

The Self in David Malouf's 'Closer'

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The story 'Closer' forms a part of David's Malouf's well known collection titled *Dream Stuff* (2000). This paper attempts to critically analyze the nature of subjectivity depicted in the story. It hopes to demonstrate that such an examination is necessary as 'Closer' uncovers and reveals the complex ways in which subjectivity and its politico-cultural determinants interact with each other in a given social set-up. The story suggests that complete determination of subjective agency is neither possible nor desirable. Crucially, in its closing paragraphs, it gestures towards a situation in which the self can open itself to an-other in such a way that even the other cannot remain unaffected. This paper reads such a situation as closely resembling the role that literary fiction plays in our lives. It thus concludes with a brief discussion of the manner in which literary fiction can alter the fundamental coordinates that characterize and shape human perception and action.

The Pentecostal Christian faith of her family and her strict Grandpa Morpeth ensure that the nine year old Amy meets her homosexual uncle Charles only on Easter and Christmas. The family ethos suggest that she recognize him as a destructive, corrupt and ultimately irredeemable force which needs to be limited and confined to Sydney, the place which it has (supposedly) already contaminated. Citing as example the Biblical story of Christ's destruction of Sodom, Grandpa Morpeth suggests to Amy that the pleasant countryside that they live in shall become infected with plague and get burnt if Charles is allowed to visit them. Unsurprisingly, even in their meetings on Easter and Christmas, a fence separates Amy and her family, standing on the grassy slope below their house, from Charles who stands far away on the other side.

The Grandpa, however, fails in keeping his home completely insulated from the influence of Charles as the latter continues to survive there in the form of both

memory and expectation. In sharp contrast with the men living in the household, the women - Amy's Grandma, mother and she herself- cherish the time that they have spent with Charles and look forward to his visits. The Grandma sets an extra plate for him on the dining table and places an ivory ring marked with his initial 'C' in the dressing drawer even as she knows that he has been forbidden from setting foot in the house. In a similar vein, Amy's mother Helen is heard telling her husband, "Charlie's just a big kid. He never grew up. He was always such fun to be with." (Malouf, 29) Amy's fascination with her uncle Charles, though, is of a different nature as their relationship does not draw its 'legitimacy' and strength from the very limited time that they have spent with each other in the past. In fact, the reader comes to appreciate the special bond that she and Charles share through the similarity that the narrative reveals as existing between them. Thus, in an ingenious manner, Malouf's story establishes Charles as an integral part of the future that Amy imagines for herself.

'Closer' establishes a parallel between Charles and Amy in various ways by presenting them as individuals who do not quite fit within the conservative and strict socio-cultural ethos that determine the Morpeth household in the Australian countryside. Charles exceeds social norms and sanctions in physical and sexual terms and, consequently, he is set apart from the members of his own family. Amy thus notices in old family photographs that among her mother's siblings, "[Charles] is the blondest; his eyes have the most sparkle to them." (Malouf, 25) Moreover, one day when Charles gets out of his car with his shirt off, Amy observes that "his chest had scoops of shadow and his shoulders were golden and so smooth that they gave off a glow. His whole body had a sheen to it." Further, compared with her uncles James and Matt who are hairy men, she notes that Charles's "chest and throat and arms were like an angel's, smooth and polished as wood." (Malouf, 29) Similarly, the countryside, in spite of the multiple benefits it provides to its inhabitants such as 'fat cattle', good pasture, large farmhouses surrounded by camphor-laurels and bunyas vis-à-vis an urban centre such as Sydney, fails in reining in Amy's aspirations for and imaginings of a bright future for herself that will ultimately take her away from that very space. Amy desires to become an astronaut when she grows up and thus achieve something that no one in her family has ever been able to.

The narrative of Malouf's story further underlines the similarity between Charles and Amy as it virtually establishes the former as someone who enables the latter's imaginings of herself in the future by emerging as an example that can and should be emulated. Before reaching the Morpeth household, Charles calls on the family's telephone stationed in the hallway. He informs Amy that he is on the way and shall reach Bulahdelah shortly. He jokes, "This is GAY 437 calling. I am approaching Bulahdelah." The statement might indeed be a mere joke for Charles but his niece Amy feels that he is speaking from far away; his voice, to her, seems to be coming from a spaceship set to land on the earth in some time. She says, "The air roaring through the car makes his voice sound weird, *like a spaceman's*. Far off. *It is like a spaceship homing in.*" (Emphasis added. Malouf, 27) Charles's car, for her, ultimately becomes the spaceship that she always wanted to see and travel in. She observes:

You can see his car coming from far off. You can see it *approaching*. It is very like a spaceship, sliver and fast; it flashes. You can see its windscreen catching the sun as it rounds the curves between the big Norfolk Island pines on the golf course and the hospital, then its flash flash between the trees along the river. When it pulls up on the road outside our gate there is a humming like something from another world, then all four windows go up of their own accord, all together, with no one winding, and Uncle Charles swings the driver's door open and steps out. (Malouf, 28)

As Charles thus gets firmly embedded in Amy's consciousness as someone who already practices what she herself would like to do someday, it is not a surprise to note that Amy begins to bring under critical scrutiny the socio-cultural and political paradigms that seek to isolate and alienate her uncle from the 'norm(al)' by assigning him a place at its margins. She expresses her utter lack of comprehension at the way in which religion and patriarchy collude to portray certain individuals and peoples as 'corrupted sinners' who are deemed to be dangerous to the socio-political order established and perpetuated by them. She states:

Grandpa says...that we must do what is hard to show that we love what is good and hate what is sinful, and the harder the thing, the more love we show Him...But I don't understand about love any more than I do about death. It seems

harder than anyone can bear to stand on one side of the fence and have Uncle Charles stand there on the other. As if he was already dead, and death was stronger than love, which surely cannot be. (Malouf, 30)

It is indeed painfully ironic to note that soon after Amy underlines the fact that not siding with Charles would mean siding with (his) death, the narrative of 'Closer' suggests that Charles is indeed no more. He does not turn up at the Morpeth house for Easter and no one therein has any information about his whereabouts. It is to Amy's credit, however, that she does not let his absence impact herself. Surprisingly, she manages to renew contact with him. She dreams while asleep at night that Charles has indeed come to her countryside home. She scans him (with suggestively incestuous undertones) as he gets out of his car. She notices that he is naked, with the exception of his sunglasses. He walks up to the fence and then crosses over to the side where she stands along with her family.

Amy, in what is possibly the most critical narrative gesture in 'Closer', registers her dream as a message and suggests that since she felt in her sleep that *the dream was real*, she needs to persevere with the feeling so that *the dream comes true in reality*. Every night, she stretches out her hand to Charles and assures him that if he were to similarly believe, the fence would open for him and he would be able to cross over to the other side. Amy is indeed certain that she is able to retain within herself the feeling that she had while she was asleep and that Charles can share the same feeling with her. Hence, she keeps telling him what she tells herself, "*Open your heart now. Let it happen. Come closer, closer. See? Now reach out your hand.*" (Malouf, 32)

As underlined in the discussion in this paper thus far, the narrative of Malouf's story portrays the various complex ways in which Charles and Amy interact with each other as well as with the socio-political and cultural context that they find themselves inhabiting. Crucially, it also depicts a situation in which Amy's self not only claims to retain, with remarkably convincing certainty, something that it felt in a state of semi/unconsciousness but also exudes the confidence to share it with another self who can, potentially, also be propelled towards newer possibilities of living as a result.

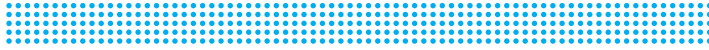
The (textualised) moment of the self 'encountering' its other in a dream-state,

as highlighted above, can be read as representing, metaphorically, the role of literary fiction in the lives of the readers of Malouf's story. Much like Amy feels that Charles transgresses boundaries and barriers in the dream that he can possibly also undermine in reality, the reader of a fictional narrative can get exposed to situations and conditions that are unavailable to him/her outside the 'singular' event of his/her reading of the text. As the dream does not really exist and needs to be (re)made real by Amy and Charles, it is for the 'responsible' readers of literary texts to realize that the fictional presents to them the opportunity of re-imagining and re-ordering the coordinates of the phenomenal, real world that they occupy outside the text that they read. Thus, 'Closer' asks its readers to reflect on the ways in which literary texts can function as entities that are capable of forcing them to re-orient the ways in which they perceive and act in the world that they occupy.

Interestingly, it is the very metaphor of the dream that Paul Ricoeur evokes in his well-known essay "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality" (1979) to explain the manner in which fictional texts produce the reality in which they are themselves situated. Ricoeur suggests that literary texts are symbolic systems that demand an "aesthetic engagement" from the reader. Such an engagement refuses to analyze pictures as the perfect reproductions of an absent referent; rather it comprehends images produced in/by literary texts as dream-like *productions* of reality for which the fundamental referent does not at all exist. These images, then, in their ability to combine, fragment, and jumble up produce a (fictional) *surplus* that cannot be accounted for by the given real world that they occupy. (Ricoeur, 133) Even as nothingness characterizes such *new* unreality, it is productive in nature as the nothingness of absence, in contrast, is nothing but the manifestation of a desire on the part of the artist for the lacking but *certain* original/master reality.

In other words, Ricoeur suggests that fictional texts demand not merely engaged and responsible reading from their readers but also a worldview that is capable of re-negotiating with the apparently stable coordinates that characterize the phenomenal world that it itself inhabits. He writes:

... [Fiction is] to effect a sort of *epoche* of the real, to suspend our attention to the real, to place us in a state of non-engagement with regard to perception or action,



in shore, to suspend meaning in the neutralized atmosphere to which one could give the name of the dimension of fiction. In this state of non-engagement we try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world. Imagination is this free play of possibilities. In this state, fiction can...create *a redescription* of reality. (Ricoeur, 134)

Credit is due to Malouf and Ricoeur, however, for they are able to resist the temptation to envision and exactly delineate the possibilities that a fictional text opens up to when a reader engages with it responsibly and imaginatively. Such a gesture would lead to the genesis of a creative and critical epistemology that would be violent in nature as it would seek to limit, control, and thus determine the course and nature of radical developments in human living and thinking that might take place in the future. Therefore, by highlighting the feasibility and radical potential of such scenarios without seeking to control the same, they collectively point towards the limits of our prevailing modes of living and thinking that are characterized, most often, by an uncritical and complacent compromise with the subject-object divide and its attendant problems of conservative identity politics and regressive stereotyping.

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The reading of 'reading', the fictional, and the literary that this paragraph presents draws from insights about Derrida's understanding of literature found in the works of, amongst others, Peggy Kamuf, Nicholas Royle, Timothy Clark, and Derek Attridge. Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (Routledge, 2004), *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (Edinburgh, 2010), and *The Work of Literature* (OUP, 2015) have influenced my thinking in particular.



**The Shackled 'Self' Amidst Conflict :
Bonds and Bondages in Khaled Hosseini's
*A Thousand Splendid Suns***

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The 'self' is neither something that exists as a default nor can it sustain its existence in isolation. It is not a single unit that could be described in linear terms. Rather, it is relative, described in relation to the 'other'. Moreover, as a part of defining, recognition is important because a self-conscious being can become what it is only through another self-conscious being. When we try to explain the 'self' in terms of difference, hence in terms of the 'other', defining identity is possible even though it is not a complete, absolute and unified self-identity. The 'other', as argued by postmodernist, becomes essential to define the 'self' and, to an extent, a part of the 'self'. Here, the other again becomes a mirror for the self, and the existence of the self becomes being-for-another. An identity, thus, becomes a play of the 'self' and the 'other'.

While to be the other is the non-subject, the self is always the subject, the centre and the agent. But for a woman, selfhood has always been defined as the 'other'. When not completely denied, it has been systematically diminished and subordinated. Beyond her biological sex, she is essentialized as woman through and within socio-cultural and religious structures, as Simone de Beauvoir writes: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (de Beauvoir 1997: 16). The woman is 'othered', for the Subject—the man—can be posed as such only if there is a counterfoil to it so “he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object” (de Beauvoir 1997: 17). But, as de Beauvoir questions, why does a woman yield to this:

No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view whence comes this submission in the case of woman? (de Beauvoir 1997: 18)

In fact, the 'othering' takes place by making the world gendered, where gender is a social and cultural construction of masculinities and femininities. The story of women in Afghanistan may not be any different from their fellow beings in other parts of the world, but Afghani women have also been subjected to the conditions of war, militarism, poverty and extreme form of patriarchy enforced through violent means by the Taliban, and with misogynistic feudal practices gaining currency in the name of restoring “Islamic identity”, the existence of women has been a turmoil for them. The paper examines the novel within the framework of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as 'other'.

Khaled Hosseini, in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, provides a vivid portrait of a country shattered by a series of ideological leaders and wars imposed on it by foreign and internal forces. In Afghanistan, after the Civil War, when the Taliban came to power in 1996, a system of gender apartheid was instituted. Women were put in a state of constant house arrest unless accompanied by a male relative. Also, woman's progress in education and employment was crushed with the harsh laws imposed by the Taliban. Under Taliban rule, women were stripped of their visibility, voice, and mobility. The novel is set in Afghanistan from the early 1960s to the early 2000s. Set against this background of Afghanistan's recent history, it follows Afghan women, born decades apart, whose lives are brought together through a series of largely tragic events.

The narrative, which spans several decades, is driven by the stories of women, who despite their starkly different beginnings, find a similarity in their existence through the narrative. Hosseini's women, much like the country of Afghanistan itself, appear to be propelled by the whims of outside forces, familial

and societal, with little chance of influencing their own lives and futures. They are the essentialized women, as de Beauvoir writes, produced and so maintained:

One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... (de Beauvoir 1997: 295)

Yet Laila and Mariam, the main women characters, hope to make the right choices, they attempt to shed their passiveness and take control of their lives but the shackles of the society, religion and womanhood do not allow them to do so. The portrayal of Laila and Mariam and their dreams, trials and challenges presents a complex view of women in Afghanistan that goes beyond oppression and the stereotype of the veil. Since it is a novel of Afghanistan at war and in upheaval, however, it is a story of shared experiences. The women's lives come together and intertwine with a shared desire for their family's survival. The differences in their upbringing and circumstances become inconsequential as personal survival becomes less important than caring for each other and their children. The story of their tragic lives runs parallel to the story of the wretched Afghanistan as the novel stretches over four decades.

Mariam's story begins in 1964 when she is five years old. Ten years later, at the age of fifteen, she is walking away from her one-room home or *kolba* on the outskirts of the village of Gul daman into the big city of Herat to find her father. Laila's story begins in 1987 when she is nine years old. She is born the same spring as the communist takeover of Kabul in 1978. Mariam is nineteen at that time. Their stories come together in 1992, as Laila turns fourteen and the *mujahideen* battle for control of Kabul. Laila is separated from her family and married to Rasheed at almost the same time that this had happened to Mariam. Their circumstances are different, but the results are virtually identical. Eventually, Laila will provide sanctuary for Mariam through the love that she and her children share with her—giving her a family, a sense of belonging, and a purpose. Mariam provides Laila and the children with the prospect of sanctuary through her decisive actions at the climax of the novel.

Not only does she save Laila from death, but she also provides the chance and the inspiration for Laila to realize her full potential.

Having been marginalized in the patriarchal social set-up, women are regarded merely as objects possessing no independent individuality. Amidst conflict and turmoil, they are all the more pushed to the margins. However, in the novel, endeavour on part of women characters and Laila's father is made to help women attain a sense of subjectivity. But the overpowering circumstances and socio-cultural and religious world of Afghanistan turn these efforts futile. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brings some hope to Laila's father even though he loses his teaching job to the Soviets. He seems to still see the positive aspects of their control, especially in Soviet policy toward women. The Soviet-backed government raised the status of women by providing them with educational and professional opportunities.

“What's the sense schooling a girl like you? It's like shining a spittoon. And you'll learn nothing of value in those schools. There is only one, only one skill a woman like you and me needs in life, and they don't teach it in school. Look at me.”...

...

“Only one skill. And it's this: *tahamul*. Endure.”... ..

"It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have." (Hosseini 2013: 18)

At the same time, this interference with entrenched tribal practices (Rasheed's sense of *nang* and *namoos*: honour and reputation) leads to the fierce resistance against the regime. “It is a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan,” Babi tells Laila, but he also points out that the freedoms women have now are “also one of the reasons [afghans in the tribal areas] took up arms in the first place” (Hosseini 2013: 121). This complexity is further highlighted later when, after the Taliban have taken control and begun their decimation of Afghan culture and the eradication of what remains of the rights of women to work, be educated, or to move freely outside the home, Laila declares that the Taliban are savages. Rasheed laughs at Laila's declaration, “compared to what? The Soviets killed a mil-lion people. Do you know how many people the mujahideen killed in Kabul alone these last four years? Fifty thousand.

Fifty thousand!" (Hosseini 2013: 251) For women, it is hard to conclude who is a lesser 'savage' because their position as the 'other' does not change. Just as the history of Afghanistan's wars and conflicts is morally complex, the lives of the characters in the novel are not linear.

Mariam, a young girl in the 1960s, grows up outside Herat, a small city in Afghanistan. She has complicated feelings about her parents: She lives with her spiteful and stubborn mother, Nana; while her father Jalil, a successful businessman, visits Mariam — his only illegitimate child — once a week. Mariam resents her limited place in Jalil's life; she wants to live with him, his three wives, and her half-siblings in Herat. She makes her wishes known by asking Jalil to take her to see *Pinocchio* for her fifteenth birthday. Jalil reluctantly agrees, but then never shows up to take her to the film. Mariam walks to Herat and finds Jalil's house, but he doesn't let her in, so she sleeps on the street. The next morning, Jalil's chauffeur drives Mariam home where she finds that her mother has committed suicide. Mariam recalls her mother's words:

*But where do I belong? What am I going to do now?
I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll be nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!* (Hosseini 2013: 40)

With her mother it was a harsh, uncompromising existence. Her mother's stern manner is in contrast to her father's cheerfulness, gifts, and affection. Mariam impatiently anticipates her father's visits and does not recognize the stable life she has with her mother and their few but trustworthy friends. Mariam also enjoys a fair amount of independence with her mother. Her mother will not let her attend school, but she has regular visits from the village mullah who teaches her to read and write and to recite the *Koran*. Nana's bitterness stems from her experience with rejection time after time throughout her life. After suffering an epileptic fit, she is rejected by her fiancé, and when she becomes pregnant with Jalil's child, she is rejected both by him and then by her own father. Nana has accepted a woman's fate and her existence not as that of a 'being' but as the 'other' who only facilitates the

defining of the subject—the man:

Woman is doomed to immortality, because for her to be moral would mean that she must incarnate a being of superhuman qualities: the 'virtuous woman' of Proverbs, the 'perfect mother', the 'honest woman' and so on. Let her but think, dream, sleep, desire, breathe without permission and she betrays the masculine ideal (de Beauvoir 492)

Thus, Nana has little ability to reassure Mariam or to raise her with a sense of security and family having experienced little or none of these comforts herself. When Nana believes that Mariam has left her to live with Jalil, her love for Mariam and her fear of one more rejection induce her to commit suicide. Her feelings for Mariam are deep, but she has not been able to express any such feeling to Mariam. The remote *kolba* beyond the borders of Gul damen could have been a refuge for Mariam, but it is, in her mind, a place to escape. And yet Nana has cared for Mariam, providing her with the skills she needs to know to support and care for herself. In Hosseini's description of Nana's teaching of Mariam, it appears that they indeed do have sufficient resources to live on and, however emotionally inadequate, Jalil makes sure they have their physical needs met.

Later, in Kabul, Mariam seeks for ways to feel part of a unit, however it might be formed. In the early days of her marriage she quickly responds to the attention and praise Rasheed gives her. “It surprised her, this thrill she felt over his small compliment” (Hosseini 63). Is this mere possessiveness out of love and care or the conventional subjugation of women? Within the terms and conditions of social set-up, a woman must tow the man's line. She is taken aback when he makes clear the extent of his will and his possessive nature, “Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that” (Hosseini 63). But later, she finds that Rasheed's insistence that while out in public she wear a *burqa*, a garment that covers her from head to foot with just a small mesh opening to see through, is, though at first shocking, a source of comfort. The burqa provides “a refuge from the

scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past” (Hosseini 66). Similarly, when Rasheed holds a celebration in recognition of Mariam's first pregnancy, Mariam does all the preparation and then is confined to her room until it is time for her to clean up. But, just as the *burqa* gives her a sense of sanctuary from prying eyes, Mariam convinces herself that Rasheed's protective nature is flattering, “Easheed saw sanctity in what they had together. Her honor, her *namoos*, was something worth guarding to him. She felt prized by his protectiveness. Treasured and significant” (Hosseini 74).

There are hints of subversion but in the end it is the physical assault of Rasheed that forces Mariam to surrender, to accept the diktat of her man with questioning, without doubt:

Over the years, Mariam had learnt to harden herself against his scorn and reproach, his ridiculing and reprimanding. But this fear she had no control over. All these years and still she shivered with fright when he was like this, sneering, tightening the belt around his fist, the creaking of the leather, the glint in his bloodshot eyes. It was the fear of the goat, released in the tiger's cage, when the tiger first looks up from its paws, begins to growl. (Hosseini 2013: 234)

Her tolerance towards Rasheed has a background. Though Mariam, one of the two female protagonists, is described as a quiet, thoughtful child at the start of the book. Born out of wedlock to a rich and married businessman, Jalil and his former housekeeper, Nana, Mariam resents her mother's strict ways and the fact that she only sees her father once a week. Mariam's shame at being illegitimate makes her unable to stand up for herself. When her mother commits suicide after Mariam runs away at age 15, Mariam is plagued by guilt that controls her for much of her life, and thus contributing to her acceptance and forbearance at being married to the abusive Rasheed. During her long marriage to Rasheed, Mariam's inability to have children turns her into a resentful, bitter, and fearful woman. She has been so brought up and condition that having not been able to bear Rasheed's child, she feels not just incomplete but also guilty. For, “[i]t is in maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny; it is her natural calling...” (de Beauvoir 501). This helps her

understand her own mother better, and Mariam's life changes with the arrival of Laila, Rasheed's second wife. Through her love for Laila and Laila's children, Mariam is able to fulfill her wish to be a mother and to finally give and receive love.

On the other hand, conflict changes the trajectory of Laila's life and she also succumbs to the act of othering. Laila, the second female protagonist, is the youngest child and only daughter of Hakim and Fariba. The absence of both of Laila's older brothers, who have gone to war, makes her mature for her age and fills her with a sense of purpose. Laila has a strong desire to use her intelligence and education to improve the world around her. At age 15, Laila falls in love with her best friend since childhood, Tariq, but war forces Tariq and his parents to flee to Pakistan. Days later, a rocket kills Laila's parents and wounds her, and Rasheed and Mariam nurse her back to health. Laila's idealism and independence are challenged when she decides to marry Rasheed in order to give her unborn child by Tariq a father. Upon becoming a mother, Laila puts her children first and finds she is willing to accept limitations she once would have openly mocked. Through her growing relationship with Mariam, Laila not only takes comfort in having a friend and mother figure, but also begins to understand the sacrifices that are necessary to be a good mother by following Mariam's example.

However, Laila partially redeems herself with Rasheed when she gives birth to a son. Rasheed then places all of his focus on this small child and excludes the women from his attentions as much as possible. This once again highlights the place of woman: once the purpose of having a wife is met, she becomes redundant. It was her duty to bear a child, a son, to carry forward the lineage, and beyond that she is of no use. Thus, the woman is an object to be used.

Meanwhile, as drought and disaster exhaust the city's and the family's resources, the fragile situation of the family also begins to crumble. Aziza is sent to an orphanage, which is a weak refuge for the starving children of Kabul. After one of the trips of Mariam and Laila to visit Aziza, they return to find Tariq waiting outside their house. It is this fateful and nearly fatal event that brings about the pivotal moment in the novel leading to Mariam's decisive action against Rasheed and Laila's ultimate escape from him and into a true sanctuary. The women finally decide for

themselves, ceasing to exist as objects, acquiring their own subjectivity. The narrative of Mariam and Laila merges with the narrative of the rebuilding of Afghanistan and of Kabul in particular. As Tariq and Laila set to work at Aziza's old orphanage, Laila feels Mariam's spirit everywhere and senses it as a force behind Kabul's reconstruction: "Laila sees . . . that Mariam is never far. She is here, in these walls they've repainted, in the trees they've planted, in the blankets that keep the children warm, in these pillows and books and pencils. She is in the children's laughter" (Hosseini 2013: 366)

Throughout the narrative, we come across various incidents in the lives of women characters that specify their bonds and bondages as a result of their condition and in the end the author offers a sense of redemption through a ray of hope, with peace and equality as preconditions of a new beginning.

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Anglophile in outlook but Indian to the Core : A Study of Toru Dutt's Letters

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The letters of any well known character are of two fold interest: one biographical and other literary. In many cases, the literary interest is but secondary, for the main purpose of a letter is never to produce a literary creation. It may be an equivalent to talking with a friend. They may be more or less table talk. "Letters must not be on a subject," says Mackintosh. "Conversation is relaxation, not business, and must never appear to be occupation; nor must letters. There is, then, as much difference between the author's 'works' and his 'letters' as between the truthful snapshot and the pose of the professional portrait and the severely critical point of view is as out of place in the one as it is right and necessary in the other." (Das 52)

Therefore, letters very rarely can rank as classics. "The letters of Chesterfield, Cowper, Charles Lamb, Coleridge, Shelley etc. fairly rank among their author's 'works'. In the case of Toru Dutt too, if her genius had been allowed to reach maturity, her letters might have ranked as English classics" (52). Toru Dutt's correspondence includes her letters from England to her cousins in India, to her British friend Mary Martin after her return to India from Europe between 1873 and 1877, and to Clarisse Bader written just before her death. Toru Dutt's letters provide a testimony to her cross- cultural exchange, her developing intellect and her literary imagination. They set her literary work in context. The letters also provide "insights into astute deliberations of the British government in India in mid nineteenth century, and a colourful picture of the Anglophile lifestyle of the Indian upper middle class" (Lokuge xiv).

Written between the ages of sixteen and twenty one, the letters of Toru Dutt offer an insight into her youthful interests, the details of her days, her immediate and extended family, her tender hearted affection for her cats, birds and horses, Gentile

and Jeunette. Her letters are also entrenched in the highly westernized and Christianized atmosphere of the Dutt family residence in Calcutta. Toru writes of her daily routine in Calcutta: dinner, lunch, breakfast, croquet, lawn-tennis, or picnic parties, and of a “more restful and withdrawn routine” in the family's country residence in Baugmaree wholly given to reading. Toru's most prominent influences were her family, Christianity, travel to France and England, and literature.

In terms of education and upbringing, Toru was unusual in mid nineteenth century Calcutta. During her time, lot of changes were taking place in Calcutta. Macaulay's Minute of Education, in 1835 propagated European education, Christianity and socio religious reforms in Bengal, “The Indian Mutiny of 1857 caused a revival of Evangelism. Simultaneously nationalist movements that were developing across India also advocated Hindu women's reforms. Despite all this the overriding majority of conservative Hindus clung persistently to the tradition that confined the Hindu woman within the house in the sacred roles of wife and mother” (Lokuge xv). There was also the widely held superstition that “a learned (literate) woman would cause the death of her husband, and be burdened by the blight of widowhood”(xv). Although English was sanctioned as important for Hindu men who were required in the public world of employment to transact with the British, it was not deemed necessary for Hindu women who were the spiritual guardians of the Hindu culture. In such circumstances, Toru Dutt's parents provided education to her and her siblings. She was both highly literate in English and unmarried, and as a result invited communal censure. In a letter to Mary Martin, Toru Dutt expresses her scorn for the sacred concept of Hindu marriage and inscribes her vast difference from the conservative Hindu community and her own Hindu relatives:

An unmarried girl is never heard of in our country. If any friend of my grandmother happens to see me, the first question is, if I am married; and considerable astonishment, and perhaps a little scandal, follows the reply, for it is considered scandalous if a girl is not wooed and married before she is eight years old. (LMM 261, 270)

When Toru returned to Calcutta after spending four years in France and England, she returned with glorious images of Europe inscribed indelibly in her

memory. After her exposure to Europe, she found it very difficult to adjust back to life in Calcutta. She saw it through Europeanized and Christianized lenses. She scorned Indian rituals and traditions. In another letter to Mary Martin, she describes:

... and today also there is the Kali - Poojah, or the worship of Kali. One feels sometimes so sad when one looks on all these processions following a graven image, offering goats, and other sacrifices to it, and bowing themselves before it. Oh, that all India should turn to the true and loving God, who is alone able to save us and cleanse us from our sins!

Have you seen a picture of the idol Kali? It is the most hideous thing you can imagine. She is represented as a female as black as night, with her tongue of the deepest red, thrust out of her mouth, almost a yard long, with the chaplet of skulls round her neck; with one hand she holds a sword, the other grasps the newly severed head of a human being by the hair. She is said to be very blood thirsty. (LMM 313-14)

After coming to Calcutta, Toru began to locate herself outside her Calcutta community. She found “Calcutta a sink of antiquity.” Aligning herself with the British, she regarded local Indians as 'natives' and when reprimanded for it by Mary Martin, she wrote back shamefacedly that, “it is indeed a term used only by prejudiced Anglo-Indians, and I am really ashamed to have used it” (264). But at the same time, many of her letters show her growing sociological political disillusion with the British Imperial government of India. In Calcutta, Toru yearned for England, for the “free life [they] led there.” After enjoying the relative freedom in France and England, she felt stifled by the societal restrictions imposed on her in Calcutta, “We all want so much to return to England. We miss the free life we led there; here we can hardly go out of the limits of our own Garden. If we can fulfil our wishes and return to England, I think we shall most probably settle in some quiet country place” (LMM 226). Her yearning is expressed mainly through her letters to Mary Martin and the European literary voices to which she had been introduced in early childhood. She was living life at second hand, and escaped quite romantically into the literatures of the west. In another letter to Miss Martin, she writes:

Ah! I so long to be there [Cambridge], and like the poet laureate hear:
Once more in college fanes



The storm their high-built organs make,
And thunder-music rolling shake
The prophets blazoned on the panes,
And catch
Once more the distant shout,
The measured splash of beating oars
Among the willows. (LMM 254)

In Calcutta, Toru grew inwards into family life. She drew closer to her father and filled up the dull routine of her life with the extended family- a favourite aunt and uncle, and the little cousin Varuna. They offered her an alternative life and a sense of belonging. “Withdrawing from the outer community from which she was distanced and which alienated her, she seems to have located her centre within her family that provided the security and comfort of a shared culture.” (Lokuge xxiii)

Toru Dutt fashions herself as a mediator of her culture and extensively chronicles her experiences during the final four years of her life in her letters. Her letters to Miss Mary Martin comprise a “kind of epistolary translation of her life in Calcutta as a young Bengali woman (writer) and offer a very different perspective of her”(Brinks 29). Instead of being merely a “colonized consciousness trapped in the almost, but not quite dilemma of colonial mimicry, these letters reveal Dutt as a pointed and passionate thinker about social reform and current politics” (29). In the letters written during the last two years of her life, Toru emerges as someone whose expressions of Anglophilia co-exist with an increasing denunciation of British colonial policies and practices that betray a conviction of their inherent superiority. The elite position of her family gave her a privileged place to express her own convictions instead of making it difficult for her to be critical of British or Anglo Indian attitudes. Attuned to the racial inequalities and tensions between Indians, Anglo Indians and British surfacing in her immediate environment, Toru aligns herself with a “community of Bengali English educated elites who were challenging the colonial double standard.” (29)

After 1857, there was an increasing separation of Indians and Anglo Indians,



whether that took the literal form of discrete, demarcated spaces, for example the civil lines, cantonments, and hill stations versus the old cities or as hardened mental attitudes concerning the unbridgeable racial differences between two cultures. Racial antipathy and exclusivity were particularly egregious in Bengal. These attitudes gradually sparked emerging political movements. Opportunities for Indians to voice their grievances publically and push for reform differed widely by region. However, in Bengal, there was most widespread existence of voluntary organisations, “By 1870's Bengal possessed the largest number of vernacular and English publications dealing with contemporary issues.” (Metcalf93)

Reform movements in Bengal influenced Toru Dutt as a colonial subject and as a writer/translator. Their emergence can be traced back to the early decades of nineteenth century. In 1823, Raja Ram Mohan Roy not only argued for increased Indian access to an English language curriculum; he also protested the East India Company's restrictions on free press. In 1870's Ram Mohan Roy's sentiments had developed into more forceful demands by noted Bengali political reformers such as Sisir Kumar Ghose and Surendranath Banerjee to put an end to Great Britain's economic exploitation. Ghose and Banerjee also denounced the inequities that structured the appointment of qualified Indians to the Indian Civil Service. This issue is passionately protested by Toru Dutt in her letters:

Among the list of those who have passed Civil Service examination, there is not one Indian gentleman; this is very unfortunate. One of our relations went up for the examination and has failed; this is very sad for him. It is harder when a Bengali fails than when an Englishman has the same mishap; the Bengali leaves all his friends and relations and stakes all for his fortune for a successful examination, the expenses of coming and going are so great. (LMM 242)

Toru Dutt's letters on political matters begin two years into her extensive correspondence with Mary Martin. One of her letters refers to the visit of Prince of Wales' to Calcutta in 1876 for which her father had been asked to serve in the “native welcome committee”(Das 75-76). In this letter, Toru allows herself to be corrected by Mary for calling her countrymen “natives.” Though Toru's usage of the term “natives” charge her of having colonial mentality, her letters make increasingly clear

that she was becoming highly sensitized to racialist oppression. In conjunction with the Crown prince's visit and its heavy influx of visitors from Britain, Toru Dutt notes an Indian cab driver's refusal to accept a white man as his hire for fear of not being paid, which was a frequent occurrence those days. Toru seems to relish relating the fact that although the cab driver was aware that the man whom he refused was the Duke of Sutherland, Governor General's brother, but he still refused him. Whereas her earlier letters never mention such incidents, but in the last year of her life, Toru catalogues a series of humiliations suffered by the Indians. She points out the cruel behaviour of Anglo Indian women toward Indians. In a letter dated 22 March 1877, she writes:

I do not know whether Anglo-Indian officers' wives are in the habit of horse whipping the Indian soldiers but it is unlikely, as I have heard of Anglo-European ladies (?) beating, whipping their Indian servants. (Das 278)

Contrary to the interest and warmth which Toru Dutt experienced while travelling in Britain, she notes that in India she is never invited to socialize with Europeans:

When other Indians socialize with them, including eating, they do so secretly, reinforcing the racial and cultural divide. Hindus, liberal ones, will dine at a European's table without much demur, but it is done en cachette. (141, 248)

The government of India deliberately discriminated with Indians. Toru Dutt notes how an Anglo-Indian magistrate on one occasion spoke in a rude tone with her father and her family. Two months later, she conveys the distress felt by loyal Indians attending a durbar in her letter to Miss Martin:

Everybody received a card of admittance. But neither Papa nor my uncle Girish went. We heard from those who were foolish to go, that they sadly rued their loyalty, for they had to stand in the sun for three mortal hours, from eleven to two, without any tent or shelter over their heads. (239)

Toru Dutt's letters rebel against the intensified racial divisions of post 1857 revolt India. The Anglo-Indian contempt for Indians' abilities and aspirations came as a shock to her. Despite their liberal claims, the British in India instinctively assumed a strict, authoritarian posture. In her letters, Toru Dutt also refers to the legal

discrimination experienced by Indians. Two incidents of vicious Anglo-Indian racism published in police reports and subsequently in newspapers, preoccupied Toru Dutt in June and July 1876 and provided an occasion for her to ridicule the egregious forms of legal discrimination experienced by Indians. In the first case, British soldiers on holiday shot a number of peacocks belonging to a Bengali farmer. The farmer protested, called his neighbours for assistance and as the encounter progressed from words to blows, one soldier was severely injured, seven Bengalis were wounded and nine Bengalis died. The presiding magistrate found that “the villagers were [to be] fined each and all; the soldiers acquitted.” In the judge's words, “natives should know how precious is the life of one British soldier in the eyes of the British government” (Das 168-69). Toru Dutt scathingly reveals this “wildly disproportionate measure of the respective value of British and Indian life.” (Brinks 32) In the second case, some dogs belonging to a British magistrate attacked an elderly woman's goat. Protecting her goat, a Bengali schoolboy hit one of the dogs, accidentally killing it. Toru Dutt queries in her letter to Miss Martin:

What do you think he received; commendation, praise, for his pluck in fighting with five dogs, for his humanity in saving a poor woman's goat (on which she depended for her livelihood) from being worried? (Das 170)

She observes bitterly, “His sentence handed down by the magistrate and upheld by the joint magistrate and sessions judge 'all Europeans' is three weeks' imprisonment with hard labour.” (170)

Toru's disposition to favour British imperial rule began to erode following such incidents. She reveals overtly in her letters to Miss Martin a consonance between her political attitudes and those of her family. According to Toru, her father believed that the British “mismanaged the whole mutiny” and he intended to vote in municipal elections for Kristo Das Pal, editor of the *Hindu Patriot*, a weekly newspaper known for “protesting British injustice, and corruption and for supporting social reformist causes, such as women's education and widow remarriage” (170). In a letter from September 1876, Toru complains about the base economic motivation behind the British presence in India:

We have no real English gentleman or ladies in India, except a very few.

People generally come to India to make their fortunes, you see, and real gentlemen and ladies very rarely leave home and friends for the 'yellow gold.'" (204)

In another letter from September 1876, she refers to her father's cousin, Shoshee Chunder Dutt, who takes a "similar swipe at Anglo Indian greed" (Brinks 32). In an essay published in *Frazer's Magazine*, he criticizes the British government for its system of taxation in India. He argues that "taxes on the indigenous population, already suffering from high food prices should not be raised, nor should new ones be imposed; instead, import and export duties should be raised. Britain's tax policies favour the profits of foreign speculators: a bias, that will foment discontent throughout the country and widen the already large divisions between the governors and the governed." (Brinks 33) Shoshee Chunder's harsh indictment of the economics of imperial rule suggests one refrain in the Dutt family's discourse on Indian politics, one that surfaces in Toru Dutt's letters when she denounces the British in India as more attached to 'yellow gold' than to family and friends.

Toru Dutt herself couples her criticism of Anglo Indian treatment of Indians with open support for various liberal, indigenous reforms. She proudly encourages "Indians in their efforts to compete with the English for the academic honours" (Das 255). She bemoans the disproportionate cost and pressure on Indians taking Civil Services exams, that "highly contentious issue for political reformers in Bengal—indeed, at least one contemporary of Dutt's characterized it later as the impetus to the formation of a national political movement." (Heimsath 67). Given her family's investment in Toru and Aru's education, "high caste women's education surfaces as an important issue for Toru Dutt, and her letters reflect her support of both British and home-grown reformist efforts in Bengal." (176)

In her letters Toru expresses scorn at the practice of child marriage. She writes, "it is considered scandalous if a girl is not wooed and married before she is eight years old" (Das 152). Echoing Bengali reformers Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Keshub Chunder Sen's support for women's education, Toru enquires of Mary Martin whether it would be possible to educate a nine year girl in England. She also expresses her delight to hear that "two Indian women have passed entrance exams to study at university and speaks out for education as the best means for Indian women

to gain more liberties.” (72) The letters also speak out on numerous occasions for liberal social reforms for high caste Hindu women. Toru Dutt was in a tangy situation. Born in an anglophile family and converted to Christianity at an early age, Toru enjoyed a freedom which most of her contemporaries could not even dream of; yet she felt constrained. In her, there was a continuous struggle between the need to conform to social decorum and the natural instinct to break free from all shackles. Though she subscribed to social etiquettes in every possible manner, inwardly she had rebellious tendencies. Being educated and intensely analytical, Toru could penetrate the veil between ostensible sophistication as a means of external adornment, and centuries old mental block which remained at the core of her countrymen. An incident narrated by Toru in one of her letters serves as an example to the above statement. The Prince of Wales visited Calcutta in 1875 amid much show of opulence a festivity. A Bengali Brahmin pleader Juggodanundo Mukherjee, invited the prince to meet the womenfolk of his family. This unprecedented trespass of social convention became the subject of a heated debate. His detractors saw him as an impious Hindu and a political sycophant. His supporters lauded his progressive attitude. During this controversy over the Crown Prince's visit to a *zenana*, Dutt expresses her agreement with the liberal position of women in *The Indian Daily News*. She affirms “the Bengali gentleman's right to open up his home to the crown prince, that is, to have the female members of his family appear before the prince, in other words to violate *pardah* and act “as Europeans act” if, out of self respect as much as self determination, he is thereby following his own beliefs.” (Das 121-2). Toru ended her narrative saying:

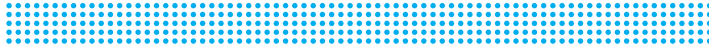
If the Babu means to bring out his family, as in English society every European does, and let his friends visit and mingle with his family, as behoves civilized men and manners, he is a very well meaning man, and his aims are laudable; but if he has only made an exception for the Prince and his suite, and means to 'lock up' his wife and family as all Hindu's do, his allowing the Prince to visit his family is a bit of flunkeyism, quite unpardonable, and worthy of highest disapprobation. (Das 121-22)

In one of her last letters, Toru mentions that “Anand Mohan Bose, a

prominent reformer and advocate for the abandonment of caste distinction and the promotion of women's education and literary culture, is encouraging her to help the cause of adult Hindu women's education.” (275) Although Toru Dutt's political views are clearly in a formative stage, attributable to her youth, it is clear that her persona in letters undergoes a marked change over the last four years of her life: Beginning as an unabashed Anglo and Francophile, dismissive of her own culture, at times racist, and longing for return for good to England, after two years in Calcutta, her attention has shifted squarely to local politics and daily events and evinces a heightened sensitivity to social and economic forms of colonial oppression. (Brinks 34)

During the last four years of her life, her letters temper her deep affection for Europe with strong criticism, and they record her developing pride in Indian life and customs. For example, she chastises the *Illustrated London News* for its “ignorance of the gender of the Hindu names; recounts Indian and Bengali folk superstitions with pleasure, proclaims the richness of Bengali language, asserts the grandeur and sublimity of the ancient Indian legends and after years of ardently wishing otherwise, she expresses pain at the thought of leaving India to go to England”(34). In many letters to Miss Martin, she expresses her desire to stay in India, “It is sad to think of leaving home and wandering in foreign lands” (Das 171). Dutt's reviewers were also encouraging her see herself as an Indian writer, whether it was a British reviewer seeing in her the landmark return of the woman writer in Hindu culture, or an Indian reviewer urging her to write in the Bengali vernacular.

Toru Dutt wrote 53 letters to Mary in all between the dates of December 1873 and July 1877. These letters reveal her closeness with Mary as well as her sensitive feminine nature. They are rich with the “evolutionary growth of a nascent personality.” (Dasgupta 12). In her letters, Toru comes out as a woman-child, pure, sweet, modest and essentially loveable, with a real Indian's love of home and country. Toru has no reservations with Mary, and pours out joys and sorrows of her affectionate heart. The letters are not mere exchanges of confidences between two girls and records of mundane events; they bear a cultured and literary stamp. According to Harihar Das, if Toru's genius had been allowed to reach maturity her



letters might have ranked as English classics.

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Journey from Subalternity to Identity in Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Karukku*

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Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary labels the term “subaltern” as “any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain” (“subaltern”). The term subaltern refers to subordinate groups within military hierarchies and stands for officers who are below the rank of a captain. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” observes groups of people who suffer domination and marginalization because of social or cultural or economic factors as subalterns: “...the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center)...men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (78). Hence, subalterns are the groups which are socially deprived, excluded, and marginalized, that is who are “subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way” (Masselos 189). Subaltern studies is “the most dynamic sector within the emerging disciplines of postcolonial theory” (Chaturvedi vii). Subaltern studies offers a “theory of change”, that is transition which “would...be seen in relation to histories of domination and exploitation...” (Spivak “Subaltern Studies,” 3).

Exclusion is an institutionalized attempt to keep out a segment of the population from social order and this distancing is expressed in physical separation. The word “Marginal” means “not part of a main or important group or situation” (“marginal,” def. 2). Therefore, marginalization is seen as an act of relegating or confining a group of people to a lower social standing of society. Both exclusion and marginalization are the ways of segregating a group of people from the social, political, cultural and economic domains of life. The entity of an individual is seen as to be embedded in society and group. Therefore, the focus is on relations that constrain individuals from achieving, for example education, income, consumption or full development, etc. Nobel Laureate Amritya Sen calls these constraints the “relation roots of deprivation,” that limits the “functionings” (*Poverty and Social*

Exclusion in India 3) of individuals of a particular group (for example Dalits, women, indigenous people, or persons with disabilities) to acquire or use their capabilities.

Dalits in India are subalterns. They are discriminated in the name of caste for ages which occurs in the post independent India as well. They suffer exclusion which is expressed in the form of untouchability and distancing away from them. They are marginalized when they are denied “access to public facilities such as wells, rivers, roads, schools and markets, etc.” (Kumar, “Dalit Literature,” 130). The situation becomes complicated in case of Dalit women who besides sharing deprivations with Dalit men have to further bear the tortures of the patriarchal social order. Jyoti Lanjewar observes, “Dalit women are also Dalits in relation to Dalit men within the Dalit community. They are thus Dalits twice over insofar as they bear the burden of both gender and caste oppression” (Basu 195). They are “Dalits among Dalits” (Bhoite vii), the most neglected and unrecognized human beings and therefore are subalterns among subalterns.

*Karukku*¹ records personal struggle of an educated Tamil Dalit Christian woman, Bama Faustina Soosairaj, who is aware of the social inequalities to which Dalit women are subjected to and she rebels against them in her quest for identity. Bama moves from past to present recalling different incidents which took place in her life. Her narrative begins with her childhood memories. It moves through her period of education and her vocation as a teacher and her subsequent decision to enter into convent and disenchantment from the church leading her to abandon convent life to her experiences and awareness as a Dalit woman wanting a space and identity of her own in a society.

Dalit women's life narratives have “the potential to create” identity and space for the “marginalized voices by questioning” the hierarchical social system responsible for the exclusion of marginalized. These life narratives are “concerned with writing history from below.” The essence of writing history from below is to challenge the hierarchical social system “with specific focus on that which is left out” (Kumar “Comparing Marginality/Subalternity,” 119) of such hierarchical construction. This paper based on Bama Faustina Soosairaj's life narrative *Karukku*

highlights the marginal experiences of a Dalit woman who is not only socially excluded but also suffers religious, cultural and economical deprivation. *Karukku* offers a critical appraisal of Tamil society in which Bama is Paraya² and the Church in which she is Tamil Paraya Christian: “It was only after this that I began to understand, little by little, that in that order, Tamil people were looked upon as a lower caste. And then, among Tamils, Parayar³ were a separate category” (*Karukku* 24). The paper is also an attempt to underscore how through her life narrative Bama makes an effort from “subalternity” (Dharmani 113) to identity and of inclusion of subaltern within the society.

Bama became aware of the demeaning presence of untouchability in the society in early childhood when she was studying in class three. One day while returning home, she saw an elder Paraya carrying a bundle of *vadai*⁴ by its string and presenting it to a Naicker⁵:

... an elder of our street came along from the direction of the bazaar.... He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadais fall out? The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais. (*Karukku* 15) She narrated this incident to her elder brother who acquainted her about caste system and untouchability. He told everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they touch them, they would be polluted. That is why the elder man had to carry the package holding its string. Gopal Guru in his article “Archaeology of Untouchability” says untouchability practices are performed “so as to retain relative social superiority on the scale of ritual hierarchy” (52). Bama's rumination over the incident shows her concern at this inhuman practice: “How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in banana leaf, and then parceled in paper?” (*Karukku* 15). Bama felt enraged. She wanted to touch those *vadais* herself to see Naicker's reaction. In other words, untouchability is just the way through which the Dalits are excluded and marginalized and pushed outside the

social periphery as 'others.' The practice of handing over the leftovers or pouring water in the cupped hands without touching Paraya gave Bama further glimpse into this callous practice: “The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti⁶ and others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths....The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paatti's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed must not touch Paatti's; it would be polluted” (16).

This spatial segregation gets mention in other Dalit women's life narratives as well, for example in *The Weave of My Life* (2008), Urmila Pawar outlines various instances when she as a Mahar⁷ girl was subjected to spatial and corporeal separation by the upper castes. Urmila Pawar's mother would make her deliver the baskets she had woven to the homes of her customers or buy some pickles from the people who were mostly from upper castes. She hated the task as they would accept baskets and even the coins only when they sprinkled water over them to wash away the pollution: “They made me stand at the threshold; I put the baskets down and they sprinkled water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them. They would drop the coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact, as if their hands would have burnt had they touched me. If the house belonged to one my classmates, the shame of it was killing...” (65). This segregation of her body established the meaning and identity of her in the social system as a Mahar girl, a subaltern.

Watching the derogatory practice of untouchability, one day Bama asked her grandmother, who was a bonded labourer at Naickers, not to drink water that way as it was very offensive. But her grandmother replied, “These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?” (*Karukku* 17). This explains the internalization of caste practices among Dalit women due to caste hegemony which forces them to accept their subordination. Hegemony is “The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and

consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci 12). The ruling class reaches the mind of the ruled ones and the ruled ones became a party in their own oppression. This holds true in case of Paraya women who accepted their destiny to remain subordinate to Naickers and endure suffering.

Bama's village Puthupatti was divided into upper caste settlement and lower caste settlement. There was great disparity between the two as far as government offices and facilities were concerned: “The post office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, and the schools—all these stood in their streets....Besides, there was a big school in the Naicker street which was meant only for the upper caste children” (*Karukku* 7). Parayas were denied of the basic amenities. The situation can be compared with Black Americans who “during 1950s” faced exclusion “from public services, to cafes and restaurants....The schools that had been made for black people were extremely poor....This was not the case with white people and their schools. The white people's schools flourished with books, equipment and....Good teachers had been employed to teach each class...” (“Disadvantages of Black Americans”). Keeping Dalits deprived of the basic facilities like education is the way of making Dalits dependent upon upper castes, so that the upper castes could exploit and use them as cheap labour.

The village fields were owned by powerful Naicker community. Each Paraya family was attached to a Naicker family as bonded labourer. From morning to evening Paraya worked hard surviving on *kuuzh*⁸ along with a few fresh nuts. The Naickers used to exploit Parayas the way they liked. After such a hard work, Naicker would “pay us five or ten paise for each marakkaal⁹” (*Karukku* 50). The labourers would silently accept what they were given, and come home in the evening: “India is an agricultural country but this source of earning a living is generally not open to the untouchables. They are workers and peasants; but as workers they are in the lowest paid and most unskilled industrial jobs and as peasants they are landless labour” (Ambedkar, “Essays,” 20). The majority of Dalits are impoverished as they are landless wage labourers and they lack access to basic resources.

The constant reminds of her caste in the school and at the church infused in Bama the consciousness that she was a Paraya: “Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us” (*Karukku* 26). Whenever something happened wrong in the school, Dalit children were invariably blamed for it: “It was the same story at school, though. They always spoke in a bad way about people of our caste. If ever anything bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, 'It must be one of the Cheri¹⁰ children who did it'” (18). Everyone seemed to think that Harijan¹¹ children were contemptible. They were used in the school as cheap labour. Menial jobs in the school like carrying water to the teacher's house, watering the plants, etc., were assigned to Dalit children. Even the priests in the Church were not above caste prejudice. Bama too had a bitter experience when she was accused of stealing a coconut and all her protests fell on deaf ears. The priest said to her bluntly, “After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it” (19). Without probing it was assumed that Dalits were bad omens, thieves and robbers who should be ostracized to keep society free from their pollution for the upper castes. After a long time, when Bama was allowed to return to the school, the headmaster “abused me roundly, using every bad word that came to his mouth, and then told me to go to the classroom.” When she entered the classroom “the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping” (19). In the very act of remembering the scene in her life narrative, Bama has confronted the hegemonic structure of the caste system.

It was not only at school where Bama suffered insults because of untouchability. Even when she would travel in public buses, she had to suffer humiliation. After class eight, Bama went to high school in a neighbouring town. She had to take bus while returning home during school vacation. In the bus, women from the upper castes, on learning the caste of Bama, would ask Bama to move elsewhere. When Bama would refuse, they would get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to her: “They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering

from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows. And pain” (27). Bama remembers the words of her mother when she told her about the problems she faced while travelling in the bus: “Say you are from a different caste. They'll never know” (20). But self-respect and self-dignity prevented Bama to do so: “But why should I pretend to these people that I'm from a different caste?” (20-21). Bama's refusal of pretension of being from other caste is the way of asserting her pride and identity as Paraya.

Bama found education as a sole means for emancipation and to overcome caste afflictions and a way to progress: “Education Everyone must have. Means of defense everyone must have. These are the paramount requirements of every man for his self-preservation” (Ambedkar, “Annihilation”). The advice of her elder brother that education is the means to attain self-respect, a space and identity in the society acted as a boon for her. She studied hard and was awarded prize for standing first among all the Dalit students who took the government S.S.L.C exam in her district which gave her encouragement to study further.

She completed her graduation and B.Ed and started working as a teacher. Bama had seen nuns exploiting the Dalit children in many churches. So she decided to become a nun to help “the poor and downtrodden.” She resigned from the teaching post to enter the religious order. But “once inside the Convent, it was like coming from the backwoods into a big metropolis” (*Karukku* 23). After entering convent, she found existence of caste divisions here also.

The school, where she was assigned to teach after taking orders as nun, was full of students from wealthy households. People of her community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms and cleaning out the lavatories. The people in the convent would speak ill about low-caste, thus defeating the very purpose of serving the poor and destitute: “According to their notions, low-caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no moral discipline nor cleanliness nor culture. They think that this can never be changed. To aid us is like aiding cobras....And I sat there like a lump of tamarind, listening to all this and dying several deaths within...being a coward, I survived somehow” (26). The description reflects the segregation of Dalits due to created and

established stereotypes about Dalits. The word Shudra has often been associated with “'darkness', 'evil', 'ignorance', 'primitivity'...” (Biswas 116). Bursting with anger Bama appeals to Dalit community: “We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low” (*Karukku* 28). Bama appeals to Dalit community to be educated and conscious about their enslavement. They must resist the social structures responsible for their exclusion and marginalization. They must make effort to create a just society free of inequalities.

Bama recalls her memories of commotion while serving in the convent as nun. Bama became nun because she thought that the convent and the church are symbol of love and equality. It was after entering the convent that Bama came face to face with the real state of affairs. She found that the people attached to church whose duty is to preach equality and love, are polluted with caste and class prejudices and exercise discrimination: “...they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way” (77). They could aware and educate Dalit children about their situation in the society and encourage them to improve their status but instead “everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them, suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility of change. And mainly because of this, those children seemed to accept everything as their fate” (103). The situation can be compared with situation of African society presented in the novel *Petals of Blood* (1977) by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. The characters of Karega and Hawkins represent those who are not only disillusioned with the British system of education but who also understood fully well its real design. Hawkins in *Petals of Blood* puts it as: “The education we got had not prepared us to understand those things: it was meant to obscure racism and other forms of oppression. It was meant to make us accept our inferiority so as to accept their superiority and their rule over us” (165). In a similar way, the convent educated Dalit children accept the inferior status

of Dalits without being the critical observers. Disillusioned Bama left the convent. She says, “My conscience was battered and bruised...I left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited” (*Karukku* 78). Bama in *Karukku* has talked about the exclusion within the exclusion and marginalization within the marginalization. As a woman she is twice marginalized, not only in the society but also within her community. The decision to leave the convent was not easy for Bama. After coming out of the convent, she suffered unemployment and deprivations. Bama's position as an unmarried Dalit woman made it more difficult for her to get an accommodation in the society:

And if a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere, all sorts of men gather around her showing their teeth. However angry you get, however repelled by their expressions and their grimaces, even to the point of retching, what can you do on your own? We think so many thoughts. We hope so much. We study so many things. But in real life everything turns out differently. We are compelled to wander about, stricken and unprotected. (119)

Her feeling of helplessness was aggravated by the evil designs of people who consider a working and alone woman an easy prey. This reflects on the further marginalization of Dalit woman.

Dalit women life narratives are not simply the narration of a life story but they are used as a means of self-assertion. They are a process of self-emancipation that creates their identity and space within literary as well as social sphere. Bama compels her readers and listeners to think about the reasons why the Dalits are still excluded. Why they are not still accepted? By writing her life narrative, *Karukku*, Bama has voiced the silence which was there for thousands of years. Through *Karukku* Bama has asserted her 'self' and has created her identity as a dignified Paraya woman.

There are numerous expressions of marginal experience and fighting instinct in *Karukku*. *Karukku* gives us hope when Bama sees the beginnings of change in the gradually growing awareness among Dalits of their own oppressions: But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far

repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect, and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion. (109)

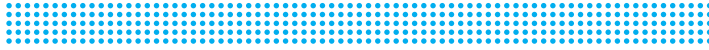
Karukku acts a site of struggle where the voice of the marginalized individual contests the institutionalized hegemony. *Karukku* has weaved a story of movement from hopelessness to hope, invisibility to visibility, from silence to articulation, from subalternity to identity and from exclusion to inclusion.

Notes:

1. *Karukku* is Bama's life narrative, originally written in Tamil published in 1992. It was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000 which won the Crossword Award for translation in 2001.
2. In Tamil Nadu, Parayas form nearly fifty nine percent of Dalit population.
3. Parayar is synonym of Paraya.
4. Vadai is a popular snack of South India.
5. Naicker is a landowning caste, the dominant caste community in Bama's village.
6. Paatti, a Tamil word used to address grandmother.
7. The name of an untouchable caste in Maharashtra.
8. Kuuzh is the Tamil name for a porridge made from millet.
9. Tamil Unit of Measurement.
10. Cheri means slum or the seaside habitations.
11. Mahatma Gandhi named untouchables as Harijans which means 'children of God.'

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REVISITING SLAVE NARRATIVES IN POSTETHNIC AMERICA

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“But I suppose the most revolutionary act one can engage in is...to tell the truth.”
(Howard Zinn, *Marx in Soho: A Play on History*, quoted in *Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade*, 2012, 53).

This might seem like a simple statement, but these lines introducing Part II of a postmodern American narrative reveal a rethinking of the postcolonial stance on history as memory. It implies that history is built through perspective, its writing a political act in which the centre predominates, with the politics of silence ensuring that the tales on the margin are relegated to chests, diaries, and individual memory. The perception of the powerful informs collective memory, and the disjuncture between individual memory of historical events and the collective national memory is featured in a silence that prevents the individual from interacting with the collective, resulting in disjunctive frames of myths, prejudices, and part-truths.

Present day postmodern narratives see for themselves a role in deconstructing this politics of silence and reversing it. One such narrative, *Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade*, an autobiographical two person account of a journey to revisit sites of slavery, counters the politics of silence that surrounds historical trauma, attempting in the process to reconstitute the framework that governs identity construction. Based on the Freudian model of trauma resolution through surfacing of the *Nachträglichkeit* or belatedness, this paper will analyse how the journey of Thomas Norman DeWolf, a white descendent of a prosperous slave owning family and Sharon Leslie Morgan, a black descendent of a slave, delineated in the narrative, attempts to create a Foucauldian heterotopic space to allow the centre and the margin to coexist in a spatial and temporal reliving of the trauma of slavery, thereby confronting

hegemonic structures that prevent memory from initiating a postethnic affiliation across racial boundaries.

In America, official history has largely confined itself to a Eurocentric concept of norms whereby African American voices find themselves on the fringes, identified as a diaspora where the factors governing the shaping of memory include African folklore and religion, the experience of slavery and racial discrimination. Despite an attempt to confront trauma, slavery does not occupy the centre in any white model of the past. It is rather, an aberration in the psyche governed by shame and guilt that needs to be overcome to allow for a postethnic change in power paradigms between centre/periphery, black/white, owner/slave, self/other. A nationally inclusive identity needs a definitive breakdown of modernist binaries. Hollinger realised the importance of Randolph Bourne's definition of the nation as “a fundamental fact of our consciousness, an irreducible minimum of social feeling” (3), also realising the need to reject “prescriptive” labels in favour of what he termed voluntary “affiliations” (7). This was the only way to move beyond historical trauma and bridge the disjuncture between (white) public and (black) private memory that informs identity.

Race has traditionally been a major factor deciding group affiliations in America. The one-drop rule ensured that a person with any African ancestry was classified as “black”. Today, racial discrimination exists in a form that is subtle yet invidious. Statistical information is used to classify Americans as white, African American, Hispanic, Native American or Asian. Race becomes a necessary part of a person's identity, and informs the psyche of the people even in “safe zones”. The challenge for a postethnic American state that claims to offer equal space to all today is to rupture the silence about the past and to reverse hegemonic structures in order to break down the barriers erected between races by history, thereby encouraging voluntary affiliations reaching across the racial divide in the present.

American identity has traditionally been informed by the colour of one's skin, centred on the idea of racially pure Whiteness. Slavery was not only an exploitative commercial venture counterproductive to a healthy psychological bond with the

past, but also resulted in a postcolonial ethnocentric “closing off” that made race the predominant reality in black lives and the white psyche. Consequently, all but the pure white were confined to the realm of the body, circumscribed by their black skin. Roy and Ringo say: “Embodiment encapsulates both the social and psychological lenses through which the concept of the self is filtered, and race becomes a powerful identifier defining the self's ability to escape the body's limiting effects” (67). Identity for blacks and whites, thus, defined caging into or freedom from the body. Ifowodo says, “The specific nature of the trauma of the colonized is characterized not by the desire of the son for the mother nor by the father's threat of castration – to follow the classic psychoanalytic paradigm – but by the self-abnegating effect of racism and political domination” (10). It is in this region of abnegation that the individual forms his relationship with the self and with history.

History has for long remained the domain of images built within a systemic structural hegemony that works to support and perpetuate modernist binaries. This has resulted in a politics of silence on all matters related to race, especially among white people. Postmodernism and its celebration of the multiple identities that make up the self has opened up this politics of silence to debate, and the postethnic positing of affiliations across the colour line has favoured the individual over the collective. Trauma, and its buried origins in the fissures of the black/white dichotomy, has resurfaced in the psyche. Ashis Nandy, in an article published in 2005, titled “There's No Forgetting the Trauma,” addresses the need for individual and collective trauma to be worked through so that the politics of silencing is ruptured. Nandy emphasises “the importance of remembering” events that are suppressed from what he calls “a collective national memory.” He talks of rupturing and regenerating the meanings and significance attached to events which follows questioning. Alice Walker also stresses the importance of going back to the site of trauma to initiate healing. In *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*, she says, ““The world cannot be healed in the abstract [. . .] Healing begins where the wound was made” (2000: 200).

The first step towards healing is accepting the existence of the raw wound.

The transatlantic slave trade from the 16th to the 19th century was a horrific tale of an entire race of people stripped of human dignity and rights and reduced to the status of 'chattel' or property. The period of slavery was a period of the suspension of democratic, civil and human rights for the millions of Africans enslaved and conferred on all a legacy of silence about the trauma perpetrated and suffered. The descendents of slaves and slave holders each have their own memories of the period, passed down to them from their ancestors. Freud calls this transgenerational transmission of trauma “phylogenetic”, focussing on the painful remembering of traumatic events or “retrodetermination”, a theory that was later used by Cathy Caruth to explain the delayed temporality of trauma (7).

It is this legacy of silence, born of guilt, shame or denial, which present day narratives seek to address, thereby countering the politics of silence about racism born of past subjugation. These narratives present a theory of healing through revisiting individual and collective memory of traumatic historical events, positing that the journey to the sites of trauma must be a common one for both blacks and whites. In *Gather at the Table*, Morgan says, “Racial acrimony, devolving to us all as a result of America's foundation in slavery, is a fatal flaw in the American consciousness”(16). She realises very early in her life that very few blacks want to discuss colour. Her co-author, DeWolf, understands this better – white people *never* want to talk about colour. Both sides are in denial, attempting to move on while the silence undercuts every aspect of life in a multicultural state. Roy stresses: “The first step to making Whiteness a tangible construct is to force it into the sphere of the visible” (187). DeWolf and Morgan realise that without rupturing the politics of silence, no healing can occur.

The first step to rupturing silence is to create a heterotopic space for communication – a space that, according to Michel Foucault, functions in non hegemonic conditions. Foucault talked of the impossibility of the co-existence of spaces under hegemonic conditions, stating that there are groups which cannot co-exist “except in the non-space of language” (xviii). In postmodern narratives, the text becomes the space for a journey that is heterotopic in that it moves beyond the purely literary to play an important socio-political role. Its characters, through the printed

word, attempt to create a micro social world that acts as a base for movements in the real world. *Coming to the Table* as a community and *Gather at the Table* as a text envision the interaction of the printed word with the real world to create a space where healing can occur through a cathartic revisiting of the past. *Coming to the Table* began with the interaction in 2006 between Susan Hutchison, the six-times-great-granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson and his wife, Martha, and Will Hairston, a white man who descends from one of the largest slave-holding empires in the Old South. This group defines itself as “a community of people who seek to heal from the ravages of slavery and the ensuing racism that is endemic to American society” (*Coming to the Table*). It conducts regular meetings at the Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, organising workshops and visits to sites which have importance in the history of slavery. These are activities which encourage interaction between blacks and whites, focussing on creating spaces where memories can be brought out into the open and the historical trauma accepted. “An experience was planned in which black and white descendents of ancestors linked by a slave/slave-owner relationship, a blood connection, or both could explore the history of slavery – its legacy and impact on their lives.”(7) Started as an informal group, *Coming to the Table* is now being offered as a formal course of study by the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at the Eastern Mennonite University.

It was while attending a week long *Coming to the Table* course of study in January 2011 that DeWolf and Morgan met and decided to collaborate on a book recounting their revisiting of history. Thus, *Gather at the Table*, the first recorded account of a white man and a black woman's conscious attempt to undertake a spiritual and intellectual journey together into the past, was born. Using the print and the social media to reach out, *Gather at the Table* forces Americans to confront statistics. *Coming to the Table* goes further, stating, “Our vision for the United States is of a just and truthful society that acknowledges and seeks to heal from the racial wounds of the past – from slavery and the many forms of racism it spawned.” It uses the print and social media to form groups, with universities and churches providing a platform to enable people to confront and accept their heritage and connect with the dark areas of history. As these areas light up, enabling blacks to accept that they have

been traumatised and whites to accept guilt, deeper wounds are revealed. Opening up these wounds will ultimately lead to catharsis – the first step towards healing. Dr. Howard Zehr, in *Gather at the Table*, calls this “restorative justice”: “We need to see that slavery is an important part of who we were then and how we are now. Guilt and shame get in the way” (108-9).

Healing needs great effort to transcend the effects of trauma. Before healing can begin, wounds have to be accepted and opened up. *Gather at the Table* emphasizes this:

“Trauma engulfs us where we are most vulnerable in body, mind, and spirit. It creates wounds that can affect us so profoundly that we may lose the ability to respond rationally, if at all. Chaos replaces order. Our experiences with each other underscore the dramatically different ways in which we view the world and the consequences of the historic trauma of race-based enslavement.”(45)

This is especially true of historical trauma, where the present generation has not experienced the pain firsthand; rather, it has been passed down through generations as memory. In visiting the sites of this memory together, DeWolf and Morgan effectually create a spatial domain that is the Other for each.

Slave narratives in postethnic America have revolutionised storytelling as heritage in their attempt to create a separate cultural space for dialogue which would directly affect the present and the future. They confront history and the mechanisms used for perpetrating racial hierarchy in America, and exemplify the use of the same tools to subvert the process. While the earlier narratives written by slaves who had either escaped or managed to buy their freedom by their very nature used ethnocentricity as a means of empowerment for a group that was marginalised, current day narratives reflect a desire to transcend the restraints of this approach in a postethnic world. They realise the importance of creating a transcultural space for interaction between blacks and whites, a space filled with what *Gather at the Table* refers to as 'shades of gray' (53). These narratives act as what Paul Gilroy termed a 'cultural contact zone'. This approach uses religion, tradition and ethnicity — the weapons of the white man – as tools to subvert supremacist attitudes.

Postethnic slave narratives consciously identify hegemonic structures that

have been used to perpetuate racist attitudes. By stressing on cultural diversity, a multicultural State ensured that the concept of difference was maintained. Postethnicity appreciates “ethnic connectedness” (Hollinger, 4) by encouraging affiliations by choice. As Hollinger notes in the Introduction to *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, “A postethnic perspective on communities of descent within the United States entails the principle of affiliation by revocable consent”(13). A DuBoisian “double consciousness”, that is, trying to incorporate both European as well as African elements in one's identity implied that while African Americans absorbed white cultural norms and practices, white people adhered to the purity of their culture. Affiliation by revocable consent leaves people free to engage beyond boundaries prescribed by race, religion and ethnicity, and affiliations to groups become voluntary, enabling people to explore beyond the ethnocentric. Present day slave narratives encourage such affiliations in a non hegemonic atmosphere.

By including the Eastern Mennonite University in its venture, *Coming to the Table* ensures the support of two powerful sections of society – the Church and the academia. Religion and education play an important role in the formation of attitudes. Religion was a powerful tool in the hands of whites, who portrayed the supremacy of their race as divinely ordained. By supporting the creation of a common space for black and white people to interact and share experiences of race, the concept of equality in the eyes of God crosses a potent psychological barrier. In the same way, denying education to blacks, for whom it was illegal to read and write, was a powerful way of keeping the black man ignorant of his condition. Education, the whites knew, would only encourage critical thinking and fan dissatisfaction among the slaves. It would also create a space for intellectual interaction, a dangerous precedent to questioning of dominance. Introducing *Coming to the Table* as a formal course of study offered by a State university was an attempt to counter psychological segregation of the intellect whereby whites and blacks occupied separate ideological spaces.

Antebellum and postbellum slave narratives of the 17th and 18th centuries attempted to empower the enslaved African American community by disseminating information about the practice and the reality of the abuse suffered by slaves. The era

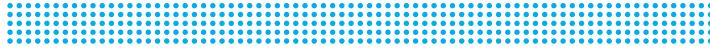
following emancipation and the subsequent abolition of Jim Crow laws did very little to heal the wounds inflicted by slavery. The one drop rule ensured that a hegemonic framework kept ethnic affiliations or, rather, the difference between white and non-white, firmly in place. A stress on cultural diversity paradoxically strengthened these distinctions. The very idea of a black woman and a white man occupying the same textual space and working towards the same goal of acceptance of the Other as an equal is revolutionary. Towards the end, *Gather at the Table* affirms:

“Our journey would not have had the same impact had we not travelled *together*; struggled and laughed and argued *together*; visited the graves, the courthouses, the museums, the places embodying both horror and hope...*together*. What we did was empowering. It brought history alive and into the present.”(202)

By allowing black and white, past and present, centre and periphery, to co-exist, postmodern slave narratives become the microcosm of a social and political order which provides sanctuary for healing from historical trauma. The narrative ends on a postmodern acceptance of the uncertainty of the individual journey, positing healing as a personal process of acceptance wherein the quest for a postethnic identity draws into its fold both individual experience and collective memory: “Ours is not the only way. Everyone needs to find their own path. [. . .] And on we walk . . . (202).

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Book Review

**Mishra, Binod. *Multiple Waves*. New Delhi :
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XII+50. Rs. 200, ISBN- 978- 81-8435-5048**

The *poiein* and its *poiesis* has been a complex plenitude since time immemorial and it has aptly been worked and reworked roughly by idealist school of thoughts, which establishes poetry as an inscrutable means of epistemological formation and an instrument of exploring through the quizzical ontological realities of its existence; the realist tradition of philosophical inquiry propagates the fact that poetry is deeply entrenched into the pragmatic reality of the universe and hence it must respond to the existential concerns of the *homo sapiens* and thus it voices the major sociological questions of the *a priori* and *a posteriori* reality of the world; finally, the *datum* of aesthetics and aestheticism locates poetry into the world of *Kalokagathia* which is an enviable consequence of *claritus*, *quidditas*, and *integrates*. It is interesting to note that the poems do not only traverse through the plenitude of idealist school of thoughts and the realist tradition of philosophical enquiry but they also pass through the sublime domain of esthetic and aestheticism as Charu Sheel Singh, with his intellectual perspicacity, has rightly placed it in his forward of the *Multiple Waves* (2017). He has rightly explicated the phenomenological and hermeneutic realities of *poieinas*:

Multiple Waves comprises poems of various natures. The poet begins his collection with the poem entitled 'Night before the New Year' and ends with 'A Happy Man'. In between there are poems on life, death, mother, child, and many other titles that, in some way or the other, affect our human lives. Mishra's unique experiences of varied type color the poems in this collection. While he feels with his heart, he writes with his mind. Thus, his feelings don't run amuck; they are beautifully bound in apt words and images. His expressions are never loose; he rightly prefers restraint to profligacy. Thus, the final outcome of this collection is of a growing poet, promising a

lot more in the coming years. (XI)

The text includes forty six poems where the poet has unpacked his poetic impressions and imaginations which resonates the underlying concerns of modernist and postmodernist world. If, on the one hand, he expounds the infinite panorama of futility and anarchy but on the other, he has also delineated the celebration of postmodernist culture. The text opens up with some remarkable motifs and plenitudes which represent the temporality of the impecunious predicament of the larger social reality of the contemporary world. The poet records the temporality of the world in his “Night before the New Year”:

Heavy-hearted though,
Night stands eager, eyelids laden
with desire
to see its new master,
whose mien dazzling though,
she cannot see but feel
through rays that penetrate her
all through her body. (01)

Similarly, some of his poems have reflected upon the murky materialist reality of the contemporary world which is primarily driven by the physical and crass cacophony of the present day. Further, they have commented upon the pragmatic realities of today and have responded to them with a sense of nihilism and despondency. Nevertheless, “Woman” represents the controlled, hegemonized and subjectivized identity of the women. The poet thus, records the miserable predicament of women:

I perform various roles though
cooking, cleaning and washing my forte,
fortified against man-made strictures.
A caged bird my only 'being'
I groan and grumble unheard
just to raise civilization after civilization. (04)

In addition, the poetic firmament of Binod Mishra also reflects upon the phenomenon and noumenon issues of human existence. His poetic corpus traverses through the

world of despair and despondency but finally it takes its recluse in the illuminated domain of hope and spiritualism. The poet employs the metonymy and metaphors of 'Poem', 'Poet', 'Wonder Tree', and 'Her Bag', 'Silent Lover' 'Nature' which finally triggers him to compose “A Poem” where he records:

A poem is not born
 but becomes
 crossing the process
 of churning and chiseling
 a divine game controlled by none
 but the Almighty.
 A poem oozes like water drops
 bursting from small holes in wet lands.
 It strikes those who yearn
 And not those who want to earn
 the wreath of the heath
 where neither the flowers abound
 nor words, nor silence make any sound.(06)

In some other poems, the poet places panoply of tropes, metaphors, signs, symbols, signifiers, and signifieds which suture the matrix of his poetic creations. His images do not only come from Indian myths and mythologies but also from the world of flora and fauna. He represents nature in different hue and concepts in 'Nature. He scripts:

We always unburden
 all our shrieks, sorrows and severity.
 You receive them gladly without groans
 and never deceive like humans
 in love, friendship and brotherhood.
 Do our agonies make you strong?
 We always recreate and yet you create
 new meadows in deserts.
 We put to test your perpetual rest,
 you always squeeze all our cries
 into meaningful silences over the tops
 and sweet notations
 rise and flow in your daughter's throat. (13)

The poetic world of the taxonomy not only represent the crass cacophony of the materialist world of today but it also focuses upon some remedies of the contemporary ills which are rampantly present. The poet represents the contingent nature of identity and echoes the postmodernist's ideas of change, flux, parody, pastiche and multiplicity. He state the fact that they all define identity. His “Identity” argues:

Identity now is in a flux
fixed one rusts and fair one fouls.
Innocence fled to spiritual world
Shyness found in smithereens
Beauty bidding adieu to branded smiles
shopped, sold and sheltered by
unsheltered avatars. (19)

Furthermore, some of his poems recount his philosophy of life which he has defined through the pragmatics of knowability and unknowability which represent the dialectics and antinomy of human life. His poem entitled “Life”

presents his philosophy of life:
Relations bidding adieu, to welcome
elation born out of formula
facilitating our whims and fancies
where talents trade on traditions,
and mountains shrink as rocks,
tunnels make way piercing
through bodies and cliffs
Bulldozers digging and casting
debris in river beds,
ecologists arranging parallel sessions—
a food for thought.
Time is never out of joint as us humans,
we stand together and are yet apart
our radiance spurs only
when our cells clank and ring
a new temper guides and drives our lives.
Let us look back and grieve for what is lost



for that alone can stir innovation and life. (26-27)

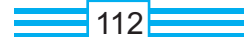
Similarly, some other poems have also reflected upon the socio-pragmatic reality of the world. In addition, there are some other poets who have responded to the inherent and irresolvable *antinomies*, dialectics, *chimera*, and *pharmakon* which lie in-between the physical-spiritual, physical-psychological, and earthly-ethereal world of today. “Absence” annotates the antinomies which lie between life and death, dichotomies and dialectics which pervade between two different poles of social,

economic, and political realities of today.

Today I am all alone
you left me half way as others,
our children have lost our addresses.
I look for your belongings in every corner
and soothe myself in silence
with your absence marking your presence (35)

The collection has made an attempt of depicting the fact that Indian English Poetry is not a mimetic representation of the Western canonical tradition of poetry and *poiesis*. It, in fact, represents the complex cultural, political, economic, and social situations of Indian realities. Moreover, the present book has given room to those unheard voices which have a great poetic potential. It is a candid attempt of the editors to strengthen the viable genre of Indian English Poetry by accommodating some unheard or rather ignored voices. Similarly, Charu Sheel Singh in the Foreword of the *Multiple Waves* rightly argues:

It is the genius of a poet to transform the ordinary experiences of day- to-day life into extraordinary poems with sparkling freshness. Cicero said that in language we not only speak the truth, we also hide it. Poets are the forerunners of the human race in the sense that they are the first to receive speech from God. Heidegger said that language is the most dangerous possession of mankind. We not only preserve history in language, we also destroy it in the same medium. This should make clear the task of a poet. Wordsworth assigned to the poets the role of refining the poetic language. That is what his poems aim to do against the backdrop of the poetry of Alexander Pope and



John Dryden. It gives me a sense of satisfaction that Binod Mishra's poetry fulfills many of these prerequisites. He is homely, unassuming, Spontaneous, and has a familiar style. His idiom is that of everyday language users. In future, I sincerely hope that he would fulfill Wordsworthian dream of poetry for the common man. (XII)

In a fast pace of life which has made possible the publication of numberless poetry collections, Binod Mishra's *Multiple Waves* deserves an important niche among the readers and true lovers of poetry both because of its content and quality.

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