaning heavily on this pain.” This introductory line conveys an abstract crisis, the pain left to his bugged heart and to this self-inquiry. It also describes a praxis in which he is caught up uncomfortably but which establishes his exilic coming of age through his struggle to face his debilitating romanticism and to voice his rage against enduring racial differences.

The novel’s plot revolves around encounters between this narrator and members of his immediate surroundings which reveal him to be skeptical of nearly everything that constitutes life for him:

I liked to dwell on differences – I still do – to reflect on how hubris and greed have eaten away the foundations without discrimination, and how the continent on which we live is now sliding on pools of slime and waste and sleaze, and how cynicism and exhaustion are condemning all of us to live on bullshit, and how the over-fed sneer unreflectingly at the ones they have brow-beaten and defeated. Emma called me narcissistic. 14

For the uninitiated reader, this protagonist seems to have nothing to offer: he is an otherworldly ghost with melodramatic acts, unseen and unheard, incomprehensibly angry, erratic, and narcissistic. He resembles Kincaid’s Lucy, and at times, Tobar’s Longoria. He draws to mind earlier characters of a different genre: traditional or modern bildungsromans with orphans and waifs, coming of age young men and women in search of experience. He too is an orphan, without a proper home and, not surprisingly, without a father. Gurnah’s character is not young and doesn’t have access to the final heroic redemption that defines a Pip or a Wilhelm Meister; in fact, he has nothing to offer besides his exile. Yet, he too wants to attain selfhood within society and his method of engaging the world involves both powerful emotional states and subjective weaknesses, an experience that leaves him wiser, albeit sadder.

The imperial romance and the “imperial unconscious” follow centuries of colonial hegemony. They formulate themselves, are safeguarded, and bred at home, and not only in the colonies. A familiar scene in Gurnah’s fiction reveals crowds of postcolonial subjects in the postmodern metropolis who are trapped in distorted European interpretations of human history and in placid stories of family and national affiliation. In *By the Sea*, an immigration officer, similar in many ways to the cardiologist in *Admiring Silence*, personifies the suzerain and white Europe: “But my parents are European, they have a right, they’re part of the family. Mr. Shaaban, look at yourself” Kevin Edelman – the Romanian-born Heathrow official of Jewish descent – tells the Zanzibari transgressor and main character of the short story. In Kevin’s Europe, all the African new-comers who keep traversing the ocean, crossing the border as undocumented expatriates, becoming illegal immigrants and inappropriate citizens, can only contaminate his pure continent. The newcomer remains silent. Reduced to a position of inferiority and knowing no return, he is painfully caught in a dialectical battle, having to use his silence as a form of resistance and awkward triumph. The first conversation in *Admiring Silence* describes, in a bitterly jocular tone, the encounter between our character and a cardiologist with an ignorant familiar manner about “Afro-Caribbean” people and “their dickey hearts,” while the narrator, a sour and anxious African, does nothing to correct the other’s sneers and arrogance other than fretfully, persistently, ruminating on them. The silent notes tell the doctor about savage ‘habits’ of eating smoked monkey for breakfast and thus confronts once again the ill-bred egotism of the middle class white European, locating his ignorance in a racial configuration meant to dispel every dream of a post-racial world.

By reinscribing the topoi of race, by placing of the black East African Self against the white Other, and by resituating the Eastern and Western philosophies in a strong dialectical opposition – Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence* offers a contrapuntal reading of the imperial culture and confronts the figures of farce through which it has always exercised its authority. The ‘voyage in’ is reshaped here as the narrator’s hermeneutics of suspicion towards the grand narratives of enlightenment and

emancipation of the contemporary metropolitan British life, and as a reminder of the complicity: that there is no act of separation between East and West, North and South, between the metropolitan culture and its peripheral sites. Intercourse between the narrator and his British counterparts establishes a correlation and also a possible opposition between two different theories formulated by Said, one concerning the mission of the exiled intellectual and the other his warning that ‘the Western culture is incapable of breaking away with its own attitudes’ (248). The productivity of this novel, therefore, could not be complete without the recognition that the racial discourse – emerging from the tragic visions of Empire embodied in one doctor’s bigotry, Mr. Willoughby’s destructive nationalism, Mrs. Willoughby’s indoctrination, or Emma’s own institutionalized narrative orthodoxy – forms a crucial part of Gurnah’s critique. It suggests that the ontological and aesthetic import of a black narrator as an African postcolonial subject interested in the relationship between the empire and its colonies, results in an impasse of critical inquiry, thus in a failure to ensure freedom.

Gurnah exposes our failure to recognize the humanity of the stranger, which, as Arendt warned, becomes particularly questionable once the status of citizenship is indefinable. In the current immigration climate, hospitality is a provisional condition, “the retraction of which,” Arendt reminds us, “equates with the retraction of the humanity of the new arrival” (qtd in Steiner 126). The persistent absence of a referent for the narrator’s home and numberless allusions to his family through an impersonal third person pronoun point to the distance between him and his familial ground, making us wonder, on the one hand, what home means or what home becomes when the inside (East Africa) becomes the outside (Europe) and the outside refuses to become the inside, and on the other hand, what the escape from his larger metaphysical torment could look like. What does it mean for him to repeatedly call Europe ‘our’ continent, even as he does so deafly and alone? From this stance, the idea of home arises with renewed identity, the return to and being at



home acting as forces that galvanize his enlightenment, that burgeoning awareness of his condition as an irrevocable expatriate in a hostile imperial metropole.

The idea of return would, under these circumstances, be the best answer to this anguish. But the book complicates it: once possible for individuals caught up in the machine of high postcolonialism – seen in idealistic characters like Chinua Achebe’s Obi from *Things Fall Apart* or Tayeb Salih’s Mustafa from *Season of Migration to the North*, and even possible in the contemporary world by characters like Rushdie’s expats – the idea of return is problematized here both by a complex ontological and metaphysical ambiguities and by the interference of the political under the guise of neocolonial practices recorded during the narrator’s brief journey home. At home, he is introduced to the country’s rough political and cultural paralysis, misunderstood and pressured into a traditional marriage by his family, embarrassing his family with his alienation and distance. Much of Gurnah’s art consists in his understanding and acceptance of home and one’s people, so here, his hero is struck with a peace of mind that seems distant, dimly but still possible. Like the Zanzibar of *By the Sea*, the Zanzibar of *Admiring Silence* is a place from which our narrator grows alienated, and yet a place that returns times and again, human and familiar. It is at home that his sense of solidarity and commitment burgeon, but also at home where his criticism against a nation fallen in distress and incapable to reinvent itself contributes to his final deterritorialization: “They wanted to glory in grievance, in promises of vengeance, in their past oppression, in their present poverty, in the nobility of their darker skins” (67). As he discovers that little is to be cherished – a modernization that takes place in a misconstrued imitation of Western political ideals, neocolonial aspirations, fallen governments – he grows irremediably alienated: “I had to remind myself that these were people who sentenced their opponents to one hundred and fifty years in jail, who made them walk barefoot on broken glass, and who pushed garden hoses up their arses and turned the tap on” (195).

Differing the meaning of place for him is an act of insistence on the relations of difference between him and his “Others” – a strategic position in which his resisting silence acts both as an enforced separation both from Africa and from Europe and as a means to recuperate both. An agent in Gurnah’s process of representation, his Orientalist clichés, like the clichés employed by Salih’s Mustafa, are a textual operation for a different way of theorizing identity, one that reconfirms the belief that in exile, one is hardly ever in control; there is an un-classic feeling about Gurnah’s characters, about how they know their longings and their desires but about how they are never at ease. Thus, they live in a constantly foreign present where “the past is home, albeit a lost home, in a lost city, in the midst of lost time” (Rushdie 429), and speak of unhomely places, anxious and contradictory, showing their condemnation of a postmodernity that is still fueled by racial tensions. It is precisely because of that that ‘admiring silence’ carries within itself an ambiguous quality, its meaning being as provocative as it is evocative. Is it his silence, like Pocahontas’ silence, that admires something, thus continually provoking the other to a dispute? Or is he evoking silence, succumbing to forces that outlive and overcome him? His resolution to take a course in plumbing, following his multiples divorces, from Emma, from his African family, from his intellectual quest, becomes his only *raison-d’être*: he knows the meaning of silences and the danger of words, and he chooses to remain the outsider and the skeptic with respect to all orthodoxies of the world, Eastern and Western. Plumbing is the metaphor for an awkward triumph in his race to challenge imperial narratives. Together with his indecision to engage in another romantic experience, plumbing is more than a comical effect of the novel; it is part of his existentialist aesthetics in an obstinate wish for renewal, of the methodological moment of his dialectical reason, announcing that his becoming is not over.

Toward the end of the novel, his character confesses: “It wasn’t home anymore and I had no way of retrieving that seductive idea except through more lies” (217). Lying and silence reveal now their full and corresponding meanings as both subterfuge and defense mechanism that inscribe and

then un-inscribe him into the epistemological sphere. Refusing to lie to himself, he stands alone, removed from the dialectical possibility that would enable him to produce further statements on cultural ethics or to participate in political acts. And the solution for him is to suspend all romance and intellectual pretense, engaging instead in practicality. His voyage back to England happens naturally then, apparently dictated by his blind love for Emma and by the intolerable desolation of his country, but it is a voyage that speaks only of the permanence of his multiple losses. The Indian exile he meets on the plane offers him a first transnational consolation: “Even after all these years,” Ira says, “I can’t get over the feeling of being alien in England, of being a foreigner. Sometimes I think that what I feel for England is disappointed love” (205). His separation from Emma and his ultimately genuine love for her represent the articulation of Ira’s belief upon his own life, and eventually, an act of awakening.

*Admiring Silence* proves to be a novel about the knowledge Gurnah’s hero gets and about how he uses that knowledge to come to terms with his diasporic condition; thus the novel closes in a circular fashion, the contemplation of silence at the beginning and at the end remaining the central theme and the novel’s most commanding principle. Opening sentence: “I have found myself leaning heavily on this pain. At first I tried to silence it. . . .” Final paragraph: “So now I sit here, with the phone in my lap. . . . But I am so afraid of disturbing this fragile silence” (217). In a novel where ‘silence’ is metaphor and dialectical tool, this enigmatic ending suggests the natural predicament in which Gurnah’s character dwells – his need to continue to work through a complicated set of attachments and his emergence as a modern African man. Gurnah’s hero is a peculiar figure of colonial resistance, with little to possess and with no triumphant ideology or nationalism. No wonder then that if his narrative deals with his search for a position, it also ends with his inability to find an adequate one. Yet, what Gurnah brings to light through this character’s lack of cosmic optimism is precisely the need for us to see the world as irrational, a place full of folly and aggression, and not a well-ordered and philosophical community. As such, his own

morality, emerging from his attention to historical-geographical process and from his ethical involvement with others, must be seen as a way to counteract a world of violence in the name of human progress.

Gurnah's novel suggests that optimistic or pessimistic, participating in the interaction between East and West is the only way to become aware of the inexorable confluence of centrist and peripheral experiences, but to do so, one must have a mind of winter and learn how to treat place dispassionately. In this respect, it is important to mention that, while Gurnah's protagonist deals with the difficulty of arriving at this condition, Gurnah himself emerges as a true intellectual, a proponent of Heidegger's existential analytic. An author who is often labeled as African, more often as British-African, and sometimes as British of African descent, Gurnah inhabits the uneasy space of transnational/diasporic writing, unwilling and unable to disengage from the cultural work that fiction writing entails. Invested in narrative processes and in the complexities of literary heritage, he intends all the while to show his firm attachment to his history and social circumstances, profoundly conditioned by the flux of colonial, postcolonial, and imperial events that define him and those around him.

Bill Ashcroft and other postcolonial critics have argued that the renewed relationship between local cultures and global forces marks the transition of the postcolonial critique from the colonies into the metropolitan centers. As the interstice between divergent cultural forces, the metropole is, for Gurnah and other twenty-first century transnational writers, an ideological space where cultural critique becomes possible, where cultural critique is, in fact, the only measure of literary prose. The attachment of the transnational writer to the disturbed psyche of the exiled subject helps understand postcolonial writing as continuous aesthetic revisions of the unhomey moments of national and cultural dislocation. It is for the reason that the narrator of *Admiring Silence* finds both distress and consolation in his condition, looming out of the pain of his exile with a narrative that is acquiescent, albeit antagonistic and fatalistic. As such, the frontmatter of

transnational writing appears as an insistence on the continuity of imperial arrogance and on the perverted nature of the privileged children of the empire, and as a perennial study of the relationship between the novel's subject and his home/homeland, a relationship in which the notion of place, and especially place in the development of an exilic individual plays a crucial role. Given these tendencies, the metropole remains a nervous condition despite the promises it entails, and exile – its vital concept – an abiding desultory realm.

Like in many other African literary works, the dynamics between center and periphery is used to make sense of the historical processes that take place pre- or post- independence. In all of them, the transnational experience is an essential act, the center that many fictional heroes visit representing an impasse, and sometimes, an occasion to speak. In another one of his stories about the intricate relationship between the human nature and its cultural environment, Gurnah understands his aesthetic responsibility as a duty to untangle the complicated history that haunts and conditions every human story. In *By the Sea*, his fondness for the filigrees of history becomes a central thematic element in the novel, a motif exposing his interest in narratives. Thus, the multiple digressions and interruptions in the novel together with a character configuration around the notion of storytelling are quintessential in the development of his cultural critique: history is understood only through family histories of betrayal, self-indulgence, self-preservation, love, and hatred, juxtaposed over national and international narratives of shifting allegiances and institutional provisions. Like Nadine Gordimer in *My Son's Story*, Gurnah is fond of depicting a postcolonial home where the entire world creeps in, disrupting the familial space, enforcing their accommodation into each other. In Bhabha's vision, the deep stirring of the unhomely is a moment of "incredulous terror" for the postcolonial subject, dictated by the conditions of cultural displacement in the face of imperial attitudes and disjunctions. This moment is not a sortie but an entering of the entire world into the domestic space, unsettling the lives of ordinary people, transforming their stories into international sagas of ethical and social transformations.

Using exile as metaphor for creating fiction, Gurnah actualizes his concerns into a textual self-awareness both at the diagetetic level (the narrator as a storyteller playing with retarding narrative elements) and at the extradiagetetic one, through the reader's recognition of historical realities and aesthetic concerns of the novel. The complexity between the story told and storytelling – between the narrator as a self-loved Narcissus and the author and reader as his “resonabilis Echo,” between the novel's traditional definition as a bourgeois narrative and the new novel's parodic intent – are dominant features of postmodern fiction; more importantly in this case, however, these concerns point to a renewed identity of the postcolonial novel, grounding it firmly as a text that follows the natural flow of literary production. A narrator of introspective orientation and positive pessimism urges us to make sense both of the chaos of his experience but also of the chaos of all experience; faced with his own freedom and responsibility, he is useful in our questioning of the novel's ability to produce ‘real’ order, reconfirming that it is artistic production that ultimately reveals the world, the bond between metaphysics and arts attempting to fulfill, as the existentialists were hoping, its role to introduce meaningful order to the world.

Chapter Three

**The I and the Other. Ethics of Recognition in**

**Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy***

All men's miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room  
alone. Blaise Pascal

*Monday*

Me.

*Tuesday*

Me.

*Thursday*

Me.

*Friday*

Witold Gombrowicz

To be weak is miserable.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Originally serialized in The New Yorker before being published in full form in 1990, *Lucy* is  
Jamaica Kincaid's effort to work through what Gary Holcomb has called "the empowering paradox  
of diaspora" – using the tropes of traversing within the burgeoning climate of modern

multiculturalism in the US to attempt a reconstruction of the self for a postcolonial female subject. Seen in relation to its author, the novel is often discussed as semi-autobiography, Kincaid borrowing and altering various aspects of her life in Antigua and the US. When treated in relation to Kincaid's other works, *Lucy* is often compared to the author's first novel, *Annie John* (1985), where the author focuses on the education of a much younger girl, with the plot set in the former British colony of Antigua, and with only a hint of Annie's final relocation to England where she will study to become a nurse. When treated in theoretical isolation, *Lucy* is hailed as the ideal metropolitan feminist text or as a compelling discourse on black diaspora, for having thrown a young, black Antiguan, into the midst of a racialized 1960s U.S.

Ultimately, the novel presents us with a concept of identity that has deep roots in Romanticism – an ideal of authenticity that celebrates the individual over society or collective identity. Kincaid sublimates this ideal by premising it on questions of recognition as part of the larger ethics of authenticity, one that involves claims about theoretical and political superiority of the feminist postcolonial perspective. One can use the interactions in the text, visible, subtextual, or implied, as narrated in the first person by Lucy herself, to discuss the importance of positing a postcolonial individual against cultural and national discourses through the negative dialectics involved in Lucy's immanent critique, and to answer the question about the importance or the risks in assuming superiority in relation to subalternist perspectives. In narrating the story of her traversing, insisting on the material and subjective conditions involved in that process, Lucy becomes one of the multiple voices and sources that can represent the story of the nation-state under and after-colonialism, and her need to establish her authenticity in the multicultural space of 1960s U.S. is of particular importance. At the same time, her radical claims to authenticity within the field of political action raise questions about the risks involved in authenticity, specifically in seeing the *I* as necessarily set against the Other, never the *I as the Other*. Questions of not mere argument with or sympathy for the other, but of taking into account the more complex conception



of the *ethics* of the other complicates Lucy's vision of an immanent critique that can only turn into a bellicose form of action. Thus what Kincaid's text shows us through Lucy's condition is that the dialectic of the colonized mind – the obsession with the white Other - is an impasse that needs to be overcome, just as much as the white metropolitan subject needs to revise his or her imperial attitude towards the exotic other.

Kincaid is known to reject excessively theorized approaches in connection to her work – of *Annie John*, she often claims that the central feminist theme is not lesbian relationships between Annie and her female friends, but rather universal “practicing relationships” of growing and learning; of *Lucy*, she argues that the book is not about racial relationships, but about finding one's place in the world. This “aloofness vis-à-vis the rich theoretical, critical, and literary movements established by black women writers” as Holcomb noted, points towards Kincaid's mistrust of circumscribed theoretical investigations and of taxonomy in general, and raises several questions on its own, along with questions about how we should understand her work, in this case *Lucy*, twenty five years after it was produced. The different and often conflicting theoretical crossings that the novel clearly invites are made evident by the shaping force that Kincaid exerts on her material, with West Indian postcolonial concerns and feminist concerns mixing together under what Kincaid elsewhere evokes “the human experience” through the concept of transnational subjectivity. Despite claims that the novel fits neatly into the genre of travel literature, it is Kincaid's own admission that ultimately she is not interested in travel per se but in the more complicated business of relocating, in the very concept of *living among other people* in order to get different ideas about the world (*Among the Flowers*). The novel challenges our different conceptions of recognition of authenticity and authority, and as such it enters the discourse of global ethics, addressing in particular what philosopher Anthony Kwame Appiah called a global need for a politics that asks us to acknowledge *socially* and *politically* the authentic identities of others within a multicultural chorus (*Identity*).

Given this reinforced admission, what would best bring the paradox of diaspora back into discourse while also untangling Kincaid's defense of "the human experience" in relation to transnational subjectivity – both of which issue from a strictly theoretical lexicon – is an interpretation of *Lucy* within the context of cosmopolitan ethics. With its focus on the politics of *difference* and *concern* based on international basis as opposed to the politics of difference based on internal divisions, as Martha Nussbaum noticed, *cosmopolitan ethics*– the ethics of the other – revives the old Hegelian concept of recognition *as such* (*an sich*), which renders self-consciousness in necessary opposition to the universalizing category of class or the new social movements that rally around religion, ethnicity, race, gender, or ecology (Hanssen 128). Hegel's concept was later adopted by the Antillean postcolonial critic and activist Franz Fanon as *actional agency* in the name of universal humanism, which Beatrice Hanssen best defined as a positing of values made possible by taking up a contradictory position, answering the *white other* with both a *yes* and a *no* (149). Although only partially applicable here, because Lucy answers with a *yes* and a *no* to everything and everybody, this notion is still central to Kincaid's novel: Lucy's struggle for recognition often results, as will be seen, in a contradictory logic, a double, alogical position with respect to others, which complicates the notion of living among other people in order to understand them, complicating therefore the entire notion of political action through cosmopolitanism. Lucy shows us just how difficult it is to recognize the other both through her philosophical reflections on misrecognition – the bias that comes with the others imagining her, let alone recognizing her *as such* – and with her own ethical actions with respect to others, in particular her mother and Mariah. Seen in relation to them, Lucy takes up actions that prompt her both to embrace cultural and national affiliations while in exile, and to detach herself from them, to reconstruct her identity apart from everything else.

*Lucy* was written at a time when debates about multiculturalism were just beginning to take shape, and it reflects a historical period in the U.S that has always been multicultural, albeit always

obscured as such. Kincaid was right to notice in the 1990s, when the book was written, that the best way to describe the identities of that decade and more largely of the entire twentieth century was, as Ania Loomba suggests, in terms of transnational networks, while keeping a focus on the center-margin dichotomy of the imperial project. That Lucy originates from a small island and becomes an au-pair for a wealthy metropolitan family is one of the first complications that the text offers through its deconstruction of domestic life and the summoning of hegemonic figures in order to test the possibilities for the disruption of authoritarian discourses. Lucy's choices – to leave her native home and family and never to return, to remain in the racially fraught culture of the 1960s New York, pursuing a dream of writing and living independently, embracing a life of adventure, sexual freedom, blatant sincerity about her difference from others – are hardly deliberative choices of culture. They are part of Kincaid's effort to produce immanent critique by using the voice an unaccommodated, youthful, black, immigrant *other* in order to produce emancipatory change.

Lucy neither chooses to move to New York nor does she have a choice of exit, or return. She leaves home at her mother's command and arrives in an American metropolitan center, seemingly New York's Manhattan, where she spends some time as an au pair, before breaking away from both home and her job in order to embark on a journey as an independent woman and writer. The journey away from home and into the unfamiliar space is contingent on a string of challenges and obstacles, confrontations with powers of good and evil that turn into lessons learned, expiations, and epiphanies. Lucy arrives in a big, cold, and unforgiving city, which she describes in Dante-esque metaphors as cold and icy, "a frozen hell." In many critical responses to the novel, this hellish diasporic location has been interpreted as the immediate opposite of the hot and tropical island left behind, with images of exile competing against images of home: "I was no longer in a tropical scene and this realization now entered my life like a flow of water dividing formerly dry and solid ground, creating two blanks...past and future" (5-6). Critic Jana Evans Braziel, in particular, remarks on Kincaid's use of dichotomized spatiotemporal parameters, with

Antigua as past motherland and New York as surrogate future. From these introductory pages, Lucy seems to have left one hell for another, and her sense of defeat seems absolute.

Against a backdrop of expatriation and loss of identity, the novel deals with the feminist universal of metamorphosis into womanhood and the achievement of desire. Throughout the novel, Lucy journeys towards a kind of freedom that she conceives as absolute, defining herself through different acts of repudiation – ideological, intellectual, and physical – against all forms of authority imposed by kinship, by trade, and by cultural belonging. The battle of recognition that Lucy leads is against the rest of the world, both against the *white other* but also against her own mother, both against the West's misrecognition of the cultural *other* and against her own culture's internal divisions, both against the female identity and the male form of dominance. In order to achieve an *Ideal I*, Lucy can only "go on alone." But, as Appiah warns, Lucy will have to recognize that "the rhetoric of authenticity proposes not only that I have a way of being that is all my own, but that in developing it I must fight against the family, organized religion, society, the school, the state – all the forces of convention" ( 154).

In deploying her authenticity and in developing a sense of authority, Lucy brings with her the contradictory logic of the former colonial subject in the battle of recognition in a metropolitan center, and in this context she attempts to acquire and manifest her agency through individual choices, a self-made sense of duty, and a ravenous expression of desires, all the while showing how hard it is for a young, black, female exile to move beyond a form of competition with the other that doesn't also involve co-operation. With an identity established by historical knowledge – Lucy's understanding of her colonial past and of the trauma of slavery, her effort to follow those traces from the past and to represent them in the present – and disciplined by a fledgling philosophical reflection, Lucy is born out of Kincaid's desire to rescue both a cultural identity and an individual one, to keep them both together and separate through an exaltation of the exilic female artist. Kincaid re-engages our longstanding fascination with the idea of Evil in literature, evoking as she

does Milton's *Paradise Lost* and in particular Satan's manic will to reinvent himself and to remain autonomous in the face of God's omnipotence. What Kincaid shares with Milton is the idea of human authority – the belief in the perpetuation of chaos until a greater man arrives, the poet who leaves the question of God secondary to human endeavor and potential. What Kincaid leaves out in her postcolonial adaptation of Milton's theological text is that Satan in his arousal, and then in his fall, never succeeded in supplanting God, his role being that of "poetic force" alone. Lucy appears to us in Satan's image as temporary, propagandistic, and therefore transcendental evil. As such Kincaid may call on us to develop a clear-headed sympathy for Satan, and subsequently for Lucy herself, both of them claiming to be what the circumstances made them.

This notion of autonomy thus involves an act not only of courage but of conquest too, for she sees herself as servant, threatened with objectification. Lucy's most important gesture of repudiation is against her own mother, and against motherhood in general, and in particular against a type of motherhood that Lucy sees as hegemonic over the child. But Lucy's unusual preoccupation with her mother is a sign that the identities of Lucy and her mother will be bound together forever. In post-colonial terms, this preoccupation bears traces of a larger anti-colonial attitude: Lucy identifies an important aspect of colonial legacy in her mother, who is inescapably dominated by notions of servitude and patriarchal authority. As Giselle Anatol remarks, "African-Caribbean women in particular must reconcile themselves with a maternal role that is not only affected by the legacies of colonialism, including the metaphor of the "mother country," but is also intricately bound up in the violence and dehumanization of enslavement" (938). Lucy tries to set herself free from the burden of servitude as she sees it inflicted on her by her mother and arrives at an ontological openness premised on the notion of absolute freedom from all centers of power as can be seen in her dismissal of anyone who doesn't pose an equal challenge. As she confesses, "I was not good at taking orders, not good at waiting on other people" (92). Up until the end of the novel, the one who can pose an equal challenge to Lucy does not make a presence. However, in

Anatol's view, Kincaid wants to stress out the bonds of gender rather than those of blood and that is often made obvious by the complexity of the relationship between mother and daughter in the novel, and later on by the equally complex relationship that Lucy develops with Mariah, Lucy's white, metropolitan host.

Lucy acts out of an impulse to discipline Mariah, to correct her erroneous views of the world, views that Lucy sees as being formed ideologically from a cultural imperialist stance, while Mariah remains a naive cosmopolitan, if only by the mere fact that she lives in a metropolitan city, that she can afford to hire Lucy as an au-pair, and that she is free to travel anywhere she pleases. In this sense, there is no stronger example than Lucy of the contradictions at the heart of cosmopolitanism. Kincaid creates a complex antagonism between Lucy and Mariah, each being a special kind of cosmopolitan, each bringing into play her concrete particularisms, differences, asymmetries, all of which reflect different kinds of "good" and which raise a question about the relationship between universal, ethical, cultural, or legal recognition of others and the respect for particularized others. In the chapter titled "Mariah," Lucy sees daffodils for the first time, an image that carries within itself both the colonial burden that Lucy feels and the actional agency through resentment that results from it. She bitterly tells Mariah that she had to read Wordsworth without ever seeing a daffodil and after Maria exclaims: "What a history you have!" Lucy's wry, incomprehensible retort is: "You are welcome to it if you like" (19). It is no longer the mere story, nor the history, but Mariah's own reaction that anger Lucy – Mariah's lack of historical perspective, her miscomprehension and perplexity at such menial past. Because Mariah fails to understand, Lucy fails to bring in a more positive attitude, to establish the type of dialogue that would resolve the conflict among their values. Failing to establish a more adequate dialogue with Mariah, and to suspect the need to achieve an equal set of values and claims with her, Lucy starts from the claim that she is self-fashioned, yet with a unique, unrepeatably history, one that Mariah, and by extension the West, fail to recognize. But as Appiah argues, prospects of peace must rely on

moral disagreements through a type of dialogue that is conversational rather than didactic, seemingly mild mannered even as it is radical.

Using her 'knowledge' of her mother, Lucy develops the same intense relationships with Mariah and revolts again against what she sees as her pernicious naivety towards the world, and in particular towards patriarchal relationships. Mariah, who is the mother of three young children and the wife of a husband who will soon abandon her for her best friend, is presented as a beautiful and friendly cosmopolitan who is not aware or not interested in her own position in society. "How do you get to be that way" is Lucy's constant, nagging question, a sign that she is concerned with the process of *becoming* but also a sign that she is unable to read through Mariah's particularisms, her plain pleasantness or her positive nature. "My thoughts, naturally, centered on myself" (26) is a clear echo of Lucy's precarious concern with her *self*, her need to tell Mariah stories about her island home, yet unable to transform Mariah's own naïve kindness into something good, seeing her concern and her kindness only as an extension of Maria's comfortable circumstances, never as her manifestation of the plurality of our affiliations.

Throughout the novel, Lucy oscillates between love towards a true Mariah and between hate towards a fake, ignorant Mariah. But her oscillations are almost never utterances. They are suffused, angry reactions such as when she catches Mariah in an attempt to bond by claiming that she has Indian blood in her, an attempt that Lucy can only see as Maria's announcement of possession of a trophy (39-40). The wordless communication, as Giselle Anatol observes, is often a metaphor that Kincaid uses in an attempt to erase the power dynamic of servant girl-mistress, the same way the face-to-face encounter between Lucy and Mariah works to reveal the traumatic experience of the metropolitan center: Mariah as the white other who in Fanonian terms always, indisputably, *names* Lucy's *difference*, leading "to the fragmentation of the body image, lending a new meaning to the aggression inherent in the Hegelian battle for recognition" (Hanssen 146). But does that alone work with respect to the core philosophy that Kincaid is after, which is a true

humanism? In Lucy's forceful indictment of Western imperialism, can Mariah mean more than that, or can she only be rarified, turned into an abstract alterity, only as the victor "who can claim to be the vanquished also?" (40). Does she ever deserve to be acknowledged, even respected as a particularized other?

Lucy's ethical and aesthetic ideals point toward Kincaid's vision for multiculturalism in the specific context of the 1960s U.S., a model that ultimately carries within itself a larger liberal narrative, a probe into the conditions of possibility for ethics and moral law in our own multicultural condition. If she is positioned inside the politics of recognition, Lucy oscillates between two levels of originality or authenticity: one is that she is an individual person among other persons, in this case far away from home and at the heart of an imperial nation, and the other is that she is seeking recognition from a collective identity, the white culture of New York or her own local affiliations which she leaves behind. She fails to see herself as dialogically constituted and thus seems unprepared or not ready to see the complex value of recognition. If taken under this claim, Kincaid does not offer us a perfect model of cosmopolitan ethics. This is in large part because of the bildungsroman genre which she chooses to embrace, in particular through its two central elements, one being the motif of the journey into an unknown space of a young, sober, romantic youth, and the other being the ethical transit as its most defining moment. As the bildungsroman focuses on a character with an embittered heart and disgust with the world, the relationship between the world and the character is of utmost importance. As mentioned before, in its applications, the struggle for recognition for a marginalized subject always results in violent logic. Lucy, the main protagonist of the novel, is Kincaid's invention of a character devoted to Evil, but what kind of evil she embraces and under what principles remains an unanswered question, despite and perhaps against the fact that the novel has been constantly positioned under the concept of an exalted idealism or healthy iconoclasm. According to Gary Holcomb, to get where she wants to be, Lucy takes on primarily a form of strategic essentialism – she embraces her "slut" identity as



a radical way of “capsizing the hierarchies of subject agency” and of negotiating “the borders of transnational identity and thereby taking part in a counterculture of modernity” (Holcomb 3). Thus Evil is not used as an end in itself, but rather as a way of leaving a state in inactivity; Evil for Lucy is *elan*, an intrinsic part of what Edward Said called ethical transition enabled by exile. Evil in this novel is constantly seen by contemporary critics as Lucy’s ambition and ability to define herself always against others, both strangers and familial figures like her mother, defining herself tautologically but on her own terms alone. Admired much for her struggle to narrate her own self, Lucy attempts to show that evil is essential in the building of a moral character; it is the middle passage in what she might see either a final exercise of responsibility, or mere authenticity recognized existentially.

But what is more than that in Lucy’s actional agency is an exaltation of Evil at the level of hypermorality, as seen in her relation to Mariah. In this respect, literary critic Terry Eagleton is useful, warning that most of us think that a world without evil would be too bland, thus powerless to provoke us into virtuous action and that wickedness is essential in shaping a truly moral behavior (Eagleton 133). Lucy starts from exactly such a view that evil is a necessary event in the path of absolute freedom. In her embrace of Satanic pride, Lucy emerges as a character carefully delineated to despise the world and to live outside of it, a character who sees herself closer to evil than to good, a character who takes cues in her self-fashioning from herself only, much like Satan who fashioned himself against “God, nature, human kinship, or objective value” (Eagleton 85), despite the fact that his self-fashioning depended on them all. Lucy believes that she is the only one living in a real world, her giving up of not only local affiliations, but all affiliations. Frustrated by the demands of social life and desperate to arrive at a recognition of her own self, Lucy takes on a form of existence that is meant to disturb us all, to an extent much like Lionel Trilling’s scholar gypsy, whose role was to “make us dissatisfied with our habitual life in culture” (qtd in Appiah 153).

The empowering paradox of diaspora that is at the center of Holcomb's critique of the novel is premised on two important factors in the constitution of diasporic identity – one is the loss and remembering of home, the familiar space that once constituted the exile's entire identity; the other is the potential contained in the notion of displacement, the exile's access to reconfiguring his or her future by facing and attempting to overcome the multiple obstacles imposed by the translocation from one nation to another. In weaving together these conflicting ideas, Kincaid attempts to suggest not only that writing in displacement is an empowering tool for all those caught up in the diasporic tumult, but that the artist is an Ideal I who can produce real order. This is seen in Lucy's condition of 'artist-in-waiting' in the metropolitan center, her realization of self-rebirth as validated by a movement across space, confirming that exile is a rejuvenating force. Exile is presented as the place where dichotomized spatial parameters carry within themselves the power to dichotomize temporal parameters as well, a form of total banishment that marks Lucy's entrance into womanhood and her birth as a writer.

The importance of the act of writing precedes the many other possible readings of the novel, its metafictional quality resting against postcolonial, feminist, and all other possible interpretations of the novel. Towards the middle of her narrative, Lucy echoes Virginia Woolf's feminist classic about gender, space, and identity – a room of her own:

From where I stood at the window, I could see into the apartment across the way  
[...] Now it was empty of people. I could see a sofa, two chairs, and a wall of books.  
How luxurious, I thought, to have an empty room in your house, a room that nobody  
needed. And isn't that what everyone in the world should have – more than was  
needed, one more room than you really need in your house? 86-7

Lucy's initial sense of loss and deterritorialization is closely linked to her strong impulse for artistic creation: the room she doesn't have but which she will have by the end of the novel, the empty notebook, and primarily the authority invoked in the narrative voice, can be used to argue that a

more precise term for the novel's genre is not Bildungsroman but its subspecies, the Künstlerroman, which traces the intellectual and moral awakening of a protagonist who pursues ambitions as an artist. *Lucy*, in fact, is often described as the feminist counterpart of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as the artist's formation in both novels takes place through a process of questioning and revolt against the bourgeois order of their respective times. Thus, like other coming-of-age novels that project a first person narrator, *Lucy* is grounded in metafiction, and implicitly in the poststructuralist relationship between being and writing. In piecing together her story, Lucy seems guided mainly by an interest in the art of writing and in the principles of textual production – her story told in the past tense, symbolic of her desire to gain freedom from the past, her quarrel with the epistolary genre, anxiously cherishing the letters her mother sends, hiding them in her brassiere until she burns and destroys them forever, and her tight embrace of the notebook in the end, symbolic on its own of the complicity between the colonized and the colonizer. What matters is her climb up the artistic ladder of her metropolitan new home. The paradox of this textual metafiction is that Lucy's narrative exists in total dependence with her ontogenesis, and in opposition with her absent text. In the concluding image of the novel, Lucy embraces the notebook that Mariah gave her as present and sits down to write her story, a story we are still waiting to hear:

When I got into the bed, I lay there with the light on for a long time doing nothing. Then I saw the book Mariah had given me. It was on the night table next to my bed. Beside it lay my fountain pen full of beautiful blue ink. At the top of the page I write my full name: Lucy Josephine Potter. At the sight of it, many thoughts rushed through me, but I could write down only this: "I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it." And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept and wept so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great blur. 163-4

The shame, the tears, and the great blur on the page mix together to form a paradox that Kincaid often chooses to narrate. Lucy's narcissistic and confessional mode references the profound problem of language and writing: the text writes itself (has already written itself) as seen by the past tense of the action and simultaneously, it invokes Jacques Derrida's *différance* – a notion commanded by Lucy's final revelation that words can never fully summon forth her emotions nor invite gestures that she painfully desires. Lucy's youthful anxiety and her unresolved contrary logic stem in part from the fact that she hasn't yet learnt the art of sitting in a quiet room alone. Her story is meant to remind us that writing and reading are both ethical practices and solitary acts, and in order to complete the self, one has to turn inward rather than looking outward only, one has to be gregarious and social, but also a solitary.

Written as memoir of things past and of things lost, Lucy's narrative speaks of her determination to be/come a writer. A symbol of her aesthetic subjectivity, the past tense also speaks of renewal, articulating Lucy as a native female subject with a voice to be heard during the age of imperialism. While the postponing of writing is a paradox that can be read as negation and impossibility, therefore as exclusion of the native female by the epistemic violence of the imperialist discourse, it can also be interpreted as a feature of the learning and growing process that Kincaid tries to give voice to, an essential element in one's appropriation of freedom, in particular the freedom that Spivak denies the historically-muted native subject, the non-elite or subaltern woman. Kincaid's attraction to the native subject's position in the context of imperialist and hegemonic discourses establishes *Lucy* as an interventionist possibility in line with what Benita Parry calls a deconstructive strategy devised by the post-colonial intellectual. In criticizing Spivak's approach to the subaltern voice, especially her argument that imperialism inflicts an absolute epistemic violence over the native voice, Parry reads the inscription of the speaking native self as disrupting the linguistic aggression of imperialist discourses and not as Spivak argues, setting its limits. In the same vein, Kincaid inscribes the native, female, individual self who "defies

the discriminatory discourses impinging on her person” (Parry 47) and asserts herself as articulate antagonist to patriarchal, imperialist law.

The synergetic aspect of transculturation – the positive and energetic aspect of the process of transculturation in which two or more equal but different forces contribute to the formation of a new and complex subject – finds materialization in the immediate and palpable context in which Lucy’s character operates. Lucy can attain her freedom only by transcending place, and acting alone and devious, like Wordsworth’s schoolboy recluse who, coming from afar on Nature’s invitation, had a fancy “that the lot of others could be his.../here must be his home” (18-46). This freedom is enabled by Lucy’s crossings of borders, of her relocation from an old homeland to a new one. Of special importance here is the nature of the new homeland as a space unburdened by the history of colonialism that Lucy still carries with her. The novel invites ways of thinking about migration and exile through the materiality of Lucy’s immigrant conditions and also through Kincaid’s imagining of the American land as the Promised Land. Unlike Annie John, Lucy relocates in the American diaspora, a place that exists outside the imperial sphere involving Antigua as a former British colony, suggesting that the absence of colonial guilt and responsibility provides an alternative postcolonial vision of identity and power. Here, the feminist theory and postcolonial theory overlap as they appear to be “occupied with similar questions of representation, voice, marginalization, and the relation between politics and literature” (Bahri 201). Kincaid complicates the key concept of representation arising from feminist perspectives in postcolonial studies by indicating that Lucy’s presence in the American metropolis is sufficient onto its own, not requiring what Spivak calls congressional protection as the typical mode of representation in the US, but acting rather as *portrait*. In Spivak’s contention, the two modes of representation, *Vetretung* (political representation) and *Darstellung* (from *stellen*, to place) (qtd in Bahri 204) are made obvious by Lucy’s subject position, deconstructing her gender and race both from a biological point of view and from a socially and culturally constructed perspective.

Lucy uses her marginal subjectivity – her status as au pair – to enter the domestic domain of the metropolitan family and to make claims to universal authenticity – that is, to speak not from daughter to mother, not from woman to man, not from colonized to colonizer, not from the local to the global, but in decrying such dichotomies, from a multicultural “lived experience.” This effort at an alternative construction of identity in which the feminist ideal of transnational feminist activism, advocated by some feminist postcolonial critics such as Chandra Mohanti and Cynthia Enloe, materializes under Lucy’s need to read sameness and difference on a global scale. Lucy relies entirely on representing herself and placing herself not as the Caribbean Third World Woman, the dutiful other, as in most Western representations of the Creole woman, but as *herself*, embracing the subjectivity attached to her writing without overtly broaching the question of race. This makes up the notion of radical gesture as central to Kincaid’s text. And yet, Lucy’s inability to read Mariah in the same way, her inability to initiate her rational life through dialogue with Mariah, marks her as an unhappy Bildung whose transition from self-formation and self-expression to a positive sense of self-enjoyment (as the main characteristic of the Bildungsroman genre) is deterred.

The intricate question of Lucy’s “slut identity” embraced as a methodological tool in her achievement of freedom from homeland, mother, and in fact anything that comes against her ambitious self, must be accompanied, if not preceded, by the question of Lucy’s state of existence, the cultural and historical conditions that enable that methodology and invite its consequences. One way to understand the corollary of elements that constitute Lucy’s exilic condition is through another loan from Europe, this time the strategic concept of the nomad, which was particularly inscribed in Western postmodernism as the migrant who most effectively resists the controlling institutions of the state. Although Lucy’s attention is not directed towards any state institution but rather on the more bottom up institutions of matriarchy and patriarchy in her immediate surroundings, Kincaid must be seen here working with idea that one of the most productive forms

of cultural identity is nomadism, especially through what Robert Young identifies as “the creative performative of identity derived from the physical affiliations of family and place” (53).

A distinction needs to be made between different forms of nomadism, between the immemorial and practical nomadism of people such as the African cattle herders, the unfêted nomadism of refugees and asylum seekers, and the celebrated nomadism of cosmopolitan intellectualism that Lucy aims to attain, with an attitude of victory against the vicissitudes of leaving behind a beleaguered homeland. Nomadism, celebrated or decried, is the permanent state of migrancy created by landlessness – leaving one’s settlement behind because of political violence or otherwise, and as a result, becoming permanently alienated from it. With no possibility to return, and crucially with no definite desire to return, Lucy is deployed as a disillusioned fugitive in the same vein as Gurnah’s narrator in *Admiring Silence* or Hector Tobar’s Antonio in *The Tattooed Soldier*. As a disillusioned fugitive, Lucy sees her future lying only in her unsentimental view of place and the people who occupy it. From a postcolonial perspective, nomadism is politically charged, conditioned by the migrant’s culture, often in the face of imperialism. Deleuze and Guattari have argued that the idea of nomadism “can be extended to include all forms of cultural and political activity that transgress or dissolve the boundaries of contemporary social codes (qtd in Young 52). Thus nomads can operate “as lateral resistance across borders in acts of defiance of assertions of hegemonic control” (53). This positivist view that is a fundamental part of postcolonial justice poses two problems: one is the question of resistance since for many nomads – the gypsies in Europe, for example – justice and egalitarianism are as remote as they were two centuries ago; the other problem emerges out of Lucy’s power to celebrate her migratory exilic identity as she understands it to be rooted in colonial violence.

In recent revisions of the term, exile has been defined as the human condition that involves “the idea of a separation either from a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin” (Ashcroft et al. 86). In Ashcroft’s view, this fundamental idea is built upon two significant notions:

one is the old distinction between exile as involuntary constraint and expatriation as voluntary act or state, a distinction that Andrew Gurr made in the early 1980s and on which Ashcroft invites revision; and the other is the complex set of relationships between exile and colonialism, in particular the renewed claim that exile is/has remained a characteristic of colonial conditions and more often than not “a deliberate feature of colonial practice” (Ashcroft et al. 87). As Lucy breaks away and refuses to return home, the reader is invited to think about a form of exile that becomes expatriation, and about exile and expatriation becoming one under the aura of what Anatol calls “the false opposition between home and exile.” Lucy’s story addresses the conditions and the realities of her exile, and the message here seems to be that for Lucy exile starts as banishment and it ends as escape and freedom. The material implications of Lucy’s departure may point toward the fact that it is commanded not only by her mother’s isolated desire but also by the culture to which Lucy belongs, where colonial legacy is still at work. This, Lucy observes not only in the world outside her home but inside it as well, as her revolt against her mother is partially grounded in Lucy’s recognition that her mother reinforces the legacy of oppression: she views Lucy as inferior because she is a girl and imposes on her the servitude attached to being an au pair in a white metropolitan household.

And yet, the question remains: how does Lucy invite us to partake in the process of true critical worldliness and in what way, if any, should we be skeptical of her? In the interstice between cultural empowerment and personal desolation, Lucy’s embrace of her slut, nomad identity is her embrace of the satanic condition. In Holcomb’s view, Lucy possesses a body on which is inscribed her deviant morality. This attitude can be seen through what Robert Young calls the language of postcolonial theory, and by extension, of the postcolonial novel: illicit, excessive, salacious, licentious. They exist in Lucy in their most heightened form – fear of mother, anxiety about her place in the world, and the strongest of all, desire to be seen, loved and admired. Her uncanny independence invites a Derridean reading of difference as Lucy, the alien, writes herself in the



blank pages of her notebook and through that epistemological space bridges the gap between “the time of the upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received” (Cohen 4). Lucy’s body is pure culture – in a sense, she exists only to be read, as all monsters, inhabiting the contact zone between the writer and the reader – “that which reveals, that which warns, a glyph that seeks a hierophant” (Cohen 4). The demonic as seen in Salman Rushdie’s and Kincaid’s novels has its roots in Milton’s delineation of a Satan as a professional politician, a propagandist. “He is what the occasion made him,” Balachandra Rajan argues, “an ardent champion of the Rights of Man, therefore able to be generously indignant about the despotic tendencies of governing Heaven” (410). Whereas some critics point out that the function of Milton’s Satan is to point out the weakness of Evil, both Milton and Kincaid use Satan’s invincible monstrosity as poetic intention, to endow them with weapons of reason and right to champion the rights of self, and also under the idea that becoming autonomous can only be meaningful when achieved under the image of the artist as the only Ideal I capable of producing order and emancipation in the modern figure of the immigrant. Unlike Milton, whose Satan is ultimately ontologically substanceless, Kincaid uses him as creative force who rejects absence and negation.

Moreover, as some critics observed, Kincaid’s conceptualizations are “decidedly Caribbeanist” – the diabola/djablesse a metaphor for movement, migration, diaspora, the idea of mobility across space and time, accompanied by the idea of rejuvenation and regeneration. Thus Kincaid’s portrayal of Lucy as Milton’s Lucifer seems almost an accident, aside from Lucy’s memory of being forced to read *Paradise Lost* in colonial Antigua, forced to memorize its incomprehensible lines, the same way she was forced to read Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud,” the daffodils foreign and remote until Lucy finally sees them in another land. Critics of Kincaid also like to point out that like Satan, Lucy determines that it is “better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven,” failing to notice the poem’s next line, “Awake/Arise/ or be for ever fall’n.” Lucy, named after Lucifer ‘himself’ since she was a “botheration” from the moment she

was conceived” (152) is presented as Lucy’s mode of resistance to her mother’s interpretation of the fallen angel, her embracing of a name as an ideological tool in the dynamics of possession and dispossession between her and her mother.

Yet Kincaid writes under the assumption that evil and literature exist in an inseparable bond, each existing for its own sake. As Terry Eagleton argues,

If the artist seeks to redeem a corrupt world by the transfigurative power of his art, then he or she must be on intimate terms with evil. This is why the modern artist is the secular version of Christ, who descends into the hell of despair and destitution in order to gather into eternal life. ... the artist must be on nodding terms with evil because he must treat all experience as grist to the mill of his art, whatever its conventional moral value. This is why, if his work is to flourish, he himself must be a kind of immoralist, reluctantly abandoning all hope of sainthood. The more magnificent the art, the more degenerate the life. 59

However, in traditional definitions, evil is prone to disgust with life and revolted by physical contact, while Lucy embraces her sexuality and her lust for life grows bigger even as she finds revulsion in the identity of others. Operating mainly through gender identity, attempting and succeeding to overstep the boundaries of her imposed gender role, Lucy engages in everything her mother would call slut behavior: she violates sexual taboos (Lucy’s expression of desire to be the one who is fingered by the sexual predator), makes sustained claims to autonomy and sees herself in opposition to everything that surrounds her. Her dream of pure autonomy and her confusion of the moral with the moralistic reinforce what Frederic Jameson called the “archaic categories of good and evil.” Lucy sees herself as a modernist experimental artist – the point at which art ceases to draw its content from the world around it, instead turning in on itself and investigate its own form, taking itself as its subject matter.

Finally, Lucy's disaffiliation attempts are a mark of her age rather than of her postcolonial identity. She is in an ethical transit and carries with herself a cultural burden that complicates her doctrine that she can be a self-created being, a *cause sui*, living apart from others at her convenience. But Lucy's methodology – her insistence that revolt is a property of the human nature and that it has beneficial effects – invites a complex discussion of exile as not only *another* place but as a specific space with specific cultural moments that engender satanic figures who fail to obey naturally but not without consequences. Lucy therefore appears at a time of crisis and of cultural anxiety: a political and ideological difference that was a catalyst to monstrous representation in literature and outside it. Lucy helps us understand the limitations of the Satanic position in literature, and implicitly, the limitations of a literary form in which the hero can only live outside of society, unable to move beyond a state of perpetual revolt.

## Chapter Four

### **Sorrow, Wretchedness, and Evil. Fateful Encounters in**

#### **Hector Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier***

“I think that it's not asking too much to have our little region over there [Latin America] which never has bothered anybody.” Henry Stimson, U.S. Secretary of War, 1945.

“We have created a more humanitarian, less costly strategy, to be more compatible with the democratic system. We instituted civil affairs [in 1982] which provides development for 70 percent of the population, while we kill 30 percent. Before, the strategy was to kill 100%.” General Hector Gramajo regarding Guatemala's civil affairs program during the 1980s. <sup>2</sup>

There is not just signification or interpretation. There is also truth.

Alain Badiou, *L'Être et L'Événement*

Guatemalan-American journalist Hector Tobar published his first novel, *The Tattooed Soldier*, in 1998, setting the story first in Guatemala and then in the metropolitan Los Angeles in the U.S., and situating historical events in 1991, but with many flashbacks into what was then Guatemala's recent past. The marriage between settings and plots in the novel re-inaugurates a central postcolonial notion, that of the contact zone, to use Mary Louise Pratt's term, where the “trajectories” of the “spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures [...] now intersect” (7). Pratt's useful term gets recycled in relation to the

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<sup>2</sup> The first two quotations are taken from Noam Chomsky and Heinz Dietrich, *Latin America*, 1999, p. 9, and p. 51.

importance Tobar attributes to the travel of ideas and authors across regions and cultures as a consequence of recent historical, political, and economic events, and he employs it more specifically in the context of the encounter between the small Latin American country into which he is culturally rooted and the U.S., his birthplace and current home, and which he acknowledges as a global superpower that continues to require our criticism.

Tobar uses his transnational space to provide a criticism of quiet despair, albeit under the sign of literature of possibility, to U.S. imperial practices from 1950 and on that have had a devastating impact on national development projects throughout Central America, and in particular on the indigenous peoples of Guatemala, whose displacement and elimination – as opposed to mere marginalization – are central to his novel. As he deconstructs historical place and time through the interaction of characters of various and often undefined ethnic and cultural distinctions, Tobar reconsiders notions of subalternity and imperialism, and aims to expose the unbreakable chain of violence created in the larger context of globalization in the 20th century, and in particular in Guatemala, which had been dominated, at least up until the time of the book's publication, by U.S. geopolitical hegemony. What, Tobar seems to be asking at the end of the novel, could motivate investment by the U.S., considered by many the world's first truly global power in history, in a small country like Guatemala? And is that a kind of intervention that leads to a cancerous violence eating into every political idea and making recovery impossible? In trying to answer these questions, Tobar's novel represents an ethical model for our willingness to do something about the lure of violence.

*The Tattooed Soldier* often brings to mind Homer's *Iliad*, its plot stretching over a couple of weeks only but flashbacking many events from the past – its wrath, its wounded vanity, the fall and insult of Troy – lending its shape to Tobar's account of the decline of the Guatemalan nation. The gruesome past in Guatemala's history becomes a gripping tale of revenge of two antagonistic characters, war and rage lying at the center of it. Antonio is a quiet, bookish young ladino with

dormant left-wing affiliations, living in Guatemala City and writing for the student newspaper. As a student, he meets Elena, a beautiful young woman, an idealist and romantic political activist, an omnipresent face at political rallies and parties. Forced out of Guatemala City because of her overt activism, they seek refuge in a remote provincial town where they settle into an unnervingly quiet life, Antonio with a government job, and Elena as a restless housewife and new mother. Because of Elena's "voyeuristic impulse" into the poorest corner of the poor town of San Cristóbal where they live – her concern for the lives of others and her desire to chronicle the suffering of ethnic Mayans – they are tracked down by soldiers from the Jaguar Battalion, the handful of men trained to silence by torture or murder those who opposed the government. Elena and her young son are murdered in plain daylight by the efficient, well-trained sergeant Longoria, leaving a distressed Antonio no other chance but to flee the town, running fast and very far. He ends up in L.A., where, overcome by grief and rage, he is unable to take hold of his life until he meets the soldier with the jaguar tattoo and resolves to kill him in revenge. This plot deconstruction shows Tobar's interest in the notion of violence, in particular in the relation between objective and subjective forms of violence that cannot be perceived from the same standpoint. Against the explosions of subjective violence that we tend to perceive as irrational, Tobar's sympathy lies mostly with Elena's loyalties, her Marxist, humanistic endeavor to produce justice by looking at the marginal others, and by trying to address the "indian question" in her country.

More so than the other texts treated in this project, *The Tattooed Soldier* is a strong sociopolitical novel while also a literary achievement in terms of genre and thematic approach (reviewers variously call it a gripping tale of revenge, a political novel, or a "suspenseful" story). In the novel, economic inequality, ethnic exclusion, and the propagation of violence are larger issues that sit uncomfortably behind the notion that this is just a transnational tale of revenge, although what connects the two is indeed the sacrament of violence as motif in both fiction and in our real global culture. But what *The Tattooed Soldier* clearly shares with the rest of the novels in this

project is the radical politics which each author embraces with respect to postcolonial and imperial discourses, and in particular with respect to the “transformative strategies of postcolonial discourses, strategies which engage the deepest disruptions of modernity” (qtd in Coronil 227). These strategies are not limited to the recently colonized, as noted by Bill Ashcroft, who calls Latin America “modernity’s first born” for being a region that has participated since its inception in the production of postcolonial discourse (qtd in Coronil 227).

Like Rushdie, Tobar subscribes to the notion of an authorial enlightened cosmopolitanism: he uses his diasporic locality of L.A. to provide a renewed attack on the holistic vision of society, and deals with myths of national belonging in order to make us “question the homogenous and horizontal view associated with the nation’s imagined community” (Bhabha 206). Like Kincaid and Gurnah, he voices an interest in equality and political representation for marginalized subjects from small corners of the world, lending his narrative discourse to questions about what it means to speak for oneself as opposed to speaking for someone else, about the problems that come with representing a larger collective, and of questioning who the other can be with regard to the desire for “a collective, ethical, right to difference in equality” (Balibar qtd in Bhabha xxv). Like Gurnah, he questions specific historical processes that brought together center and periphery and which led to new imperialisms – in Gurnah’s work, the focus is on the different versions of what Laura Chrisman calls the imperial unconscious of British subjects, on its impact on the configuration of identity for a formerly colonized subject from the small yet culturally complex island of Zanzibar; for Tobar, the focus is on what David Harvey calls the ugly facts on the ground (in Guatemala) against the high moral tone of universal pronouncements from the U.S., which are not only a cover for American desires for dominion and war but also “a political resonance in the United States at both elite and popular levels” (Harvey 3), and which too often results in a *willingness*– a popular will, that is – to violate “the sovereignty of unwilling nations,” as the remarks of Woodrow Wilson in 1918 show and

which Noam Chomsky comments on extensively<sup>3</sup>. Thus, a claim can be made that these authors are committed to a postcolonial theory whose most meaningful attribute is its formation in “post-traditional contexts of action ... in localities where social subjects configure their identities interacting with processes of global rationality and where, for this reason, cultural borders become porous” (Coronil 235). This theoretical position at once departs from the traditional definition of anticolonial discourse which was produced in spaces of action, in “situations where subjects formed their identities in predominantly local contexts not yet subjected to intensive processes of rationalization” (Habermas, qtd in Coronil 235). Instead, it embraces a radical politics which no longer lies in the kind of anticolonial work that defines struggles “with the categories at hand” but is to be found in intellectual metropolitan work that “deconstructs [those struggles] in order to broaden the scope of politics.” In doing so, such a mode uses different representational strategies to counter hierarchies and assumptions that turn some subjects in objects of knowledge for allegedly superior subjects (Coronil 236-7).

In the face new imperialisms, these novels are produced through their loci of enunciation – metropolitan imperial spaces– that continue to produce the “postcolonial discourse” of the colonized, questioning not only who the colonized is but also how a democratic process can be achieved by making anti-imperial criticism available to the Western, Anglophone world. Tobar’s novel marks its entrance into postcolonial studies by suggesting that a new constructivist aim can be deduced from concrete analysis even from a position of superiority, and can, in fact, benefit from Tobar’s double consciousness as a potent force to disrupt dominant narratives and unsettle the field of political action in the Gramscian, Marxist tradition, by creating truth effects. In this respect, the novel’s first usefulness to postcolonialism is through what Fernando Coronil calls for a recognition of Latin America’s distinctive historical experience in the production of theoretical thought and non-imperial knowledge formed at the heart of empires. As Coronil points out, “reflections on modern

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<sup>3</sup> See Chomsky, *On Power and Ideology*, p. 14.



colonialism originate in reactions to the conquest and colonization of the Americas” (223). Further, he suggests that the political and cultural experience of the marginalized periphery develops into a more general theoretical position that “could be set against western political, intellectual, and academic hegemony and its protocols of objective knowledge,” emphasizing thus that what postcolonialism as it existed until a decade ago has failed to acknowledge (in the name of its critique of grand narratives of modernity), is both the production of non-imperial knowledge that draws on wide-ranging Latin American reflections, in particular through the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group of the 1990s, and “the difference between Eurocentric claims to universality and the necessary universalism arising from struggles against world-wide capitalist domination” (225). Tobar’s novel highlights the problem of discerning the boundaries of the postcolonial field in two different ways: by using a discourse of the immigrant condition that is greatly determined by new imperialisms such as contemporary, mid-20th century interventionist approaches of the U.S.; and by developing an internal narrative of key cultural aspects of Guatemala, in particular the ethnic divisions that have become irreparable precisely because of U.S. interventionist approaches, and which pose a problem to current Guatemalan projects of reconstruction and democratic development. Especially when compared with old postcolonial nations in South Asia or Africa where national development was a direct consequence of movements of independence from direct colonial rule, Guatemala’s history helps broaden the rubric of “Latin American postcolonial studies” despite the lack of a commonly recognized postcolonial body of work on Latin America. As Fernando Coronil observes, the absence of a “Latin American postcolonial studies” is not a problem of studies on Latin America but between postcolonial and Latin American studies, which have shared concerns and distinctive contributions, and which can be brought together under the recognition that reflections on modern colonialism originate in reactions to the conquest and colonization of the Americas (Coronil, 221).

With respect to geopolitics, Tobar has manifested a special concern for Guatemala's history of unrest and class and ethnic divisions; but his writings also manifest a general concern for Latin America, as seen in his *Translation Nation*, a book about the different realities of Latin American migrants across the U.S., and in *Deep Down Dark: The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine and the Miracle That Set Them Free* (2014), where Tobar mixes scientific understanding of history and political geography with political representation in order to retell the story of the thirty-three miners stuck for sixty-nine days in one of the mines in the Chilean Atacama desert. Through these stories, Tobar shows his fondness for factual detail and for a kind of truth for which a writer has to travel deep down dark into the minds of his subjects. For Tobar, truth exists when it emerges out of a labored inquiry into historical detail in combination with an authorial ethical attitude towards social justice. Time and again, he returns to a type of realistic, nonfictional writing, in order to chronicle the real history and real events of Latin American people and to instill in us solidarity – that abstruse mixture of compassion and understanding – for marginalized people. Because of this investment, Tobar becomes part of a large category of writers/activists from Latin America a list that includes Che Guevara (*Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*), Miguel Marmol (*Miguel Marmol*, compiled by Roque Dalton), and the indigenous rights activist Rigoberta Menchú (*I, Rigoberta Menchú*, interviewed by Elisabeth Burgos) among others, who write under the sign of a special subgenre of realism, namely *testimonio*, a contemporary literary category with social justice at its core, and which took shape in Latin America in the context of national liberation movements and other social struggles of the 1980s.

The long and complex colonial history of Guatemala and its unending series of political collapses and conflicts are of particular importance in understanding Tobar's assessment of the current dynamic between indigenous Guatemalans and Ladinos, a dynamic intertwined primarily with imperial ambitions from the United States, ambitions that aggravated the economic and political marginalization mainly of indigenous communities. The novel emerged straight out of those

political times and it directly followed the rise of *testimonio*, theorized most intensely in the US in the 1990s by John Beverley and others as a new kind of literary genre produced by revolutionary movements throughout Central America in the previous years. But, Tobar's novel is neither a "socialist-feminist" testimonio in the style of Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which became the paradigm in representations and modes of theorizing of testimonio for Beverley; nor is it in the genre of more militant and male-authored testimonios which was another common manifestation of such narratives both in Guatemala and largely across Central America at the time. It is neither a straightforward account about the various armed struggles of Guatemala's heterogeneous indigenous people, nor a story about the more obscure guerrilla activities of the Spanish-speaking, ladino Marxist activists of the 1960s, which, as Beverley notes, preceded the indigenous revolts and were rejected by the indigenous people, and which Tobar does include as a type of marginal political narrative through some of his ladino characters. Thus the most important questions about this novel have to do with its very nature and also with its goals. Why did a journalist who writes extensively in realistic modes, decide that only a fictionalized account of Guatemala's traumatic historical past is possible? And what kind of political representation to the "indian question" as a general concern for the left does Tobar attempt to provide, in particular with respect to the possibility of social and national recovery and democratic progress?

Tobar is often taught in universities across the U.S. in courses about trauma and literature, with a more specific focus on testimonial literature, and *The Tattooed Soldier* should continue to be addressed alongside a straightforward testimonio like Menchú's. What has been acknowledged about this genre is that certain texts and textual practices can be derived from and also accompany testimonios, even as they complicate the genre by their apparent adherence to institutional practices like postmodernism that in discourses about testimonios are often accused of producing the very conditions of subalternity and repression that testimonio itself tries to represent (Beverley 6). Tobar's novel, like Manlio Argueta's novel *One Day of Life* or Edwidge Danticat's short story

collection *The Dew Breaker* follow the same pact between imaginative expression and an authorial ethos committed to social justice which represent a traumatic event by giving voice to the sinners, to the very perpetrators of violence in the name of or by the force of an ideology opposed to giving equal rights to all the citizens of a state. Tobar's and the above-mentioned authors mark an important departure from the strict conditions of a testimonio – an account given in the first person narrative, in the voice of a subaltern subject, and giving urgent voice to a collective need, but they also mark a departure from postmodernism, in particular from its skepticism to truth, the belief that all evidence is suspect. What makes these novels important is the way they combine two seemingly opposite analytical approaches into a unified intellectual project, as that which Coronil calls for when asking for “an intellectual project directed at countering this unequal, colonizing relationship” (237), namely between postmodernism's peculiar object of interest, “one formed as a colonized object, an inferior and alien *Other* to be studied by a superior and central *Self*” (Coronil 237) and the representational strategy most often attributed to postmodernism, that of merging together self-reflection as the inherent dimension of any intellectual enterprise and granting subjectivity and not objectivity to the social subject studied.

Tobar describes a general, global contempt for indigenous peoples and makes an effort to give voice to an erased subaltern figure in order to chronicle the processes that contributed to the effective elision from the polity of indigenous, marginalized, forgotten people. As such, he makes an effort to give voice to a kind of subaltern that complicates signification and in particular collective movements of liberation and progress. That figure, neither heroic nor clearly victim complicates for us what a subaltern is and what the limits for the subaltern experience can be. Unlike Spivak, who first re-formulated Gramsci's theory of the subaltern as the social group that exists socially, politically and geographically outside the hegemonic structure, thus excluded from a society's established structures of political representation, and whose central argument is that once the subaltern speaks he or she ceases to be a subaltern, Tobar may invite us to think of a subaltern who

remains a subaltern even after the act of speaking truth to power. If Tobar takes on Chomsky's more unsettling claim that one should not speak truth to power because the power knows the truth anyway, Tobar seems to be calling for a different kind of action. The concept of solidarity that Tobar often brings forth does not come without an adequate understanding of those historical processes that impede social reconstruction, and which can be represented through a type of literature that gives voice to the most subaltern of subjects and that is available to a wider audience.

At the very center of the novel lies the binary opposition between the figures of two complex characters, one a ladino with a recognized position in society and with mild, questionable leftist and intellectual tendencies, and the other an "indian" whose main attribute is that he is entirely wiped out from history and that he has no means to defend himself other than by brutality in ideology and action. Longoria's effective elision from the polity and his forced embrace of violence against his own people speaks for his quasi-colonial condition – as that which goes beyond the polarizations of the local and the global, the center and the periphery, or indeed the citizen and the stranger. What, Tobar is asking, made that happen and how can it be both represented and redressed? What may that action be which does not, to follow Walter Benjamin, safeguard against the imposition of violence on the other? The characters in *The Tattooed Soldier* show that what matters is not the potential for the subaltern to speak – not whether or not he or she can speak – but what he or she can say as an intellectualized potential with respect to language and radical change.

Significantly, the novel reflects Tobar's abandonment of a position of detachment vis-à-vis the notion of evil, in particular in relation to the U.S. as a liberal democracy that holds evil as an abstraction and an aberration from the intellectual Left to the self-righteous indignation of the Right, for which evil is reserved only to remote foreign evildoers, thus inapplicable to the incorruptible American soul. For Tobar, the history of colonialism in Latin America and American interventionist policies from the 1960s on invites a moment of recognition about the scale of atrocities committed in the name of righteous American values. Thus the novel addresses the importance of the evils on

the ground – militarized interventions, land distribution, social inequality – and is ultimately concerned with assembling the root causes of a longstanding conflict, taking the measure of what Hannah Arendt once called “the banality of evil” – an evil that can only explain itself only in relation to the system that produces and encourages it – and exploring it in relation to the monster characters at the center of his novel. For Arendt, the evil of Adolf Eichmann unveiled during the Nuremberg trials was not mythical but banal; as Jennifer Szalai notes, it was rootless “because neither reality nor the system was able to close the circle of logic for Eichmann’s behavior. Closure lay somewhere in the depths of the self, at the very banal, very ordinary, moment of choice” (4). Eichmann, who participated in the Holocaust because of his careerist ambitions and not in the name of grandiose ideals about a white master race was, as Arendt was amazed to discover, utterly ordinary, torn away from the reality that surrounded him.

Tobar’s novel has two monsters, equally banal and very ordinary: Guillermo Longoria, an ethnic Guatemalan who was kidnapped by the army when he was a young boy, and who became a member of the death squad, the Jaguar Battalion of the Guatemalan army, and Antonio Bernal, a ladino and semi ambitious student of journalism who starts as victim and ends as aggressor when his wife and child are murdered by Longoria. Contrary to a popular interpretation of the novel which tends to justify Longoria as pure evil and mythical monster while Antonio is justified in his revenge, Tobar forces us to look at the roots of what constitutes evil in Guatemala and at what happens to individual choice in relation to different forms of Guatemalan identity.

Given this plot, it is important to remember some of the most crucial events of 1991 in the U.S. and key historical events in Guatemala that contributed to the concerns and the interests which the novel expresses. In 1991, the US was at the peak of its rise as a global hegemony: abroad, it was dealing with the newly authorized use of military force to “liberate” Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion and annexation. The Gulf War, mythologized in popular culture as Operation Desert Storm, came to an end in the spring of that year with W.H. Bush’s announcement of the “liberation” of Kuwait. This

military enterprise was one among many American political ventures outside the domestic space, all of them key moves signaling imperial quests by way of demolishing "Communist" agendas throughout the world – of particular interest that year were the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the trial in the U.S. of the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. At home, internal affairs were plagued by, among other things, the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles, an event that re-ignited old debates on race and class tensions in the U.S., and which Tobar used to create the tragic plot of *The Tattooed Soldier*.

While the Rodney King affair serves as the backdrop and helps to situate Tobar as a diasporic author committed to reveal some of the dynamics of North American multicultural tensions, the other dramatic story unfolding in the background is of Guatemala's long and painful civil war and the historical conditions that led to it. Well accustomed to colonial incursions into its territory, Guatemala saw the collapse of its Classic Maya Civilization while already under Spanish occupation, a rule that started abruptly in the early 16th century and lasted until 1821. The end of the Spanish rule was immediately followed by a series of commercial and political relationships with the U.S., and Guatemala found itself propelled at the very top of all American intrusions into Central America. In the 1950s and 1960s, the United Fruit Company was the country's largest single landowner. With imperial interests in Guatemala and the rest of Central American region, this U.S.-based business was directly involved in the overthrow of democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz, who in 1952 launched the first reform program designed to redistribute land to farm workers. Against a backdrop of economic and political volatility in the country, this became the event that set the tone for the brutal civil war that followed. From 1960 until 1996, Guatemala was split between a leftist rebel movement that sought among other things to restructure the country's economic reforms and to create justice among the different social and ethnic classes, and a government that enjoyed the support of its army and in particular the support of the United States, which managed to do away with every single democratically elected president with a reform or

nationalization program in mind, and which sowed the seeds of a conflict in which many indigenous farmers disappeared or died. So often split along ideological lines, the rebels dismissed as “Communist,” the U.S.-backed and trained military portrayed as a defender of a truly democratic, anti-communist agenda, Guatemala sank rapidly into a civil war that both uncovered and intensified its internal problems, among which the most serious was the economic and social gap between Spanish descendants and the indigenous population.

In 1991, Guatemala was still engulfed in full-scale civil war, and upon the publication of Tobar’s novel in 1998, it was at the very beginning of a long recovery following almost four decades of bloodshed. Started in 1960, the war came to a halt with a peace accord in 1996, but various marks of the war are still felt decades after that hastened and unstable treaty. A recent Guardian report from October 2013 on the legacy of the civil war in Guatemala stresses out the crucial role that the US played in forging economic inequalities and in delaying the peace process in the country. To this day, Guatemala has,

one of the world's highest rates of land concentration, where 3% of private landowners – a white elite – occupy 65% of the arable land. Small farms (those with fewer than four hectares) occupy only 11% of agricultural land. Poor indigenous farmers scrape out a living through subsistence agriculture, often on the poorest soils, while wealthy plantation owners, or *latifundistas*, benefit from an agricultural system based on international exports such as coffee, sugar cane and African palm oil – and cheap, mostly indigenous, labour. It has been a recipe for conflict. Tran 2

As the report shows, Guatemala is only now trying to tear down “the wall of impunity surrounding some of the leaders during the bloodletting” and that new battles continue to ignite in different parts of the country over resources and economic inequality, with “indigenous Guatemalans once again find[ing] themselves battling the government and multinationals over land and water rights” (Tran 1).



As David Harvey reminds us, in his acceptance speech before the Republican National Convention in September 2004, president George W. Bush took the concept of universal liberty and freedom as “the right and capacity of all mankind” one step further: “I believe America is called to lead the cause of freedom in a new century, I believe that millions in the Middle East plead in silence for their liberty. I believe that given the chance they will embrace the most honorable form of government ever devised by men. I believe all these things because freedom is not America’s gift in the world, it is the Almighty’s gift to every man and woman in this world” (qtd. in Harvey 2). It is true that the American discourse on universal freedom and democracy is starting to take a different direction (especially with the presidency of Barack Obama, who recently restored Cuban-U.S. diplomatic relations for the first time in half a century); yet, distinctive core American values and recent history with Latin America can be used to argue that the U.S. through its moral frame still insists that evil lives only abroad, often in the guise of a communist ideology as in the case of Latin America and some other parts of the world, and in the guise of an anti-American terrorist ideology in the Middle East, while through its supreme mission to realize God’s intelligent design on earth, The U.S. presents itself as best equipped to change the world. This moral framework is the foundation of any new empire whose excessive resort to militarism joins in a constant invocation of the absolutes of good and evil. These are circumstances that directly produced Tobar’s main characters, who are a reflection of the battles igniting in Guatemala over natural resources and of the slow process of reparations with respect to human rights violations.

Guatemala is often cited as the primary example next to the reservations of western U.S. for the realization that “persecution and the repression continue under our noses, frequently in brutal form” (Chomsky 11) and that after 1942, the peoples of Latin America in general were integrated into the world system as dependents, subservient to Western imperial powers and their violence, and which continues in renewed forms through foreign debt crises, threats of intervention, distorted development, and encouraged social backwardness (12). As Chomsky among others argues, the U.S.

as global superpower has all the reasons to be afraid of small countries, especially ones that were making progress in their effort to be economically self-sufficient and served as a model to neighboring small countries, and that as a consequence, the U.S. has often acted independently of international and domestic laws: under its steadfast official opposition to “communism,” the U.S. has managed to use force in international affairs, going against the policy of the U.N. Charter, a fully recognized treaty.

Tobar is very careful in synchronizing the voices that make up his novel, and parallels Antonio’s account with a thorough chronicle of the rise and fall of Guillermo Longoria. A poor peasant who as a young man disobeyed his mother’s orders to come straight back home from the market, Longoria was taken away by the army while watching *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* at the cinema. “He was seventeen years old, and still filled with youthful innocence,” Tobar writes (33), in a depiction meant to survey all possible explanations behind Longoria’s trajectory from poor, uneducated native boy into US-trained Battalion sergeant, then into L.A.-based post office clerk, and finally victim. Although they neither start nor end as equals, Antonio and Guillermo Longoria are in the end monsters in equal measure when viewed through the lens of violence theory, one that suggests that social subjects like them are created out of different political expediencies that deny them the possibility to transcend the violence inflicted at a national Guatemalan level by foreign interference for decades before they became adults. Through this opposition and the violent acts that make up the book’s universe, Tobar presents a situation that never turns into dialogue despite creating a desire in us to see it happen; his situation remains one where there is no possibility for agreement, where revenge and further violence are the only possibilities, and which strangely remain as such even after the removal of the characters from Guatemala at the height of the civil war and their transfer into the space of the U.S.. How, Tobar seems to ask us, have these characters come to act and think this way? What turns one into a torturer, killing innocent men, women, and children, only to be hunted down and brutally killed years later in a shadowy L.A. street? What turns the

other, a victim who lost his wife and child to a merciless torturer, into a hopeless exile and then a killer moved only by the idea of revenge?

While Tobar finds some of his answers in their cultural specificities, their ethnic background, their intellectual potential, and their political loyalties, by writing from a diasporic perspective, he insists that without understanding the Western narrative of capitalist expansion, we wouldn't be able to make sense of these realities, that without the contact zone, negotiating such tensions would be impossible. Without the war and without the contact zone, there would be no Guillermo Longoria as a poor peasant turned into a *matone*, and later on as a defeated exile; nor would there be Antonio as a widowed, apathetic, quasi intellectual exile, whose only purpose in life is the mourning of his loss before mourning becomes revenge against what he singles out to be the architect of his tragedy. Tobar chronicles the personal histories of his characters, putting their peculiar stories of transgression and atonement into a comfortable third person narrative which attempts to translate their unspoken ruminations on their condition. The contact zone enables Tobar to remind Guatemalans and North Americans alike of the violence in which they are both involved, and more generally to deal with the idea of violence as perpetuated through war and personal tragedy. And while the conditions, or what Edward Said would call the textual situations, involved in the production of *The Tattooed Soldier* separates Tobar from writer activists such as Rigoberta Menchú or Manlio Argueta, whose works are produced in local conditions and describe localized situations (Guatemala in Menchú's case, El Salvador in Argueta's), Tobar mixes those Guatemalan specificities with the cultural particularisms of metropolitan L.A. in order to further represent, in the same Saidian fashion, the global predicament of the artist intellectual; Tobar uses the diasporic space *contrapuntally*, through the mutual considerations of otherwise disparate social practices, of culture and empire, of history and the present, and through this he speaks of the task of the global writer intellectual, whose interest is in thinking and interpreting together "experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its

internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others" (Said, *Culture*, 36).

The question of evil arises from the way Tobar handles personal rage to give voice to a national tragedy at the height of American imperialism, and from the way he manages the voices of two different kinds of subalterns, one at the very margins of culture, forgotten and stripped of history, stripped of humanity, his body material annihilated by his body politic, and the other, a Guatemalan disillusioned with his broken dreams and rendered unable to understand the larger context of his victimhood. Lacking also inner depth, Guillermo and Antonio, speak for the roots of despair and its consequences, and Tobar's admonition is that catastrophe, trauma, and pain do not turn us into gentler and wiser people. The fortunate fall does not apply to his characters, and as such a claim can be made that a fall is not always fortunate. Here, Tobar adopts an almost anti-Marxist approach: Marx who insisted on justifying historical evils by insisting also on the good which will ultimately come from them, cannot be met in *The Tattooed Soldier*. For Tobar, constructing a just society does not depend on what Brian Davies described as God organizing evils so that good might arise from them (qtd. in Eagleton 135). Contrary to a popular Big Picture argument, Evil is in fact Evil, and we can recognize good if good is made possible for the beneficent whole.

Longoria requires special attention because he is cast as the ultimate and total evil, the book requiring from us a definition of what evil is, and an interpretation of evil acts as opposed to evil people. The kind of evil that Longoria represents has no heroism attached to it, no matter how much he insists there is. There is violent death around it, and so much of it that in the end even Longoria is afflicted. But Longoria does not have a monstrous ego even though his acts are bound up with destruction; he treats his girlfriend and the others around him with even-tempered respect. He has outbursts of violence, one particular example being his abuse of the old woman who recognized the tattoo on his arm and accused him of killing her son in the Guatemalan civil war, but he does not understand why no one can see that he responded with violence to violence. Conditioned by his

circumstances, Longoria becomes evil as a consequence of his ideology, and kills innocent people for what he sees an honorable end. Thus Tobar's mission is to deliver the troubled narrative of one of Guatemala's war torturers, a confession from the other side of the oppression spectrum. In the novel, Longoria muses:

This was the worst thing to remember, the sounds children make when they are dying. The flutter in the throat. Crying because they're bleeding all over the floor and it doesn't make any sense. They cry because when you stand there in your uniform and shoot them they feel like their fathers are punishing them for doing something wrong. And you, in camouflage skin, are in the room with them, watching this happen. You are the one who put the bullets in their bodies.... Only bullets can stop that sound, only more bullets can stop them moaning for their mothers. 64

Throughout the entire novel, Longoria is defensive and delusional; yet, Tobar composes a powerful account on the disturbances inherent in the Guatemalan army, and implicitly, on the psychological damages caused by wars and revolutions. Like the jaguar tattooed on his arm, which symbolizes 'belonging', authority, and destruction, Longoria becomes an emblem of all the monsters surging from the Guatemalan war psychology and training. He reminds us of Kierkegaard's dictum that those in despair are arrogant as well as self-consuming. He is fond of playing chess on Sundays in a multiethnic L.A. park, but chess is a game he only partially understands and which he always loses; its symbolic value is that Longoria has always been the peon of the ugly permutations of power in a country ridden by war, pressed to take a side and vulnerable in its face. Longoria is caught in a battle of ideologies, his loyalty and his faith in the army acting as his only way of life and survival. For this, we are deemed to detest Longoria, despising his actions and loathing his mentality.

An indigenous Guatemalan, Longoria is struggling to come to terms with his cultural identity and is longing for a 'common' historical experience and cultural codes. As he becomes prey to the dominant regime of representation emerging from the U.S. intervention in Guatemala, he

dreams of a nation that is no longer possible, the same way Rigoberta Menchú, the famous Guatemalan *testimonialista* once aspired to a Mayan nation without accounting for the many historical transformations that made that recovery impossible. Thus, the trouble with Longoria is that he is not only an outsider inside his own nation, but that he has no people of his own, no *Volksgeist*, as Du Bois would say, that would give him spiritual strivings and resources for a positive sense of the self. For him, the wholeness and homogeneity of the collective soul which Menchú describes so well in her testimony, does not exist, because it was cut off so early in his existence by an unforgiving army. Thus, as critics like Kwame Anthony Appiah often suggest, that *Volksgeist* might be presumed not to exist, as there will always be different stories for different subgroups, some of which involve the strongest uncanniness and our most complex form of sympathy.

Through Longoria, Tobar speaks of the difference between ‘what we are’ and ‘what we’ve become’, of the problems inherent in dislocated and numb historical experiences. Prodigal son in a ruined nation, Longoria enters Tobar’s narrative calling on us to reconstruct that nation through dialogue between different oppositional forms of identity. Longoria – arrogant and vulnerable – *una cara que da lastima* – “had to love the army,” the army which becomes his home, his trauma, and his apology. And in that modal phrase, *had to*, lies his confession and his indictment. If there is one idea that bothers Longoria, then it is the contempt he senses in those around for himself as an “indian” – but he has no weapons to oppose that until he is sucked in by the army. Once in, he acts without speculating, fighting on his own despite his affiliation to the army. His presence in the novel has two implications: one is that even in Elena’s activism for indigenous people, no indigenous people are actually ever seen along Ladinos; they are, especially for Elena, the most radical leftist in the novel, a category to protect although impossible to do so on equal fighting terms. This ideological distance between “victims” and “protectors” further alienates indigenous people as it is seen from Elena’s journeys into the forbidden shanty-towns of San Cristóbal, she with good intentions but never truly able to extend a hand and treat others in fairness. She knows, in fact, what

is fair and what is not, and through her revolutionary ideals, longs for a radical change in her society, one that would accommodate the marginal categories into the mainstream culture. Elena is Tobar's representation of a ladino leftist intellectual, but she is never seen doing more than trying to provide compassion and leaves us with the image of her watching from behind the curtains the funeral processions carrying yet another baby dead from unspoken diseases, from life in the slums. And just when she had thought she had found the root of all the deaths in the slums she surreptitiously visits, she dies at the hand of Longoria, one of the same indians she was seeking to protect. Such tragic turn of fate is deeply ironic, Tobar seems to say, for the violence that Guatemala sees now is both divisive and irrational.

The relationship between Longoria and Antonio is more homogenous and congruent: despite his own tribulations, Antonio remains a petit bourgeois until the end, a ladino and a pseudo-intellectual. While Antonio suffers a highly individualized loss, Longoria's epitomizes the collapse of the Guatemalan nation. In fact, in the reinforced class distinctions between Antonio and Longoria, Guatemala as a nation-state seen from home and from exile cannot be the same. It is only in Los Angeles that Antonio is forced into a labor migrant narrative, depoliticized and dehistoricized, a condition of loss, both personal and national, that inflicts in him an idealized vision of justice. For Longoria, however, Guatemala has always been dehistoricized, deterritorialized, and cancerous; he lived at the very margins of his own culture, an Indian boy, his nose flat, his complexion darker. *A pars pro toto*, Longoria is understood as an allegorical being, walking in the dark of a Guatemalan society driven by hegemonic forces, telling himself a narrative that he needs to believe. And later on, he walks in the dark of a Los Angeles, disillusioned, impotent, and exhausted.

Tobar deconstructs difficult social, cultural, and political events by writing stories of abuse where voices collapse, where the notions of oppressed and subaltern are complicated by the presence of multiple social and economic classes and by different categories of 'subaltern' voices, where the 'same' and the 'other' struggle to recognize one another, where the authors infiltrate

themselves into sites of trauma to explain that the Good and the Evil are not generic sets nor fixed categories, and where the architectonics of trauma is shaped by a meticulous design of a literary genre for the novel. The novel projects an impersonal third person, the narrating “I” insinuating into the text through the protagonists’ constant and disturbing musings on their condition, each staking a claim on our attention with respect to their oppressed identity. In this third voice, their stories are given equal importance: while emphasizing Antonio’s whiteness and intellectual affectation (Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* and *Crime and Punishment* are his favorite books), he underscores Longoria’s erasure of identity and intellectual impotence. In doing so, Tobar juggles with our sympathies and our potential to empathize, finally leaving us with the sense that the most powerful and disturbing voice belongs to Longoria, the lone, delusional, unbending, and repulsive torturer. Writing about Antonio, the Spanish descendant, with a sentimentality which he avoids when depicting Guillermo Longoria, the peasant and the matone, Tobar projects a Longoria that deserves very little, if any, of our sympathy. Because of what he does, he does not deserve a voice. Yet, Tobar insists on what he is, by showing how he became this way, and the reader is being quietly asked to ponder whether, maybe, Longoria is a justified sinner.

All revenge stories have a tragic plot. Seen through the lens of the diasporic movement to the U.S. that followed the civil war, *The Tattooed Soldier* was written with an overt interest in the function of the American metropolis as a contact zone. Dictated by economics and geopolitics, the translocation from a country in which U.S.-style economic and political methods brought poverty, tyranny, and defeat, to an idealized U.S. metropolis, L.A., is chronicled by the double consciousness of a diasporic author to reveal the ambivalence and the tensions of the contact zone. Through a narrative in which the characters perform their actions both at home and abroad, and in fact, where the climax of their personal tragedy unfolds in the contact zone, Tobar attempts to rewrite a common history seen from the migrant’s perspective. Tobar shows a deep understanding of the relationship between indigenous, the Ladinos, and the U.S., in a hierarchy that places Mayans at the bottom and



the U.S. at the top. The Mayans, slum dwellers living on the outskirts of towns exist on the outskirts of society, a septic, noxious colony of shacks and cast into a world of discrimination and prejudice. The Ladinos like Antonio, who seek to “feel the Indian in me” fail to “understand the roots” and despise a soldier looking and acting like a peasant.

Molded to depict different forms of victimization and to enact different forms of violence, the two characters at the center of the novel continue the mourning song of a nation clad in violence and inequality, and each commits his crime in the name of an idealized vision of justice and through an implacable logic. The voices Tobar brings into play brings him in close proximity to the genre of the testimonial novel, a form that George Yúdice defines as “an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation,” one which imposes a rereading of culture. The testimonio has complicated even further the literary sphere with its penchant for social science and political activism, but it gathered force both through its power to portray history and to form collective identity during times of social unrest, and through its complicity between the factual and the semblance. What Tobar uses with respect to it is the principle of *the truth of the other*, which helped him shape his novel as the intellectualized representation of a traumatic experience. Tobar, the son of immigrant Guatemalans in Los Angeles, is not directly a “testimonialista,” that is a “subordinated and oppressed person assuming the role of responsible/ethical writer;” yet, he is what Yudice calls an enunciator or a portrayer of history, aware that the stories he tells are unique to the geo-political space that produces them and that the traumatic experiences of his Guatemalan characters are sustained by a network of relations. Having to examine and to represent ‘situated’ events in Guatemala, Tobar’s commitment is twofold: to the ethics of representing a ‘reality’ (that is, they make visible the predicament in which their countries fell victim) and to the ethics of a literary form capable of mirroring that reality without expressing a party line. The political unconscious in his novel holds to prescriptions relative to very particular situations and to a form that invites us to embark on Bakhtin’s imaginative passage of empathy and exotopy. Bakhtin’s

discourse refers back to one essential function of the novel, and that is its testimonial function as epideictic, deliberative, or forensic (qtd in Nance 62-3). In each case, however, the writer of a testimonial novel abstains from overtly and hegemonically indicting and moralizing us, and formulates instead propositions which, as Linda Martin Alcoff argues, restructure our consciousness by existing in a continuous dialectical state.

Finally, L.A. is depicted as a site ostensibly removed from the political sphere, but accommodating particular types of émigrés, exiles, and refugees, thus reflecting the state's prerogatives on who may or may not take residence within its borders. One debate arising from the novel deals precisely with the state's capacity and willingness to discriminate between one type of immigrant and the other, a limited capacity and unbending prerogatives. Yet, Tobar also shows what can be negotiated in a space like L.A. where its immigrants are victim and tormentor alike, good and evil, penitent and offender, exploiter and exploited. In a fashion similar to Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, where the revered father has to confess to his daughter that he is "the hunter and not the prey" in the Haitian-American community of New York (Danticat uses this character as one of the *macoutes* or torturers in the days of the Duvaliers in Haiti), Tobar's Guatemalans use the locality of L.A., to borrow Homi Bhabha's term, its culture or social affiliation, as a place of negotiation where the idea of arrival becomes a metaphor for atonement and retribution.

It is this space that seems to interest Tobar ultimately. In his authorial presence as an enlightened cosmopolitan, Tobar acts in the same manner as Rushdie and Gurnah, under the principle of "the right to narrate" as a right to signify the most marginal and, here, controversial social figures. In addressing the issue of self-representation, Tobar localizes Homi Bhabha's concept of political representation, and specifically that "no name is yours until you speak it" into the political space of Latin America. Because his characters are no longer able "to speak" and in turn by presenting himself as a writer who can speak for subjects who exist outside the polity, Tobar deals with myths of belonging to a homogenous cultural and national sphere and organic communities.

For that he has to place himself outside what Bhabha calls “the complex process of minoritarian modernity” which elide the binary opposition center/periphery or minority/majority. Thus, as a possible answer to the question why Tobar wrote *The Tattooed Soldier* as fiction rather than nonfiction, one can argue that his nostalgic bond with Guatemala would make it impossible to render a traumatic event in realistic fashion, or that a realistic representation would result in an implausible solution, the ambiguity and radicalism of Rigoberta Menchú’s account which resulted in such heated debates about veracity in modes of representation having served as warning sign.<sup>4</sup>

By using testimonio in its definition of a mediated narrative – not as the voice of an authentic subaltern but through a cosmopolitan narrative authority, Tobar continues to counter modernization theory – a theoretical and historical wave within Latin America which presented capitalism as an alternative to socialism and which argued that achieving modernity would overcome obstacles inhering in the economies, cultures, and subjective motivations of the peoples in the “traditional” societies of the Third World (Coronil 223). Tobar’s production of knowledge stands in contrast with knowledge internally produced, in particular through the use of testimonio which is largely a feature of localized narrative action. This serves to set Tobar’s novel within a wider historical context, promoting the idea that knowledge should be global and that postcolonial studies, following Coronil again, needs to acknowledge the world-wide conditions in the production of knowledge with which this novel identifies itself most clearly. In this respect, Coronil reminds us that Edward Said once argued that the term postcolonialism is a misnomer, that the analysis of contemporary imperialism has to include more than the knowledge coming from those places in the world with which postcolonialism most clearly associates, and that the production of transformative knowledge has to take into account global knowledge produced under global circumstances.

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<sup>4</sup> See John Beverley.

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