

# Towards a postcolonial aesthetic : art, politics, and the work of literature

Tan, Leah Jolene Mei Yee

2021

Tan, L. J. M. Y. (2021). Towards a postcolonial aesthetic : art, politics, and the work of literature. Doctoral thesis, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/152347>

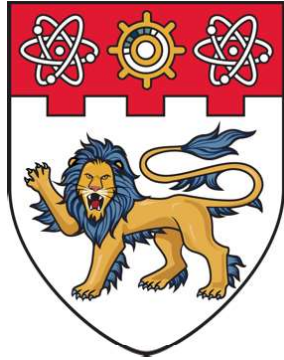
<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/152347>

<https://doi.org/10.32657/10356/152347>

---

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0  
International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

*Downloaded on 25 Apr 2025 07:13:00 SGT*



**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY**  

---

**SINGAPORE**

**TOWARDS A POSTCOLONIAL AESTHETIC:  
ART, POLITICS, AND THE WORK OF LITERATURE**

**LEAH TAN HONDA  
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES  
2021**

TOWARDS A POSTCOLONIAL AESTHETIC:  
ART, POLITICS, AND THE WORK OF LITERATURE

LEAH TAN HONDA


**School of Humanities**

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

2021


## Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

Date:	6 January 2021
Name of student:	Leah Tan Honda
Signature of student:	


## Supervisor Declaration Statement

I have reviewed the content of this thesis and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain plagiarised materials. The presentation style is also consistent with what is expected of the degree awarded. To the best of my knowledge, the research and writing are those of the candidate except as acknowledged in the Author Attribution Statement. I confirm that the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

Date:	6 January 2021
Name of Supervisor:	Professor SHIRLEY CHEW
Signature of Supervisor:	

## Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis does not contain any materials from papers published in peer-reviewed journals or from papers accepted at conferences in which I am listed as an author.

Date:	6 January 2021
Name of student:	Leah Tan Honda
Signature of student:	

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

Professor Shirley Chew, to whom I will always be indebted, for her tireless patience and guidance;

Professor Bede Scott, for all his advice and assistance over the years;

My parents, YMM, Priscilla, and Viona, for their constant support and encouragement;

The two Y. Hondas, for making every day wonderful.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements		i
Table of Contents		ii
Abstract		iii
Introduction	Postcolonial Literature and the Aesthetic: Reinventing Regimes of Art	1
Chapter 1	“As the Remaining Petal is about to Fall”: Beauty, Sorrow, and the Shifting Landscapes of Memory in <i>The Garden of Evening Mists</i>	45
Chapter 2	Reading <i>Anil’s Ghost</i> : History, Politics, and the Inventions of Form	111
Chapter 3	From Terror to Tragedy: Affective Translations in <i>The Wasted Vigil</i>	175
Conclusion	Beauty and the Contours of Postcolonial Politics	248
Works Cited		254



## Abstract

Situating itself in the gap between the examination of postcolonial literature as political representation, and the consideration of such writing as art, this thesis seeks to understand how qualities of form and affect, integral to the reader's experience of pleasure, provoke in the reader a political and ethical response. Proceeding from the premise that colonialism, in part, operated by manipulating the sensibilities of the subject, and that ushering in a truly *post*-colonial community necessitates an undoing of the effects of colonialism upon the senses, the thesis holds that an inquiry into the affective impact of postcolonial literature is not only crucial to apprehending how such writing performs its political function, but that it additionally constitutes in itself a proper response to the politics imbued in the text. The thesis considers the divergence between the way postcolonial novels have been read, namely, as political tracts in literary form, and the way they *should be* read, that is, as literary works that invite a political response, to ask: what is lost when the aesthetic qualities of the novel are neglected in favour of a thematic reading focused on politics? In turn, how might the aesthetic qualities of the novel clarify our understanding of its politics?

## Introduction

### Postcolonial Literature and the Aesthetic: Reinventing Regimes of Art

The question, as ever, is ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’  
And my answer is, by offering ‘befitting emblems of adversity’.  
– Seamus Heaney, “Feeling into Words”

I begin my inquiry into postcolonial literature and the aesthetic with a passage from Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*:

Dye work took place in the courtyards next to the warehouse. Circular pools had been cut into the stone – into which the men leapt waist-deep within the reds and ochres and greens, leapt in embracing the skins of recently slaughtered animals. In the round wells four-foot in diameter they heaved and stomped, ensuring the dye went solidly into the pores of the skin that had been part of a live animal the previous day. And the men stepped out in colours up to their necks, pulling wet hides out after them so it appeared they had removed the skin from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries. (130)

In dyeing leather, these men, immigrant tannery workers in Toronto, take on the colours of the dyes on their skins. They seem as one not only with the animal hides that they knead with their feet, but also with the vivid movement of reds, ochres, and greens, the broad strokes of colours leaping across the reader’s vision. Rendering the leather-dyeing process as a dance of men

clothed in colours, the narrator produces a stunning visual moment, particularly as the bodies of these men become inseparable from the beauty of the dancerly leaps that make this scene so captivating. “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (“Among School Children” 222), Yeats famously asked, alluding to the modernist conception that it is the seamless unity between the body and its rhythmic movements, content and form, in which the beauty of dance is forged. However, piercing through the idea that the thrust of art is contained in that moment of perfect unity, Ondaatje’s narrator crucially muses, “[i]f he were an artist he would have painted them but that was false celebration. What did it mean in the end to look aesthetically plumaged on this October day in the east end of the city five hundred yards from Front Street? What would the painting tell?” (*In the Skin of a Lion* 130).

“What did it mean in the end to look aesthetically plumaged” (130) is a question that comes into greater urgency when we consider that, in performing the movements lending the delightful dance of colours to the scene above, these dyers, “twenty to thirty-five years old, [who] were Macedonians mostly, though there were a few Poles and Lithuanians” (130), are in fact dying a slow but certain, premature death. In the same paragraph, the narrator underscores,

[t]hat during the day they ate standing up. That they had consumed the most evil smell in history, they were consuming it now, flesh death, which lies in the vacuum between flesh and skin, and even if they never stepped into this pit again – a year from now they would burp up that odour. That they would die of consumption and at present they did not know it. (130-131)

The contrast between the variegated picture and the grim material reality that besets the dyers after the “aesthetically plumaged” (130) moment provides the central narrative tension of this scene. As he ponders the “false celebration” (130) of creating artistic beauty out of the bleak

lives of these men, Ondaatje's narrator undermines the notion that – following Yeats' idiom – the significance of the dancer lies in his or her flawless unity with the movements of the dance; that the crowning beauty of the art is to be found in the moment of synthesis where the dancer departs from the mere materiality of the body to become the dance itself. Indeed, Ondaatje's narrator indicates that it does not suffice for art to simply convey beauty as created in the colours and movements of the dancers; that, indeed, eternalising that moment of beauty is a hollow endeavour when it both arises from and conceals a reality that is unmistakably harrowing.

Deploying “the different, the off-centre [as] a vehicle for aesthetic and even political conscience-raising” (Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* 70) in his retelling of modern Canada's early history, the narrator exposes the tug-of-war between the aesthetic and political ideals that shape the novel, and gestures towards the notion that in our search for ways to read beauty in postcolonial texts, the equations upon which beauty – as well as the unbeautiful on its underside – are apprehended need rethinking. This scene from *In the Skin of a Lion* sheds light on several issues that I seek to address, and provides a point of departure for this thesis. The first concerns postcolonial fiction's uneasy straddling of the artistic impulse to create objects of beauty, and the urgency to bear witness to the traumas and injustices of history. That “[s]ocial responsibility” is “the root of the creative work of the writers themselves” (Katrak, “Decolonising Culture” 255) is perhaps unquestionable – and yet art, as Étienne Gilson writes, concerns the “making of beauty for beauty's own sake” (*Arts of the Beautiful* 16); its “proper function” is to “produce objects expressly willed and conceived in view of their beauty alone” (22). The creation of beauty – that compelling quality that pleases one when perceived – is, as Gilson further asserts, art's “proper end, their *raison d'être*, and consequently their very nature” (22). How, then, might writers create beauty out of a past – and, indeed, a present – that is

riddled with violence and pain? Or, perhaps more significantly, how might beauty serve to more acutely convey the traumas and injustices of history in literary writing? How, indeed, might Ondaatje's narrator create a scene of beauty out of the dyers' work, when the work itself putrefies the dyers' bodies from within?

In this thesis, I explore two particular issues relating to the politics and aesthetics of postcolonial literature. The first revolves around the nature of postcolonial literary works. The second concerns the reception – the assumptions and frameworks of interpretation – that readers bring to their analysis of postcolonial fiction. In brief, I explore a marked tendency in postcolonial literary criticism: the divergence between the way postcolonial novels have been read, namely, as political tracts in literary form, and the way they *should be* read, that is, as literary works that invite a political response. I focus in particular on these questions: what is lost when the aesthetic qualities of a novel are neglected in favour of a thematic reading focused on politics? In turn, how might the aesthetic qualities of the novel *clarify* our understanding of its politics?

I proceed from the understanding that postcolonial literature is political not primarily because of its subject matter, but because of the formal means by which that subject matter is presented. In other words, as Jacques Rancière asserts, “[a]rt is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments that it conveys concerning the state of the world”, but “because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples in this space” (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 23). This is, however, not to say that the thesis espouses a strict formalism that relegates to second place the social and historical content that postcolonial writing frequently seeks to *represent*. I draw from the contextualist view of art advanced by the art philosopher, Peter Lamarque: that literary “works are very much

part of the real world” and “it is their embeddedness in a real-world context that gives them their identity” (“The Uselessness of Art” 211). In other words, “to attend to a work for its own sake is to attend to it as just as an embedded, intentional object ... informed by knowledge of the work’s history” (211). In fact, Lamarque makes the argument that valuing works of art for their own sake “does not imply attending only to properties of their appearance, which would be absurd, nor attending to them disinterestedly”, for “[t]o value a work for its own sake is to value it for what it is in itself” (209). The implications of valuing a work for “what it is in itself” (209) involves

the seemingly paradoxical idea that a work of art’s intrinsic properties, those determining what it is in itself, must include some intentional and relational properties. It is not just a contingent fact, but in some sense an essential truth, that David’s painting is of *Marat*, that Giotto’s Assisi frescoes are of *St. Francis*, that Ingres’s portrait of Napoleon is of *Napoleon*, and so on. To understand them as the works they are, we must grasp at least that; indeed those facts must inform our experience of them, if we are to experience them correctly. (210)

Lamarque’s words lend themselves to the notion that if the cultural and historical situatedness of the work gives shape to its identity, it is not inconceivable that the *formal properties* of the work are themselves informed by, and thus inextricable from, the wider relations of culture and history that the work explores. He points out that, indeed,

[t]he consequences are striking for what we mean by attending to a work for its own sake. It could not mean merely attending to the work’s surface appearance or to its formal or perceptually accessible properties alone. It must involve attending to some facts about the work’s context of origin. That context tells us what the

work is as distinct from other works that superficially might share some or much of its outward appearance. I am even inclined to suppose that some elements relating to the initial purpose of the work are inherent in the relevant context of origin. (210)

In this way, a proper response to the properties and effect of aesthetic form *also* requires an adequate grasp of the particularities of culture and history from which the work stems. Lamarque writes elsewhere that, “[i]f aesthetics is to be at all relevant to literature it must deploy recognizable features of aesthetic appraisal as applied more widely but it must also capture something distinctive about literature as an art form” (“Aesthetics and Literature” 29). To his words I would add: if aesthetics is to be relevant and applicable to readings of postcolonial literature, it has to be commensurate with the weight of the historical traumas and injustices that postcolonial writing *distinctively* carries. This is to say that looking at postcolonial literature through an aesthetic lens would not only mean speaking of the properties and workings of form; it necessitates discussion of how form is both informed by the history from which it stems, and actualises the interventionist tendencies distinctive in postcolonial writing that are, inevitably, fundamental to why the works have been created in the first place.

In the following chapters, I look into the ways that Anglophone postcolonial writers use the affective qualities of form to stimulate reflection on our relation to other cultures, our historical understanding of the present, and, ultimately, our place in the world. The overall task here is to contemplate, as Elleke Boehmer does in her drive to “re-vision” the reading practices and interpretative schemes with which we approach postcolonial literature, the question of “what a postcolonial aesthetic might entail” (“A Postcolonial Aesthetic” 171). The term ‘postcolonial aesthetic’ itself invites reflection on what – if any – the distinctive ‘set’ of formal properties that

underlie postcolonial works might resemble, as well as its effect on the reader's perception. Thinking about the aesthetic, however, is also inextricable from a consideration of aesthetics, the field of philosophy concerned with the nature and function of art, the appreciation of beauty, as well as the relation between art and the social pressures that govern both its production and reception. To speak of a postcolonial aesthetic is thus also: 1) to examine theories of the aesthetic for any implicit biases towards the Western cultural milieu from which they have sprung; 2) to inquire into the ways in which these aesthetic theories might have contributed to the exclusion or depreciation of postcolonial creative works from proper recognition as art; 3) to advance a view of art that centres not only upon the transcultural aesthetic practices and anti-imperialist politics of postcolonial works, but which also promotes awareness of the singular, distinctive modes of feeling and perception fostered by postcolonial literary forms.

Postcolonial theorists, as Bill Ashcroft has remarked, have “warily avoided the theory of aesthetics” (“Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetic” 410), not only because of the idea that aesthetic judgment, particularly as it has been theorised in Enlightenment philosophy, “can be a form of colonisation” (419), but also because aesthetics itself is “implicated in the canonical marginalisation of postcolonial literatures” (410). The two points of interest that Ashcroft raises in the lines above – first, regarding the political implications of aesthetic judgment as it relates to the perceiver, and second, regarding assumptions about the nature of art as it relates to the work itself – provide a useful starting point for examining the intersections and divergences between aesthetics and postcolonialism, and it is with these that I now proceed.



### *Aesthetics as regime of perception*

The idea that aesthetic judgment lends itself to colonisation is, of course, derived from conceptions of the aesthetic popularised by Kant, and is a sentiment advanced by postcolonial re-evaluations of Kant's inquiry into beauty as well as his writings on judgments of taste that underpin his aesthetic theory.<sup>1</sup> It is crucial to note that aesthetics, particularly as it relates to the philosophical inquiry into the nature of sensory perception and the beautiful, is a phenomenon that arose from a distinctly Western intellectual tradition. Prior to Kant, early Enlightenment writers who paved the way for the development of aesthetics as a field of knowledge were concerned with the question of how sensory perception relates to (the presumably superior faculty of) reason and logical thinking. One such writer was the German Enlightenment philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), whose rationalist thinking led him to articulate the sensuous pleasures associated with aesthetic experience as an aspect of "really confusedly known intellectual pleasures" (*Selections* 532). In alignment with Leibniz's idea that sensory perception nevertheless belonged to the domain of logic and conceptual knowledge, albeit 'confusedly', Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762), in whose work *Reflections on Poetry* (published 1735) the first modern usage of the term 'aesthetic' is recorded, similarly attempts to relate sensory pleasures to reason.<sup>2</sup> He makes the argument that "*things known*", derived from logical and conceptual reasoning, relate to "the superior faculty as the object of logic" (*Reflections on Poetry* 78, emphasis in original); in turn, "*things perceived* [are to be known by the inferior faculty, as the object] of the science of perception, or aesthetic" (78, notes and emphasis in original).

---

<sup>1</sup> While Kant's discussion more frequently relates to instances of beauty in nature rather than art, his writings on beauty and judgments of taste have nevertheless become a cornerstone of aesthetic theory relating to the appraisal of art.

<sup>2</sup> See Leonard Wessell's "Alexander Baumgarten's Contribution to the Development of Aesthetics".

Hierarchies of cognition notwithstanding, to Baumgarten, aspects of aesthetics such as beauty lend themselves to apprehension through rational concepts of analysis.

It is against this context, where sensory perception is seen as an appendage of reason, that Kant's writings on aesthetics take shape. Prior to his inquiry into judgments of taste in *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant has argued, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), for sensory perception to be seen as distinct from conceptual understanding.<sup>3</sup> Kant's approach to the primary question that guides the formulation of his aesthetic theory – that is, how does one arrive at “the ability to judge the beautiful” (*Critique of Judgment* 43) – arises from his search for a way to apprehend beauty by a means other than the objectivity implied by conceptual reasoning.<sup>4</sup> In his drive to show that apprehending beauty is an act that is ultimately subjective – in other words, that beauty does not present itself to analysis through conceptual reasoning – Kant puts forward several ideas that have come to be foundational in philosophical aesthetics: disinterestedness as a requisite for aesthetic judgment, a universal ‘common sense’ that explains why beauty can be similarly perceived by different people even as it remains a subjective experience, and purposiveness without purpose as a precondition in the form of the object. I will elaborate on the first two principles before returning to the third in a later paragraph.

A disinterested judgment of an object differs from a judgment based on agreeableness, which relates to the individual's private response to pleasing stimuli that other people may or

---

<sup>3</sup> In his bid to differentiate between the various ways in which an individual might relate to an object, Kant sets forward the argument in *Critique of Pure Reason* that “[t]he genus is *representatio* in general (*representatio*). Under it stands representation with consciousness (*perceptio*). A *perception* which relates solely to the subject as a modification of its state, is a *sensation* (*sensatio*), an objective perception is a *cognition* (*cognitio*). A cognition is either an *intuition* or a *conception* (*intuitus vel conceptus*)” (224). While perception relates to an immediate, conscious response to an object, conceptual understanding revolves around the apprehension of the common or shared characteristics across objects that perception fosters.

<sup>4</sup> Kant asserts that “a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment and so is not a logical judgment but an aesthetic one, by which we mean a judgment whose determining basis cannot be other than subjective” (*Critique of Judgment* 44).

may not share; it similarly diverges from a judgment based upon consideration of the good, for what qualifies the object as ‘good’ “always contains the concept of a purpose, consequently a relation of reason to a volition” (48-49). The crux of a disinterested judgment, according to Kant, is a contemplation of “the character of the object only by holding it up to our feeling of pleasure and displeasure” (51). A disinterested judgment commands reflection upon the object alone, without referring to the existence of the object within wider structures of reality.<sup>5</sup> In this way, “the liking involved in taste for the beautiful is disinterested and *free*, since we are not compelled to give our approval by any interest, whether of sense or of reason” (52, emphasis in original).

As a transcendental philosopher, Kant’s interest lies in uncovering *a priori* knowledge that is “*absolutely* independent of all experience, and not of this or that experience only” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 399, emphasis in original). The drive to uncover an *a priori* principle foundational to the perception of beauty across individuals leads him to advance the idea that if a judgment of taste is made in freedom, without being qualified by conceptual reasoning or private interests, then it may be assumed that the object “must contain a basis for being liked [that holds] for everyone” (*Critique of Judgment* 54, notes in original). Such a judgment, as he has already argued, is subjective; Kant reasons that the question of how a subjective experience can be shared by individuals – for “in a judgment of taste about beauty we always require others to agree” – must occur as a result of the “universal validity” (57) of the judgment. A universally valid judgment, Kant elaborates, is made possible through “common sense (*sensus communis*)”, which is “a sense *shared* [by all of us], i.e. a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (*a*

---

<sup>5</sup> I refer to Kant’s statement that “[b]oth the agreeable and the good refer to our power of desire and hence carry a liking with them, the agreeable a liking that is conditioned pathologically by stimuli (stimuli), the good a pure practical liking that is determined not just by the presentation of the object but also by the presentation of the subject’s connection with the existence of the object; i.e., what we like is not just the object but its existence as well. A judgment of taste, on the other hand, is merely contemplative, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object” (51).

*priori*), in our thought, of everyone else's way of presenting [something]" (160, notes and emphasis in original).

It is, however, in the notion of a disinterested judgment reified by universal assent, particularly as such assent springs forth from a 'common sense' that is presumed to be shared across individuals, that Kant's aesthetic theory reveals a possible political underside. In the appendix to his exposition on taste, he writes that 'common sense' is an integral aspect underlying the communication of ideas across members in a community, and plays an important role in the development of a shared culture amongst individuals:

A people in such an age had to begin by discovering the art of reciprocal communication of ideas between its most educated and its cruder segments, and by discovering how to make the improvement and refinement of the first harmonize with the natural simplicity and originality of the second, finding in this way that mean between higher culture and an undemanding nature constituting the right standard, unstatable in any universal rules, even for taste, which is the universal human sense. (231-232)

Even as he does not state it in explicit terms, Kant relates the "universal human sense" to the forging of a form of homogeneity, particularly in "that mean ... constituting the right standard" (232) that underpins communication amongst individuals of the group. While Kant's writings on judgments on taste are formulated as a theory that highlights the prerequisites for the perceiver to appraise an object of beauty, his ideas on the aesthetic reveal, as a prominent impulse, a striving towards an idealised homogeneity that is to occur on the basis of freedom. Terry Eagleton has pointed out that in Kant, "the 'aesthetic' ... has little to do with art. It denotes instead a whole program of social, psychical and political reconstruction on the part of the early European

bourgeoisie” (“Ideology of the Aesthetic” 327). In particular, as Kant’s aesthetic is premised upon the individual’s exercise of autonomy in judgment, Eagleton posits that “the aesthetic ... marks an historic shift from ... coercion to hegemony, ruling and informing our sensuous life from within while allowing it to thrive in all its relative autonomy” (328). In turn, “[w]hat matters in aesthetics is not art but this whole project of reconstructing the human subject from the inside, informing its subtlest affections and bodily responses with this law which is not a law” (330). Here, then, is a central question that Kant’s aesthetics holds for postcolonialism: what are the political implications underlying Kant’s theory of aesthetics, particularly when a judgment made in freedom and disinterestedness inclines towards the forging of homogeneity, and when this homogeneity of perception, in turn, is seen as a crucial aspect in the development of culture?

Jacques Rancière, the neo-Marxist French philosopher, offers some insight into the above when he speaks of aesthetics, essentially, as a form of politics. Like Eagleton, Rancière sets forward the view that “‘Aesthetics’ is not the name of a discipline. It is the name of a specific *regime* for the identification of art” (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 8, emphasis mine). To Rancière, (Kantian) aesthetics and politics both share in the implicit processes through which perception and taste are shaped.<sup>6</sup> What Kant presents as *a priori* properties that undergird a judgment about beauty, Rancière reads as a “system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise” (*Politics of Aesthetics* 13). To the French thinker, Kant’s aesthetic theory is not so much an inquiry into the essential qualities that constitute a judgment of taste, as it is a

---

<sup>6</sup> Rancière writes that “art and politics do not constitute two permanent, separate realities whereby the issue is to know whether or not they ought to be set in relation. They are two forms of distribution of the sensible, both of which are dependent on a specific regime of identification” (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 26).

manner of *prescribing* a set of criteria for evaluating what could be identified as aesthetically pleasing in contrast to others that could not.<sup>7</sup> Just as aesthetic theory qualifies what counts as art and what is beautiful, politics too works on a similar principle of delineation: “[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time” (13). Both aesthetics and politics govern the individual’s scope of perception, and function by simultaneously facilitating and discounting the recognition of various objects and events as valid phenomena presenting themselves to sense experience.

Rancière’s discussion of the role of politics gains greater clarity in light of his 1981 publication *Proletarian Nights* – a text in which he transcribes narratives from members of the nineteenth-century French working-class, with the objective to confront the question of why creative writing produced by these individuals is systematically excluded from recognition as works of literature.<sup>8</sup> Rancière makes it clear that the disqualification of the workers’ narratives from consideration as literature was not because the workers did not or could not produce creative or imaginative works. It is, as he writes,

the legitimisation of the knowledge that dictates what is or is not important, what makes history or does not. This is how the social sciences declared these accounts

---

<sup>7</sup> He states that “more precisely, then, the relationship between aesthetics and politics consists in the relationship between this aesthetics of politics and the ‘politics of aesthetics’ – in other words in the way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular” (Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* 25)

<sup>8</sup> In his introduction to the 2012 English-language reprint, Rancière describes *Proletarian Nights* as a work that “introduces us directly into the speech of these workers, in all its forms, from personal confidence or the recital of daily experience through to philosophical speculations and programs for the future, by way of the fictitious stories recorded in their journals” (x). His intention is to intervene in “precisely this distribution of roles between the language of the people and literary language, reality and fiction, document and argument” (x) – a distribution of roles that delimits *what* kind of work, produced by *whom* is to qualify as creative production worth attention.

of workers' excursions lacking in the factory and organised struggle. By this token, they confirmed the social order that has always been constructed on the simple idea that the vocation of workers is to work – good progressive souls add: and to struggle – and that they have no time to waste playing at flâneurs, writers, or thinkers. (*Proletarian Nights* viii)

Rancière's paragraph above underscores that a distinct and crucial interrelation exists between the rigidly hierarchical political regime of nineteenth-century France and aesthetics as a regime that regulates what could be recognised as art, especially in a way that reinforces pre-existing conceptions about participation in socio-political and cultural spheres. He highlights that, from the outset, the distinction between the workers' narratives and creative production from other social classes arises not from a consideration of the artistic merit or fineness (or lack thereof) presented in the works, but instead from a regime of perception that lends judgment not to the works themselves, but to the wider socio-political hierarchies as a precondition of whether the production of art is even possible.

For the nineteenth-century France that Rancière examines, aesthetics as regime delineated the workers' writing as noise as opposed to speech, to be kept invisible even as it existed alongside other forms of literary writing. This meant that aesthetics is at play at homogenising not only the requirements for participation in the domain of art (set aside for the dominant social class), but also the forms and content that pass through into consideration as art. Even as aesthetics posits itself as a theory of perception that accedes to universal validity, it is implicitly at work at creating the idea of a universal human subject made in the image of the European bourgeoisie, positioning the specifically European bourgeois sensibility as a value system that all humans should share, if not aspire to. It is in this notion of the 'universal' human

subject, made to reflect the particular values of the dominant European social class, that aesthetic theory reveals itself as a form of colonisation, as an unspoken means of control over taste and value perception. Aesthetics, in other words, is at work conditioning the sensory perception of the individual, transforming the otherwise ordinary faculty of perception to reproduce the hierarchies propagated by colonial knowledge.

These implications of aesthetic theory find themselves at odds with postcolonialism particularly as they imply an internal logic of hierarchical thinking – social, cultural, and even racial – with the implicit assumption that only *some* forms of creative production created by *some* groups of people qualify as art, and yet this is a universal standard that *all* should aspire to.<sup>9</sup> The disjuncture between the idea of universality and the hierarchies that it masks doesn't *only* suggest that other forms of artistic practices (and their makers) are set into a relentless struggle against their disqualification, but it also engenders a schema of dependence where these other forms of art are continually made to reify the aesthetic regime that defers their recognition.<sup>10</sup> In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon touches upon the notion of dependence, created by the colonial power differential, when he describes the Negro's search for recognition:

---

<sup>9</sup> Building upon Eagleton's analysis of aesthetics as ideology, Ashcroft writes that in aesthetic theory "[w]e see ... the appearance of an old *bête noir* of postcolonialism, the idea of the universal subject ... This universal human subject is the spectre that has haunted the reception of colonial creative production for at least a century-and-a-half. The combination of knowledge, judgment and taste, contemporaneous with the rise of capitalism, provides a hegemonic order to which all consent. Just as some people's thinking is regarded as 'philosophy' while that of others is not, so some writing is considered 'literature' and other writing is not. The aesthetic judgment of the dominant class is regarded as a standard of 'taste'" ("Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetic" 412).

<sup>10</sup> In other words, the success of postcolonial literature as art would be contingent on the extent to which the writing itself mimics the style, structure, and concerns (or lack thereof) of post-Enlightenment European art. Under this aesthetic regime, postcolonial writing would always enact itself, in the words of Homi Bhabha, as the "*subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (*The Location of Culture* 86).



The Negro is comparison ... that is, he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal. Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit, arises. The Antilleans have no inherent values of their own, they are always contingent on the presence of The Other. ... Every position of one's own, every effort at security, is based on relations of dependence, with the diminution of the other. It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility. (211)

While Fanon's discussion centres upon the racial aspect of the colonial power differential, his crucial observation of the "relations of dependence" (211) – a relentless comparison – that is imposed upon the black postcolonial subject is one that aesthetics, as a regime, has produced for postcolonial literature as well. This idea of dependence reveals itself particularly in the way that Anglophone postcolonial writing continues to assert itself against and negotiate its relation to the English canon.<sup>11</sup> As writing born into a world system marked by imperial domination, Anglophone postcolonial literature, like the Antillean culture that Fanon describes,<sup>12</sup> had little by way of an intrinsic system of evaluation, "no inherent values of their

---

<sup>11</sup> In *Making the English Canon*, Jonathan Kramnick points out that the English canon "achieved its definitive shape during the middle decades of the eighteenth century" when "[e]ighteenth-century literary critics looked to older works in response to a prolonged and pronounced transformation: the opening of the cultural product for a nation of readers. What we have learned to call 'the canon' – a pantheon of high-cultural works from the past – came into being as a contradiction. Modernity generates tradition. The swelling of the book trade, the passing of aristocratic authority, the rise in literacy, the prominence of women writers and readers, the professionalisation of criticism, together provoked over the course of the century a recourse to older works as national heritage. Canon formation, then as now, partook in wide-ranging debates about the nature of the cultural community. Critics weighed the value of older works and pondered their relation to modern writing" (1). The development of the canon was, thus, a result of eighteenth-century anxieties regarding changes in the social and cultural spheres, and a search for ways to organise and shape emergent forms of public life. Even in its conceptualisation, the canon was ideological in objective, even as it trafficked in the aesthetic.

<sup>12</sup> The Antilles is the product of the colonial encounter between Europeans, indigenous inhabitants of the Antillean islands, and slaves taken from Africa. John Harrison points out that "[f]rom this encounter the Caribbean emerged a creation *par excellence* of mercantilist driven colonialism" ("The Colonial Legacy and Social Policy in the British Caribbean" 55),

own” (211). From the outset, postcolonial literature is set into contention with Western aesthetic theory regarding what qualifies as art, as well as the English literary canon that presents itself as, in the words of Matthew Arnold, “the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas ... freely, – nourished, and not bound by them” (*Culture and Anarchy* 79). Even as Kant and Arnold are writing in different cultural contexts – Germany during the Enlightenment, and England during the Victorian era – they both put forth the cultural milieu and values of European bourgeois society as a particular (aesthetic) regime for legitimising and qualifying what counts as art.

In “Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon”, John Marx observes three particular ways in which Anglophone postcolonial writing relates to the English canon: repudiation, revision, and transformation from within. The greatest push that postcolonial literature exerts on the canon, as he writes, arises from the way that “[e]very newly celebrated work that emerges from the former colonies or from the migrant populations engendered by imperialism helps to transform the canon into a more heterogenous archive” (85). Rather than “opposing or revising it from outside, postcolonial literature increasingly *defines* a new sort of canon from an established position inside its boundaries” (85, emphasis in original). While I agree with the notion that postcolonial works, particularly with the “mainstreaming of postcolonial literary writing and reading in the university” (95), alters the idea of the Anglophone literary canon, I argue that the task ahead is not only for postcolonial texts and writers to reshape the canon; it is just as urgent for postcolonial artists and critics to rework the

---

and the development of the culture of the region is marked by several common features: “externally driven conquest, colonialism, the plantation system, slavery, agricultural mono-cropping, indenture, political dependence on metropolitan rulers and the social and political institutions that these factors entailed” (55-56).

theoretical frame of the aesthetic through which the status, nature, and function of art are articulated. This will serve as a means for postcolonial literature to assert its own value and relevance not only as works worthy of appreciation as art, but also as works that *should* be treated as art and not mere political tracts.

### *Asocial formalism*

In “Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetic”, Ashcroft observes that the seeming antithesis between postcolonial politics and aesthetic theory has resulted in the consideration of postcolonial literature as “writing that aspired to culture as a ‘way of life’ rather than as ‘Art’”, in a manner that “led directly to the worldliness of postcolonial writing, its affiliation with a social and cultural context rather than its filiation with the lineage of English literature” (412). Aesthetics, he continues, “was an essential component of the discourse of exclusion by which postcolonial writing was kept out of the orbit of the beautiful and good characterising canonical English literature” (412). On the same subject, Boehmer similarly muses that

we find ourselves up against the irrefutable fact that the postcolonial entails a definition drawn not from the *work* but from the *world*; that it first and foremost denotes history, not aesthetic form. This difficulty pinpoints why it is that postcolonial critics committed to diversity and democracy have, generally, and no doubt wisely, steered clear of dealing with a postcolonial aesthetic *per se* at all. Apparently it implies not only a political distraction but also a complicit diktat. (“A Postcolonial Aesthetic” 176, emphasis in original)

The insights that these critics raise highlight crucial postcolonial assumptions about the nature of art and its relation to the material world. The first concerns the distinction between ‘art’

and 'life', 'work' and 'world', which can be perceived in terms of the dichotomy between formalist and representational views of art.<sup>13</sup> The representational view of art holds that there is a correspondence between art and the real world – that art inexorably inclines towards its real-life referent, and gestures towards an existence beyond the object itself.<sup>14</sup> To conceive of art as representational is to premise interpretation of the artwork in the gap between how faithfully the work adheres to and departs from its referent: the work 'represents' an aspect of the world as it is lived, or stimulates reflection upon the possible by departing from a faithful depiction of reality. The formalist view,<sup>15</sup> in contrast, sets forward the idea that the only way to engage with or interpret the work of art is through a focus on form. While formalism itself gained prominence in the early twentieth century through the writings of modernist visual art critics such as Roger Fry

---

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, whose ideas Ashcroft draws from above, argues for theories of culture to shift from a narrow, elitist focus on aesthetics and the arts, namely "literature, music, painting, sculpture", and to consider a wider range of "material, intellectual and spiritual" (*Culture and Society* xiv) practices that stem from communal life. William's conceptualisation of culture as a "way of life" (xiv) has been interpreted as an "anthropological view of culture" (Stevenson, *Cities of Culture* 12) that reflects communal activity "as it is lived" (13). Aesthetics, as I will go on to discuss, reveals an intrinsic focus on form and the self-containment of the art object; an anthropological view of culture, in turn, concerns itself with human experience as it is lived. In this way, I interpret the distinction between what Williams and Ashcroft posit between 'Art' and 'way of life' as a contrast between the view of art as form and as representation of reality.

<sup>14</sup> Representational art, as Robert Layton tells us, "introduces a further element into style; that of devising means for depicting objects in the real world" (*The Anthropology of Art* 158). To conceive of art as representation is to consider the "tension between fidelity to the natural model and its reduction to regular forms" (158).

<sup>15</sup> Discussions of formalism in literary criticism often relate to Russian Formalism and French Structuralism, which are both derived from the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. While Russian Formalists sought to examine the work of art against the techniques and devices of form and style pertinent to the routines of literary culture, French Structuralists focussed on uncovering the literary and linguistic structures within individual works as a means to interrogate literature itself as a system of linguistic and narrative conventions (see Fredric Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language* pp. 101). In my use of the term 'formalism', however, I draw upon its use in philosophical aesthetics, where "formalism denotes a position on the nature of art which has important implications for the limits of artistic appreciation" (Carroll, "Formalism" 87). Formalism, as it relates to philosophical aesthetics, revolves around the concept of art as significant form (which I discuss on page 21 of this thesis). In short, this view of art, put forward most prominently by early twentieth-century art critics like Clive Bell, holds that where objects qualify as art, it is "due to their possession of something other than their representational content. It is due to their possession of significant form" (88).

and Clive Bell, the principles upon which the formalist view is based can be traced to Kant. I thus return to the third principle that Kant identifies as a condition for aesthetic judgment.

In departure from the two principles discussed earlier, which relate to the stance of the perceiver towards the object, the third focuses on the question of what qualities within the object present themselves for consideration in an aesthetic judgment. In alignment with his overarching line of thought that a judgment of taste cannot rely on conceptual thinking, Kant posits that an aesthetic judgment is to be made “on the basis of a merely formal purposiveness, i.e., a purposiveness without a purpose” (*Critique of Judgment* 73). He argues that

An aesthetic judgment instead refers the presentation, by which an object is given, solely to the subject; it brings to our notice no characteristic of the object, but only the purposive form in the [way] the presentational powers are determined in their engagement with the object. Indeed, the judgment is called aesthetics precisely because the basis determining it is not a concept but the feeling (of the inner sense) of that accordance in the play of the mental powers insofar as it can only be sensed. (75)

By these words, Kant seems to suggest that the singularity of form, distinct from any purpose or utility that inclines attention towards the relation of the object to a wider reality, is the only phenomenon that presents itself to aesthetic judgment.<sup>16</sup> The concern here is not so much about whether the object had been designed with a purpose in mind, but that ideas of functionality or utility cannot constitute any aspect of our appraisal of the object. A consideration of how the object’s form contributes to the performance or fulfilment of a function would necessarily render

---

<sup>16</sup> Denis Donoghue speaks of purposiveness as “an attitude that never goes forward to any corresponding action: it is the finality encountered in the form of the beautiful object. The form is final; it does not lead beyond itself; it does not insist on a teleological or otherwise Platonic end” (*Speaking of Beauty* 68).

the judgment cognitive, as it arises through conceptual understanding of the object's relation to its existence in the external world.<sup>17</sup> A judgment made upon the basis of the object's possible utility reveals partiality towards the concept of the good, and thus cannot be considered aesthetic.<sup>18</sup>

Kant's ideas above have been foundational to the rise of formalist aesthetic theories across the domains of painting, poetry, and fiction, where perfection of form is deemed the highest ideal for the artist, and an engagement with form the only appropriate response for the perceiver. These formalist notions of art, intrinsic to the later emergence of the 'art for art's sake' movement that gained traction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, don't only suggest that the import of the work's content remains irrelevant to aesthetic engagement; they also deny that the artist's objective in creating art might be driven by impulses beyond formal perfection. In the influential essay, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis", where he purports to locate "the real distinction between works of art and all other objects" (*Art v*), Clive Bell posits that there is "no other means of recognising a work of art" than the singular emotion evoked by "Significant Form" (8-9).<sup>19</sup> Consisting of the play of "line and colours combined in a particular way", significant form "is the only quality common and peculiar to all the works of visual art that move

---

<sup>17</sup> Kant asserts that "it is an aesthetic and not a cognitive judgment, and hence does not involve a concept of the character and internal or external possibility of the object through this or that cause; rather, it involves merely the relation of the presentational powers to each other, insofar as they are determined by a presentation" (66).

<sup>18</sup> In Kant's words, "If our liking for an object is one on account of which we call the object beautiful, then it cannot rest on a concept of the object's utility" (73); for "[a]ll interest ruins a judgment of taste and deprives it of its impartiality, especially if, instead of making the purposiveness precede the feeling of pleasure as the interest of reason does, that interest bases the purposiveness on the feeling of pleasure" (68).

<sup>19</sup> Noël Carroll observes that "Bell's statement of the formalist position has been particularly important for the development of philosophical aesthetics in the twentieth century. Perhaps the leading reason for Bell's influence has been the fact that he connected his version of formalism with the project of advancing an explicit definition of art. For this reason, Bell can be considered one of the major forerunners of the twentieth century's philosophical obsession with discovering an essential definition of art" ("Formalism" 87).

me” (10). As he advances the notion that form alone defines art, Bell writes that “[w]hat we must say is that representation of three-dimensional space is neither irrelevant nor essential to all art, and that every other sort of representation is irrelevant” (28) – that, indeed, “[e]very sacrifice made to representation is something stolen from art” (44). In a similar vein, Gerard Manley Hopkins comments that “[s]ome matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake. ... Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape’s sake – and therefore the inscape must be dwelt on” (*Journals* 289).

It is in the writings of Oscar Wilde that aesthetics, understood in terms of formalism’s inward focus on the shape and texture of the work itself, has most succinctly come to be associated with an irresponsible, hedonistic indulgence in the sensuous properties of form. “Art never expresses anything but itself” (“The Decay of Lying” 942), he asserts, and in addition:

The highest art rejects the burden of the human spirit, and gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness. She develops purely on her own lines. She is not symbolic of any age. It is the ages that are her symbols. (938)

While Wilde isn’t the only writer to speak in terms of the tautology that art is to be considered for art’s sake alone, his words have lent themselves to the widening divergence between art and life, work and world – that an aesthetic focus on art stands for a willing and complete disengagement from the material, social, and historical realities that motivated its production; that aesthetics forges a route for escape into an alternate realm untouched by the struggles and

concerns of normal life.<sup>20</sup> Wilde claims that “[t]he only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us” (943). With an irreverence towards social and political concerns, and a disinclination towards the possibility that representational content might present itself to aesthetic engagement, such formalist theories of art have contributed to the characterisation of postcolonial literature as belonging to the world rather than as work, as life rather than art. Indeed, with the implicit aim of shifting power imbalances – whether in the form of contesting colonial representations of native populations or insisting upon the relevance of local forms of knowledge in resistance against the cultural and ideological hegemony of Western thought – postcolonial literature insists upon its rootedness in the external world in a way that defies the formalist definition of art. In the assertion that form is the final object that presents itself for contemplation, formalism is distinctly at odds with the political consciousness and historical situatedness of postcolonial writing. One could perhaps say that in the turn away from formalism, postcolonial form itself becomes neglected in favour of the issues that the work represents.<sup>21</sup>

The distinction between world and work, life and art has also given itself over to the conception of postcolonial writing in terms of utility, where interpretation rests primarily upon consideration of the work’s social or political ‘usefulness’. This is a view put forward by the

---

<sup>20</sup> The tautology expressed in the phrase ‘Art for art’s sake’ also entails the idea of “form for Beauty’s sake” – that “Form existed for the purpose of Beauty as Beauty for the purpose of form” (Kearns, *Théophile Gautier* 68). One critic writing in the early years of the twentieth century suggests that such aestheticism “preach[es] that an artist must refrain from attempting in any manner to shape the conduct of his fellow-men”, and lambasts the movement for permitting that “an artist may choose any subject, moral, unmoral or immoral, and that so long as he expresses that subject with fine ‘artistry’ all is well” (“Art for Art’s Sake” 98).

<sup>21</sup> Pramod Nayar observes that “more often than not, postcolonial ... texts are evaluated and read almost exclusively for their politics, ideologies, and ‘value’ as sources of ‘authentic’ information” (*Postcolonial Literature* 20). In this climate, “[l]ittle attention is paid to the aesthetic dimension of such texts – an ironic situation where so-called imaginative literature that thrives on aestheticizing the world is treated only as political tract or opinion” (20). Raising a similar concern about “this problem that haunts much of postcolonial writing today” (Nayar 20), Deepika Bahri writes of a “crisis of postcolonial literature, manifested in anxiety over its relevance, uncertainty about its value, and suspicions of the death of literature as a significant social form” (*Native Intelligence* 1).



Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, who, insisting on the functional value of postcolonial African writing in enacting social change, boldly asserts that “art for art’s sake is just another piece of deodorized dog-shit” (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 10). Pronouncing that postcolonial (African) art primarily exists to shape social, political, and historical consciousness, Achebe posits:

Because it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence ... The story is our escort; without it we are blind. (*Anthills of the Savannah* 124)

While art, as it is implied in the statement above, might excite or bring pleasure to the perceiver, this quickening of affect is incidental. Art’s function is to remain squarely in its capacity to represent reality, and through that representation communicate the communal interests of that culture:

I will still insist that art is, and was always in the service of man. Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitement of wonder and pure delight); they made their sculptures in wood and terracotta, stone and bronze to serve the needs of their times. Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good of that society. (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 19)

Achebe’s open rejection of the formalist premises communicated by the phrase ‘art for art’s sake’ is entirely understandable. He echoes the particular postcolonial anxiety about the seeming mutual exclusivity between aesthetics and politics, as well as the assumption that concentrating on aesthetics pulls the reader away from the work as social artefact, and into an apolitical,

ahistorical focus on aesthetic pleasure. Implicit in this dichotomised view of aesthetics and politics is the idea that aesthetics relates to a political quietism that detracts from the immediacy of social struggles in the postcolonial world.

While I uphold the urgency of social transformation that Achebe ascribes to postcolonial art, I diverge from his view that the aesthetic focus on form, beauty, and pleasure is antithetical to the political objectives of postcolonialism. It is my belief that a formalist engagement with art, which focuses attention on the means of presentation within the work itself, can help us arrive at a better understanding of the ways that postcolonial literature succeeds at social and political transformation through its status as art. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno asserts that

Art, however, is social not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful', it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined. Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society. (308)

The doubleness inherent in Adorno's conception of art needs to be noted: autonomous art, which lacks pronounced function or utility apart from the implicit objective to afford aesthetic experience, nevertheless remains intrinsically engaged with wider forces of society and history

because of its relation to aesthetic tradition. Crucially, the work's engagement with the socio-historical conditions that inform its production stems not from its representational content or any function that is ascribed to it; instead, it arises from the ways in which the form of the work invents upon the history from which it emerges, in the particular ways that it responds to or subverts the aesthetic tradition or lineage that it has inherited. To the extent that its formal structure exceeds the conventions of its aesthetic lineage and introduces newness, the work exerts a gap between its socio-historical situatedness and the (ideal) image of social transformation that it conveys. It is, then, in this gap that critical reflection upon present reality is made possible, and the political potentialities of the work realised.<sup>22</sup> In this way, "[a]uthentic art is therefore both antisocial and socially engaged" (Gracyk, "Adorno" 142).

Likewise, even from his aestheticist viewpoint, Wilde gestures towards the notion that the impact of art, ultimately, lies in the conferment of a critical distance through which we view the world:

People tell us that Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before; that it reveals her secrets to us; and that after a careful study of Corot and Constable we see things in her that had escaped our observation. My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition. ... When I look at a landscape I cannot help seeing all its defects. ... Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place. ("The Decay of Lying" 921)

---

<sup>22</sup> Theodore Gracyk gleans from Adorno's words the notion that "autonomy interjects purposelessness into human making, which is always purposeful. However, because the purposelessness arises from violations of expectations, autonomy requires the artwork to be embedded in a history of art. Therefore art is inherently social, for each artwork's autonomy depends on what it stands against. Authentic art is therefore both antisocial and socially engaged, and unqualified autonomy is illusory" (142).

In privileging the act of perception above the analysis of representational content, a formalist aesthetics refines perception itself; it detracts attention from the material world, only to sharpen the individual's perception of that world, heightening his or her awareness of the defects and deficiencies that had previously eluded recognition. To this end, it is crucial to realise that even as a formalist aesthetics holds form as the sole and final object of analysis, the import of this aesthetic encounter exceeds the lines and texture of form itself, and is posited as what can fundamentally be construed as a transformation within the perceiver. Wilde speaks of how "[m]ere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways" ("The Critic as Artist" 1009). Walter Pater too writes: "How is my nature modified by its [the work of art] presence, and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do" (*The Renaissance* viii). The words spoken by these English aesthetes suggest that the highlight of the aesthetic encounter doesn't merely lie in the pleasure elicited by the beauty of the object; that, instead, the pleasure has more to do with the transformation engendered within the perceiver than the arrangements of form make possible.

### *Politics and the effect of beauty*

I have argued that the political import of postcolonial literature emerges from the reader's engagement with the work as art. That is, the political force of the writing is not found in the facts given or information suggested by the author's creative *representation* of the world, but is an effect – a by-product, as it were – of the sense experience afforded by the aesthetics of the work. Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether the political utility written into the work from the outset detracts from the work's status and value as art. What does it mean to hold

postcolonial literature as art? What does it mean to value postcolonial literature *as art* and not simply as political writing cloaked in literary form?

The literary critic, Denis Donoghue, has written that art – which he construes as the making of eloquence – “does not serve a purpose or an end in action” (*On Eloquence* 148). He asserts that,

[i]n rhetoric, one is trying to persuade someone to do something: in eloquence, one is discovering with delight the expressive resources of the means at hand. Eloquence is a promise of another kind of happiness, not an acquisition in the world but a token of other ways of being alive, in passing. It does this when it discloses a pitch of language – and therefore a flair of feeling and perception – in addition to, or even instead of, its standard referential duty. (148)

These lines seem to suggest that, in his view, the crux of what makes art *art* is the fundamental intention that prompts the artist’s creative process. Whether or not a work conveys themes or ideas that might lend themselves to a sociohistorical or political reading is secondary to the question of whether the author has created the work with pleasure as its aim.. For, as Donoghue asserts, “[e]loquence is not the same as rhetoric. ... Long thought to be a subset of rhetoric's devices, eloquence has declared its independence: It has no designs on readers or audiences. Its aim is pleasure; it thrives on freedom among the words” (“On Eloquence”). By this consideration, the defining feature of art is its purposelessness, save for the aim to give pleasure; any social or political purpose or usefulness that it actualises is only incidental to its objective to please its audience.

While Donoghue argues for a clear distinction between art and rhetoric – a purposeless pleasure and a purposeful persuasion – I want to suggest that the lines between the two are much

more porous when it comes to postcolonial writing. I advance the view that the persuasiveness that we have come to see as an implicit and distinctive feature of postcolonial literature – the “politics of opposition and struggle” (Mishra and Hodge 276) that has come to define such writing as a field – is, in fact, given rise to by the pleasure that postcolonial literature affords *as art*. Take, for example, the opening chapter of *By the Sea*, a novel by the Tanzanian author, Abdulrazak Gurnah, where we encounter Saleh Omar, an elderly Zanzibari man presenting himself as an asylum-seeker in England. As he recounts his early days as a refugee, Saleh is quick to inform his reader that “I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English” (Gurnah 5); that, as “an asylum-seeker, in Europe for the first time... I knew the meaning of silence, the danger of words” (12). Saleh’s silence is self-imposed, and enacted only under the advice of the man who had sold him his air ticket. Nevertheless, bereft of speech, Saleh is spoken for by Kevin Edelman, the immigrations officer at Gatwick Airport:

People like you come pouring in here without any thought of the damage they cause. You don't belong here, you don't value any of the things we value, you haven't paid for them through generations, and we don't want you here. We'll make life hard for you, make you suffer indignities, perhaps even commit violence on you. ... why do you want to do this? (12)

Unable or unwilling to speak for himself in the presence of Kevin, “the *bawab* [gatekeeper] of Europe” (Gurnah 31), Saleh becomes, in effect, a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which the immigrations officer negates and overwrites the elderly man’s personhood, imposing upon Saleh instead the “lifetime of stories and descriptions about beggars like me” (52).

While Kevin does not ultimately deport Saleh, he confiscates the mahogany box of incense in the elderly man’s luggage. The helplessness that falls upon Saleh at the confiscation of

the treasured box – “the casket which I had brought with me as all the luggage from a life departed, the provisions of my after-life” (31), which “I could not bear to leave behind when I set out on this journey into a new life” (13-14) – is reflected in the narrowing scope of his narrator’s gaze as he focalises on increasingly minute details of the encounter: “[w]hen I looked up again I saw that he would steal it from me ... He put it down beside him, next to his yellow pad, tugged at his shirt to make himself more comfortable, and went on writing” (14).

Yet, at that moment that Kevin takes away his mahogany box, the narrative suddenly – and eloquently – leaps to Saleh’s memories of the incense:

Ud-al-qamri: its fragrance comes back to me at odd times, unexpectedly, like a fragment of a voice or the memory of my beloved’s arm on my neck. Every Idd I used to prepare an incense-burner and walk around my house with it, waving clouds of perfume into its deepest corners, pacing the labours it had taken me to possess such beautiful things, rejoicing in the pleasure they brought to me and to my loved ones – incense-burner in one hand and a brass dish filled with ud in the other. Aloe wood, ud-al-qamari, the wood of the moon. (14)

Fragrance, perfume, the pleasure that the incense affords the man fortunate enough to have it in his possession. The pleasure is not only olfactory: the memory of the scent transports Saleh to his beloved, and even acquires an *expansiveness* as he traces his steps around the “deepest corners” (14) of his home. Indeed, the waves of joy that he experiences anew while remembering the incense is mirrored in the rhythm of his speech, forged through repetition of the present continuous within a single line: “*waving* clouds of perfume into its deepest corners, *pacing* the labours it had taken me to possess such beautiful things, *rejoicing* in the pleasure they brought to me and to my loved ones” (14, emphasis mine). As Saleh marvels at the beauty and pleasure of

the incense, he gains, in the reader's eye, the fullness of a life with a home and a lover, and even the very human sensibility that enables him to take such delight in a thing as mere as powdered wood.

Donoghue muses that,

[w]e normally advert to eloquence when we note the exuberance with which a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a line of verse presents itself as if it had broken free from its setting and declared its independence. This explains why we remember a certain eloquent moment and, a split second or an hour later or never, the context in which it appeared. ("Song Without Words" 190).

Eloquence etches such an imprint upon the mind that these moments of beauty emerge with exceptional radiance from the rest of the prose. Donoghue posits that such moments of beauty are significant because of "their irreducibility: each has a context which in some cases I have forgotten, but each seems surrounded by empty space. Each exists in an eternal present moment" (190). In Gurnah's novel, the reader encounters the pleasing abruptness of Saleh's memory, the gracefulness of his prose as he delights in his recollection of the incense *just as it is being taken away*, just as he enters into the disenfranchisement that accompanies his refugee status. The contrast and disjuncture between the beauty of his memory and the indignity of his present circumstance give that paragraph a distinct radiance and the quality of flight, furnishing the sentiment that, as the reader inhabits his words, we too soar with him above the degradation that he experiences at the immigrations office. In this instant, Saleh is no longer simply the desperate, pitiful figure of an asylum-seeker – Gurnah's artistry enables the reader to understand that Saleh, too, has a story (or even stories) of his own that exist alongside, or even counter, the narrative of him as a "victimised and wounded subject only" (Helff 392).



This excerpt from Gurnah's novel exemplifies the idea that the social or political impact of postcolonial literature emerges not from overt argument or discourse, but through the effect of beauty engendered through the devices unique to literary writing. This encounter with beauty within the narrative doesn't only produce delight, as Donoghue would aver; the delight itself lends itself to political persuasiveness about how refugees should be regarded and perceived.

To the cultural philosopher, Elaine Scarry, beauty is precisely *effective* in bringing about change in an individual's convictions. Beauty decentres the self, making the individual not only receptive, but "willingly cede" (*On Beauty and Being Just* 112), to the object that occasions the encounter with beauty:

[a] beautiful thing is not the only thing in the world that can make us feel adjacent; nor is it the only thing in the world that brings a state of acute pleasure. But it appears to be one of the few phenomena in the world that brings about both simultaneously: it permits us to be adjacent while also permitting us to experience extreme pleasure, thereby creating the sense that it is our own adjacency that is pleasure-bearing. (114)

The experience of beauty overtakes our senses and perceptions so that we "cease to stand even at the centre of our own world" (112). Therein lies the possibility of change, of an altering of consciousness, as we savour the experience of beauty and allow ourselves to, in "extreme pleasure" (114), inhabit the structures of thought and mood that gave rise to it. The literary theorist, Derek Attridge, aptly describes this phenomenon when he writes that experiencing art means "to encounter, to undergo it, to be exposed to and transformed by it, without necessarily registering it – or all of it – as an emotional, physical, or intellectual event" (*The Singularity of Literature* 19). Indeed, even as postcolonial art brings about social or political change through its

impact on its readership, it does so through powers or methods of persuasion that are not *merely* rhetorical.

In alignment with Donoghue's assertion that the aim of art is to bring pleasure, the literary critic, M. H. Abrams, asserts that "[t]he end of a work of art is simply to ... be beautiful, and to be contemplated as an end in itself" ("Aestheticism" 3). However, I wish to advance the idea that even as the work of art culminates in beauty, the *effect* of beauty does not end as the final pages of a literary work are turned. Beauty springs forth from the work into the world, compelling the beholder to recreate the causes of beauty in his or her life in various and varied ways. Scarry writes that

[b]eauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people. Sometimes it gives rise to exact replication and other times to resemblances and still other times to things whose connection to the original site of inspiration is unrecognisable. (3)

As works of art invested in politics, postcolonial literature is irrefutably steeped in the making of social and political change. However, such social and political change is not wrought by reason or argument, but by the beauty that these works bring forth, which prompts its own replication in the world beyond the text. It is in this way that beauty *can* help to actualise the political motivations of the authors.

It is thus my contention that the aesthetic focus on the irreducibility of form, beauty, and pleasure are not antithetical to the political imperatives of postcolonial literature. I advance the thought that it is, in fact, through the affective transformation engendered by form that the literary politics of postcolonial writing is realised. Proceeding from this thought, my objective in this thesis is to show that the politics of postcolonial literature gains higher traction the more the

work succeeds as art and the more that readers respond to it as art – in other words, that the political thrust of postcolonial writing comes into greater fruition when postcolonial art is received, to coin a phrase, ‘for art’s sake’. The chapters ahead will advance these claims: 1) that a fuller grasp of postcolonial literary politics entails a return to a formalist view of the work, where the arrangement of form, rather than the information or ‘meaning’ conveyed in the subject matter, constitutes the crux of analysis; 2) that apprehending the social and political possibilities set forward by postcolonial literary form necessitates a non-presumptiveness regarding how the work relates to the morally good and the morally agreeable, as well as a crucial non-expectation about which *particular* ways the text is to perform its social function; 3) that it is in the *inventiveness* of postcolonial literary form, which emerges from the cross-cultural fabric of postcolonial societies, that render the aesthetic qualities in postcolonial writing all the more compellingly political.<sup>23</sup>

In the chapters ahead, I examine, in chronological order of the historical events that they depict, Tan Twan Eng’s *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), and Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), which focus respectively on the Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asia (1942-1945), the civil war in Sri Lanka (1983-2000), and the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan (2001-present). Published after the turn of the new millennium, these novels shed light on some of the most pressing and dire issues that haunt the contemporary global landscape: war crimes, human rights abuses, and terrorism. The contemporariness of these novels is a deliberate choice – it allows me to make the argument that far from heralding an ‘end’ to the politics and legacies of the colonial era, the term ‘postcolonial’ has to grapple with the new

---

<sup>23</sup> These ideas, derived in part and while also in part divergent from Kant’s views on a judgment on taste, suggest that Kant’s aesthetic theory nevertheless remains relevant to apprehending postcolonial art, and that aesthetics as a field of inquiry can further aid us in uncovering the political thrust of postcolonial writing.

formations and transmutations of imperial power that have arisen in the aftermath of colonialism, as well as the new articulations of injustice that they entail.<sup>24</sup>

*Affordances of 'exotic' form: a caveat*

A postwar memoir narrated in the form of a Japanese garden; a nation's civil conflict illuminated through Buddhist sculptures; anti-war politics articulated through the stylistics of Persian miniature painting. Focusing on indigenous aesthetic elements that are, presumably, 'other' to the culture(s) of readers in the Anglophone literary marketplace, my three primary novels might be argued to partake in a form of self-exoticism, demonstrating a tendency towards what has been noted as postcolonial writing's "ambiguous involvement in new 'orientalising' imaginaries" (Tickell 8). In what might be perceived as a note of caution, Graham Huggan asserts that,

[i]n negotiating their condition, and turning it to their own advantage, postcolonial writers ... recognise that the value of their writing as an international commodity depends, to a large extent, on the exotic appeal it holds to an unfamiliar metropolitan audience. ("The Postcolonial Exotic" 24)

The danger inherent in making 'exotic' art that appeals to an unfamiliar readership lies not only in fostering the idea that cultural difference can be consumed and hence known, but also in the

---

<sup>24</sup> Ella Shohat reflects that the prefix 'post' "underline[s] a passage into a new period and a closure of a certain historical event or age"; in this way, the 'post' in 'postcolonialism' suggests that the world is "going beyond" ("Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'" 101), or *has gone beyond*, the political injustices of the colonial era. This prefix, however, is "slippery" (100), for it inadvertently implies that postcolonialism is inherently focused on the issues of the past. In a similar vein, Aijaz Ahmad points out that "[t]here appears to be ... far greater interest in the colonialism of the past than in the imperialism of the present" (*In Theory* 93) – a point of view shared by Graham Huggan when he writes that "the withdrawal of the colonisers from their erstwhile colonial territories is by no means adequate for the settling of old scores" ("The Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism" 20).

act of self-othering that reifies the colonial paradigm of centre and margin. Perceived this way, this manner of self-exoticism could be said to undermine the political impulses that prompted the authors' creative process, and even diminish the effectiveness of the texts' literary politics. As Huggan elucidates,

[c]ontradictions inevitably emerge: writers wish to strike back against the center, yet they also write and are marketed for it; they wish to speak from the margins, yet they are assimilated into the mainstream; they wish to undo the opposition between a European Self and its designated Others, yet they are pressed into the service of manufacturing cultural Otherness [...]. (24)

However, in departure from the belief that the use of indigenous aesthetic elements amounts to a trafficking in consumable cultural difference that runs contrary to the aims of postcolonial writing, I'd like to put forward the argument that such intentional self-othering, in fact, bolsters the political work that postcolonial authors perform. I begin with Edward Said's observations in *Orientalism*, that in colonial rhetoric "supremacy ... is associated with 'our' knowledge ... and not principally with military or economic power" (32). Knowledge, he elaborates,

means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a 'fact' which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself ... nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for 'us' to deny autonomy to 'it' – the Oriental country – since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as we know it*" (32).

Indeed, “[w]hat gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West” (40). By this consideration, an integral aspect by which colonial dominance was justified, in the eyes of the colonisers, was the assumption of the knowability of the Other. The idea that the Other could *essentially* be known – conveniently reduced to an object of knowledge – facilitated the absorption of the Other into the totalising discourses and hierarchies of colonial hegemony. As he examines the postcolonial exotic, Huggan suggests that “[p]ostcolonial writing beguiles the line between resistance and collusion” (24) – that writers employ a paradigm of representation that bears echoes to colonialism’s orientalisation of other cultures that Said describes above. Nevertheless, I argue that as indigenous aesthetic elements introduce strangeness into the Anglophone novel, they challenge the reader’s objectifying gaze, and, in effect, occludes the work’s knowability and obstructs its absorption into predominant discourses about the cultures represented.

Taking the idea of affordance, which outlines the “potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs” (*Forms* 6), the literary theorist, Caroline Levine, posits that by their nature, forms contain “particular constraints and possibilities”, and “[e]ach shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities” (6). While each form affords a given range of potentialities, the meeting or amalgamation of two or more forms may alter or even suppress the possibilities of each form in unanticipated ways. She asserts that “the movement and assembly of forms prompts me to rely on a kind of event I call the ‘collision’ – the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology” (18). In such a meeting of forms, “each is capable of disturbing the other’s organising power” (17). Representing the meeting of forms, the incorporation of indigenous aesthetic

elements within the structure of the Anglophone novel can be understood as an act that produces disruptions and even ruptures in the reader's reading process. As I will show in the chapters to come, insisting upon their own modes of attention, these elements disrupt the hermeneutic process by which the reader interprets the texts, and in this way obstructs the readiness of the reader to absorb the Other within Western hegemonic assumptions about other cultures.

### *Emblems of history*

Focused on the search for and the rendering of beauty while bearing witness concomitantly to indescribable human catastrophes, these novels additionally bring to the fore an aspect of postcolonial writing that has conventionally been overlooked by postcolonial literary criticism: the making of beauty as a means to speak to our condition in history. I earlier spoke of the urgency for conceptions of the aesthetic to be renegotiated through the lenses of postcolonial history and culture. Before I proceed into the next chapter, I wish to sketch out a brief idea of what such an aesthetic might resemble.

I begin with "Cane Gang", a poem by the Jamaican poet, Olive Senior, where she describes the plantation system that has become emblematic of colonialism in the West Indies:

Torn from the vine from another world  
to tame the wildness of the juice, assigned  
with bill and hoe to field or factory, chained  
by the voracious hunger of the cane

the world's rapacious appetite for sweetness (96)

The “sweetness” of the sugarcane, pleasurable as it may be, is inseparable from the slave labour from which it stems, and inevitably bears traces of the “broken-down bodies” (96) that made the sweetness possible. The sugarcane thus contains an inherent doubleness that binds its sweetness to a history that is undeniably horrific; even as sweetness is pleasurable as a quality in itself, it nevertheless serves as an unrelenting testimony to the colonial exploitation of slave labour that governed its production. Pleasure thus carries within it the echoes of history.

While it speaks particularly to the colonial importation and exploitation of African slave labour in the West Indies, the sugarcane in Senior’s poem lends itself as a striking metaphor to the notion of the postcolonial aesthetic. Even as postcolonial poets and writers set out in the first place to create artistic beauty, the symbols and emblems through which they articulate beauty are inextricable from the “complexities of mire or blood” (Yeats, “Byzantium” 260). In this way, the aesthetics of postcolonial writing exceeds the constructs of disinterestedness and purposelessness that underpin theories derived from Kant – *not* because aesthetic concerns are secondary to history or politics, but because the formal devices and images that furnish postcolonial art are themselves steeped in an unjust and traumatic history.

The problematised relation between received notions of the aesthetic and postcolonial art additionally suggests that the idea of beauty needs rethinking. While Kant speaks of disinterestedness, purposelessness, and universal assent as fundamental conditions for beauty to be perceived, Thomas Aquinas, whose writings on beauty have likewise been influential in Western ideas of the aesthetic, posits that “beauty requires that three things be present: *integrity* or *wholeness*, for things are unseemly insofar as they lack these; *harmony* or *proper proportion*; and *intelligible radiance*, since we call radiant things beautiful” (*The Essential Aquinas* 184, emphasis in original). It is my suggestion that with its emergence from fractured lives and



fragmented cultural experiences, postcolonial art brings new questions, and hence new meaning, to bear upon these traditional constituents of beauty.<sup>25</sup>

In his acceptance speech for the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, Derek Walcott speaks of his postcolonial Antillean poetry as a process that “should be called not its ‘making’ but its remaking [of] ... fragmented memory” (“The Antilles”). He elaborates:

[b]reak a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. (“The Antilles”)

Walcott’s words suggest that as opposed to the rendering of an unblemished wholeness, it is the deliberate search for and gathering of fragmented memory, vital to the *remaking* of wholeness, that is a condition for beauty. These “cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows white scars” are all the more compelling for they reveal the painstaking labour undertaken by a potter or artist who strives to find meaning and beauty in the shattered pieces. As postcolonial art emerges from the individual lives and communities torn apart by the colonial encounter, it draws attention to

---

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, beauty, as Walter Pater writes, “like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative” (*The Renaissance* vii-viii). It is “a value, to be perceived in its diverse manifestations” (Donoghue 46). Postcolonial art demands that we recognise the various and divergent ways through which beauty might present itself in art.

the human spirit which, in spite of war, violence, and suffering, remains indefatigable in its tenacity to survive, and its will to forge beauty even in the harshest of circumstances. It is perhaps, then, this indomitable human spirit that postcolonial art asks of us to recognise as a form of the beautiful.

As I close this chapter, I return to the idea of postcolonial form and the question of whether postcolonial literary writing might possess any distinguishing set of formal properties. The Trinidadian writer, C.L.R. James, comments that for a Caribbean artist like himself, “[t]he basis of our ideas on aesthetics and artistic development was the basis of our civilisation. It was western European ... I didn’t see the evidence of any powerful artistic tradition that could be called West Indian” (“The Artist in the Caribbean” 177). Even as he underscores the cruciality of bringing forth a distinctively West Indian aesthetics, James posits that “I have no idea what this West Indian form will be like. All I know is, that it must come to terms . . . [with] the West Indian personality, the West Indian national outlook, has to come to terms with the African past” (179). While much critical attention has been given to the cultural in-betweenness of the postcolonial subject,<sup>26</sup> James’s words draw attention to the idea that the postcolonial artist is caught up in yet another kind of in-betweenness – that of the various artistic traditions that have, for James particularly, come to be his African, European, and Caribbean inheritance. Having no originary artistic tradition that he can wholly lay claim to as his own, the postcolonial artist is not only faced with divergent aesthetic forms and legacies that jostle for recognition, but is also

---

<sup>26</sup> Homi Bhabha, for instance, highlights the significance of “those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (*The Location of Culture* 1). He suggests such cultural in-betweenness “provide[s] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”; for, it “is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (1). Likewise, Mary Louise Pratt famously discusses the ‘contact zone’, which describes “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (“Arts of the Contact Zone” 34).

confronted by the urgency to invent upon these legacies, to create new forms that speak more intelligibly and compellingly to the present culture. He has to negotiate between the impulse to reclaim the legacies of the past, and the exigency of reframing that past from the angle of the present – to “[d]evelop the West Indian artistic tradition of the past and create one in the future without which there will never be a great West Indian artist” (178).

In a similar vein, Salman Rushdie gestures towards the centrality of this in-betweenness in his writing process when he elucidates that his choice to frame his seminal work, *Midnight's Children*, through an unreliable narrator serves to reflect his own fragmented access to the past: “[i]t may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (*Imaginary Homelands* 10-11). Yet, this fragmentary insight into the past, as he elaborates, “may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed”, for

it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archaeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects. ... The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present. (12)

Importantly, Rushdie highlights that for a postcolonial writer like himself, the task at hand is not merely about gathering fragments to reclaim or represent the past. Perhaps more significantly,

the writer reinterprets the past through the tools of the present, so as to allow these enduring fragments to illuminate the condition of the present with greater clarity. Seamus Heaney, too, speaks of the urgency not merely to represent, but to re-examine the pieces and symbols of the past. At the culmination of his essay, “Feeling into Words”, he writes:

I began by suggesting that my point of view involved poetry as divination, as a restoration of the culture to itself. In Ireland in this century it has involved for Yeats and many others an attempt to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past, and I believe that effort in our present circumstances has to be urgently renewed. But here we stray from the realm of technique into the realm of tradition; to forge a poem is one thing, to forge the uncreated conscience of the race, as Stephen Dedalus put it, is quite another and places daunting pressures and responsibilities on anyone who would risk the name of poet. (60)

As he relates the temporality of tradition to the “conscience of the race” (60), Heaney illuminates the cruciality of re-examining and inventing upon artistic tradition, as a means to more compellingly articulate and lend shape to the ethos of the present. Herein, perhaps, lies the crux of the postcolonial writer’s task and the distinctiveness of postcolonial form: as the writer employs and invents upon Anglophone literary forms to, in Heaney’s words, “search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament” (56), they don’t simply excavate the past in order to establish continuity with the present. They rewrite the story of the present through the images and symbols that they have inherited, often from different cultures, showing that the past is not *simply* relevant, but also exists to be made new. In doing so, postcolonial artists and writers don’t only trace the lineages – both historical and aesthetic – from which they have come, but

also furnish a picture of what our contemporary world is and has become, enabling us to grasp the beauty of our world ever more fully.

## Chapter 1

“As the Remaining Petal is about to Fall”:

Beauty, Sorrow, and the Shifting Landscapes of Memory in *The Garden of Evening Mists*

### I. Heeding the Requests of Form

In Tan Twan Eng’s *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), we see Nakamura Aritomo, a “man who had been the gardener of the Emperor of Japan” (*Garden* 9), teaching his young Malayan-Chinese apprentice, Teoh Yun Ling, the aesthetic principles of Japanese gardening. “Garden designing”, he begins, “is known as The Art of Setting Stones” (95). When Yun Ling muses about how “those rocks you found – all have unusual markings”, Aritomo relates that the “first piece of advice” given to aspiring gardeners is to “*obey the request of the stone*”, for “every stone has its own personality, its own needs” (95-98, emphasis in original).

The Art of Setting Stones that Aritomo describes comes from the *Sakuteiki* (作庭記), an eleventh-century Japanese text that is recognised as one of the oldest published works on garden-making. In describing the principle of ‘obeying the request of the stone’, the *Sakuteiki* outlines that “when placing stones, the most important stone of an arrangement should be set first and all the other stones that are to be set afterwards should be set in accordance with this first stone” (Keane, “Listening to Stones” 9). This principle exhorts the gardener to “look carefully at the world and understand things from the material’s point of view”, emphasising that “it was not the aesthetic of the designer that was important; rather it was the inherent nature of the material that called for a certain design to flow from it” (9). This first principle of The Art of Setting Stones is one that we, as readers, might also abide by as we meander through Tan’s narrative –

not least because, as Neil Lazarus points out, that for some postcolonial literary critics, “evidently, all that is required of the texts evoked is that they permit – which is to say, not actively disallow – a certain, very specific and very restricted kind of reading to be staged through reference to them”, even in “the most leadenly reductive of ways” (*The Postcolonial Unconscious* 22). Indeed, the *Sakuteiki*’s call for a focus on the *inherent* characteristics of the stones – which *The Garden of Evening Mists* echoes – acts as a timely reminder for readers to look away from the subjects and themes that predominate conceptions of what postcolonial texts *should* do and say, and to look into what this text *actually* does and says.

As its title might already suggest, Tan’s narrative interweaves elements of Japanese gardening – as well as various other Japanese aesthetic forms that train the gardener’s eye – with the literary form of the Anglophone novel, and presents to the reader through that formal borrowing a singular narrative experience that insists upon its own modes of attention. With the “twists and turns” (*Garden* 149) that arise from its narrative layerings, as well as its rendering of “illusion, visible only when the right conditions are present” (138) through the novelist’s “play[ing] with light and shadow” (111), the novel resembles a Japanese garden in both form and effect. The play on light and shadow, in the rendering of illusion and mystery, is in fact a prominent aspect of Japanese aesthetics – one that the Japanese novelist and essayist Junichiro Tanizaki discusses in the aptly-titled *In Praise of Shadows*. There, Tanizaki brings to attention the notion that far from being an element of nothingness, shadows and darkness are crucial to the apprehension of certain types of beauty; for instance, “only in dim half-light is the true beauty of Japanese lacquerware revealed” (13). Similarly, an integral aspect of the novel’s rendering of beauty, as I shall demonstrate in the pages that follow, depends upon the reader’s excavation of the depths of the narrative’s form that plot alone insufficiently reveals. As Aritomo appropriately

remarks, “only a third of each stone should be seen above the ground ... So dig deep” (*Garden* 98).

Throughout the narrative, Yun Ling further takes pains to emphasise the centrality of “appearances” (111), particularly in the way “only a small portion was revealed to the world, the rest was buried deep within, hidden from view” (99); for, just as in gardening, “we had done everything properly, even if the results of our efforts were not visible” (214). In turn, the reader is given to understand that the deeper layers of the novel, “hidden in plain sight”, can “only be read when all the pieces were put together” (139). Yun Ling’s focus on these crucial aspects of the narrative, which furnish the novel’s “unusual markings” (95), thus exhorts the reader to obey the particular contours of the narrative’s form by paying heed to the various structural elements derived from Japanese aesthetics that are given emphasis, particularly as these requests of form compel the reader to re-vision the way that the narrative reveals itself. In the pages that follow, I will address *The Garden of Evening Mists* in light of its formal borrowings from Japanese aesthetics, paying particular attention to the way that these aesthetic principles lend themselves to the postcolonial historiography and politics of reconciliation that the novel advances.

#### *Japanese aesthetics, imperial violence, and postcolonial memory*

As *The Garden of Evening Mists* – Tan’s second novel – delves into the complexities of postwar memory and the concomitant issues of truth and justice, it builds upon, and explores in greater depth, crucial themes and narrative tropes foregrounded in the author’s debut work, *The Gift of Rain*. In *The Gift of Rain*, the aged narrator, Philip Hutton, recounts the events leading up to and during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya fifty years after that traumatic chapter in history. In this earlier novel, the author lays the groundwork for several key issues that later



surface in *The Garden of Evening Mists* – one might think of them as authorial preoccupations that extend across Tan’s (re)writing of Malay(si)a. An example of the above is the search for idioms to narrate the cross-cultural fabric of Malay(si)an society, particularly in a manner that contests the racial binaries that continue to overdetermine social relations in the country.<sup>27</sup> Philip underscores, for instance, that “[i]t was only just starting to occur to me what a strange place I had grown up in – a Malayan country ruled by the British, with strong Chinese, Indian and Siamese influences. Within the island I could move from world to world merely by crossing a street” – that, in fact, “[o]ne could easily lose one’s identity and acquire another just by going for a stroll” (66). As we shall see, Tan’s authorial impulse to (re)map the country, already hinted at in the lines above, will play greater thematic and aesthetic significance in *The Garden of Evening Mists*.<sup>28</sup>

Another prominent issue that *The Gift of Rain* anticipates is the tension between (Japanese) aesthetics and the pressing postcolonial demands for justice *and* a just rendering of memory. Shortly before the outbreak of the Pacific War, Philip, then sixteen years old, is befriended by Hayato Endo, a Japanese man in his forties, when the latter rents an island from the youth’s father. Central to Philip’s recollection of these memories is his attempt to apprehend the extent to which the principles of Zen aesthetics that Endo – who becomes his *aikido* instructor and, in time, his lover – “render(ed) me unflappable” (300) as the latter cunningly made use of Philip’s knowledge of Penang island to devise strategic plans for the Japanese invasion of Malaya. One such principle given focus in the narrative is “*zazen*, sitting Zen”, the

---

<sup>27</sup> Philip draws attention to some of these racial divisions when, speaking of his mixed parentage, he reveals that he “was never completely accepted by either the Chinese or the English of Penang, each race believing itself to be superior” (28). In *The Garden of Evening Mists*, Tan gestures towards another form of such racial divisions when Hamid, a Malay businessman, terms Malayan Chinese “*orang China*”, mere “descendants of immigrants”, unlike “[w]e Malays [who] are the true sons of the soil, the *bumiputera*” (*Garden* 69). See also pages 86-89 of this thesis.

<sup>28</sup> See pages 58-66 of this thesis.

meditative act of “free[ing] my mind, to achieve what he termed the ‘Void’” (43) – a practice that compels the individual to focus solely on the tactility of breathing, so as to detach his or her thoughts from the world around. *Zazen*, as the narrative reveals, is indispensable for the individual to arrive at the state of *satori* (Enlightenment) – a state of “complete clarity and total contentment” where, as Philip describes it, “I felt completely at peace, ascending higher and higher in an all-encompassing understanding. I saw it all, everything, from beginning to end and then to a new beginning again” (218).<sup>29</sup>

Experienced as a moment of “complete clarity” and “pure bliss” (42) stemming from the individual’s transcendence over the moorings of time and place, politics and history, the state of *satori* that *zazen* affords can essentially be understood as an altered state of perception that whisks the individual out of his or her situated political and historical consciousness. Even from this cursory view, we can see the obvious tension – even contradiction – between these tenets of Zen philosophy and the novel’s clear intent to intervene in the way that the Occupation is historicised. These Zen principles have in fact been questioned and problematised for facilitating the acquiescence and complicity of Zen priests with the violence of Japan’s imperialist ambitions during the second world war. The Zen philosopher, Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, has spoken of what is, fundamentally, an *incompatibility* between *satori* and politics:

With *satori* [enlightenment] alone, it is impossible [for Zen priests] to shoulder their responsibilities as leaders of society. Not only is it impossible, but it is conceited of them to imagine they could do so. . . . In *satori* there is a world of *satori*. However, by itself *satori* is unable to judge the right and wrong of war.

(qtd. in Satō and Kirchner, “D. T. Suzuki and the Question of War” 117)

---

<sup>29</sup> See the discussion of Tan’s *mono no aware* in *The Garden of Evening Mists* on pages 66-69 of this thesis.

On Suzuki's thoughts on *satori* above, the Buddhist philosopher, Kemmyō Taira Satō elucidates that "such experience may be extremely helpful when it comes to discerning the true nature of the self and the suchness of the present moment, but alone it is of little use in reaching an accurate assessment of, say, the complex issues behind a war" (117). Philip himself gestures towards the way that his "disciplined practice of *zazen*" pulls him away from fully seeing Endo as a treacherous imperial agent, tempering his anger at Endo's betrayal with "respect and love" (300) for the older man. He muses that,

[s]trange that I could feel no trace of anger towards him, only despair. It felt almost as though I had been expecting it. He had betrayed my innocence, but at the same time had replaced it with knowledge and strength and love. I wondered if there was some deficiency in my own being that I could accept his treachery with such calm or whether my training in *zazen* had been more effective than I had thought [...]. (268)

Indeed, Philip draws his reader to the thought – one that becomes an important question in *The Garden of Evening Mists* as well – of whether Endo's attempts at aestheticising Philip's sensibilities through *aikido* and *Zen ever so subtly* encourages the latter to perceive his betrayal more leniently, as well as the violence of the Japanese Occupation with greater equanimity than otherwise. When visiting the Japanese consulate amidst the atrocities committed by the Japanese troops, Philip observes that "[c]onsiderable effort and expense had been invested to create a dreamlike ideal of Japan in the consulate gardens. I had often cycled past without paying any attention to it, but now its beauty, when so much of the world was being destroyed, made me stop and appreciate it" (262). This sense of aesthetic appreciation leads Philip to wonder: "how could we ever understand these savage, cultured, brutal, yet refined people?" (392).

In the lines above, Philip articulates in concise terms questions that are no less pressing, but perhaps more delicately put across in *The Garden of Evening Mists*: does an education in Japanese aesthetics obfuscate the postcolonial subject's perception of the *actual* culpability of the Japanese imperial agents, and in some way mitigate full and proper recognition of the horrors of the Occupation? Accordingly, does aesthetics become complicit in obstructing the politics of post-conflict memory in a manner that performs an *injustice* to the victims of the Occupation, adulterating the demand for justice with private "knowledge and strength and love" (268) – and, in this way, further enact symbolic violence upon the victims by suppressing and detracting from the demand for justice? Or, perhaps, might these principles of Zen aesthetics help to communicate a different view of postcolonial politics?

*Shakkei and the Malay(si)an novel*

*The Garden of Evening Mists* comes to us as the first-person account of its narrator and central protagonist, Yun Ling, as she re-visits her past in an attempt to arrive at "the clarity to see what Aritomo and I have been to each other" (33). Yun Ling's narrative is composed of three layers. The first, which sets the scene for her encounter with Aritomo in the second narrative frame, recounts her experiences during the Japanese Occupation in Malaya (1942-1945), where she, along with her elder sister, Yun Hong, are abducted by Japanese soldiers and placed in a slave labour camp as a result of their father's involvement in "stirring up anti-Japanese sentiments" (267). Yun Hong is forced to serve as a comfort woman; Yun Ling, in contrast, is put to work in a mine, and is later appointed to serve as the personal translator for the camp's officer-in-charge, Tominaga Noburu. Even as Yun Ling has had two of her fingers brutally chopped off by the camp overseer, Fumio, her later acquaintance with Tominaga allows her to be

“exempted from the guards’ cruelty” (274). In fact, Tominaga’s affection for Yun Ling would prove crucial to her survival. Just before the Japanese surrender, Tominaga blindfolds Yun Ling and smuggles her out of the camp – an act that would enable Yun Ling to survive the Occupation, but laden her with survivor’s guilt for having left her sister behind. She vows to “find the camp again” and “come back to get [Yun Hong]” (276) – a promise she is ultimately unable to keep as the camp, together with the prisoners, is completely destroyed by the Japanese soon after Tominaga helps her to escape.

The second narrative layer takes place during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), where Yun Ling, set on creating “a garden in [Yun Hong’s] memory” (59), becomes apprenticed to Aritomo, with whom she eventually develops a romantic relationship. When the monsoon season approaches and renders the garden impossible to work on, Aritomo seeks Yun Ling’s permission to create a *horimono* (Japanese bodysuit tattoo) on her back. Shortly after the *horimono* is complete, Aritomo mysteriously disappears. Feeling betrayed by Aritomo’s sudden disappearance, Yun Ling leaves the Cameron Highlands without building the garden for her sister.

The third and final narrative layer takes place in the novel’s present, where Yun Ling, now in her seventies, returns to the Cameron Highlands to meet with Tatsuji, a Japanese historian in search of Aritomo’s *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints). The “sense of abandonment” (342) that Yun Ling is left with after Aritomo’s sudden disappearance has stayed with her the past thirty-six years since the event. We are given to see that even as she interrogates her wartime and post-war memories in this third narrative frame, her memories remain tethered to the Aritomo whom she remembers from the past, and the Aritomo whom she comes to make new discoveries about.

Nevertheless, with each new discovery relating to Aritomo's past and his motives for being in Malaya, Yun Ling re-evaluates her own past and her shifting position within it.

Significantly, Tatsuji gives Yun Ling tantalising information that Aritomo "played a role in Golden Lily" (318), the clandestine imperial Japanese organisation that, so the rumour goes, "stole everything they could lay their hands on: jade and gold Buddha statues from ancient temples; cultural artefacts and antiques from museums; jewellery and gold hoarded by wealthy Chinese with their distrust of banks" (315) and buried the looted treasure in an undisclosed area in Malay(si)a. The historian suggests that Aritomo might have "come here to survey the topography. He had the necessary knowledge of landscaping and horticulture – remember, the locations had to be camouflaged or concealed" (318). Through Tatsuji's revelations, Yun Ling is compelled to wonder if the prison camp that she had been sent to was, in fact, "one of Golden Lily's slave-camps", for "a lot of things he said fit in with what I saw there" (320). In relation, she is also called to question not only whether or not her *horimono* might actually be a map pointing to the location of her prison camp, but also Aritomo's motives in *possibly* revealing the camp's location to her. Did Aritomo give her the map to "leave the answer to the one question I have been asking?" (342) in light of their relationship? Or did he inscribe the map of her camp – Golden Lily's location – permanently on her back to ensure that the location of the treasure buried within would never be lost? The questions of whether Aritomo was *truly* an imperial Japanese spy, and whether Yun Ling, in turn, is able to come to terms with the possibility of her deception by Aritomo, constitute the "mystery at the heart of the novel" (Lim, "The Zen of Japanese Imperialism" 436), and governs our apprehension of what the novel's reconciliatory politics ultimately entails.

Yun Ling begins the process of setting down her memories to paper as a means to resist the onset of Primary Progressive Aphasia, a disease that is causing her to “los[e] my ability to read and write, to understand language, any language” (*Garden* 30). She relates that “in a year – perhaps more, probably less – I won’t be able to express my thoughts ... And what people say, and the words I see ... will be unintelligible to me” (30). Importantly, in re-visiting her past, Yun Ling does not merely “uproot my memories from the soil I have buried them in” (173-174); for, in the process of writing, she “layer[s] what I see over what I remember” (10), and in effect makes re(-)visions to what she remembers of her earlier years. For instance, four chapters after narrating the events of the *braai* (Afrikaans for ‘barbecue’) hosted by Magnus, Yun Ling’s family friend and Aritomo’s neighbour, she muses that

It is more difficult than I have imagined, setting down things that happened so long ago. I question the accuracy of my memory. That afternoon at Magnus’s *braai*, after Frederik drove me back from Yugiri – it stands out with such clarity in my mind that I wonder if it had actually taken place, if the people there had actually said what I think I remember. (113)

Similarly, nearing the end of her negotiations with Tatsuji, Yun Ling reflects that “I have been thinking about everything he has told me. It has made me re-examine what I know of Aritomo, made me consider what he has said and done in an altered light. This is something I had not expected” (337-338).

The uncertainty of memory is something that Yun Ling already hints at in the first chapter: “guided by memory’s compass, I began to walk into the garden. I made one or two wrong turns, but came eventually to the pond” (18). Beyond pointing to the unreliability of the events recounted, however, the “twists and turns” (149) in the topography and in the narrative

reflect Yun Ling's *process* of re-visioning her past, in an act that underscores the effect of time and experience upon memory. Yun Ling's act of re-visioning reflects, in part, the literary theorist Gerhard Richter's assertion that "while memory requires time to become what it is – no memory without time, no time without memory – time also hinders memory, veiling its specificities, blurring its details, accentuating too selectively and, in so doing, uncannily rendering the familiar strange while, at the same time, causing the estranged gradually to appear more and more familiar." ("Acts of Memory and Mourning" 150-151). Tan, however, draws from Japanese aesthetics to impart an added dimension to Richter's conceptualisation of time and memory. In the novel, it is not only the passage of time as Richter discusses that precipitates a shift in relation to memory – just as importantly, it is the memories of other characters that enable Yun Ling, through the distance afforded by time, to look afresh at what had been remembered of the past. For Yun Ling, as well as the readers of her narrative, this act of re-visioning the past is one that brings about the beauty and sorrow characteristic of Japanese aesthetics, and which, in turn, is at the heart of the reconciliatory politics in *The Garden of Evening Mists*.

Yun Ling's process of layering over and re-visioning the past is an act of *shakkei* (借景) – an aesthetic principle usually applied in Japanese garden design, and rendered in the novel as "the art of Borrowed Scenery" (*Garden* 34). Yun Ling explains that in garden design *shakkei* is a technique of "playing with perspective" (119), and involves the gardener "taking elements and views from outside a garden and making them integral to his creation" (34). She cites the example when,

[b]ending to replace the dipper, my eyes were drawn across the water's surface to a gap in the hedge, through which a solitary mountain peak in the distance could be seen. The sight of it was so unexpected, so perfectly framed by the leaves, that



my mind was momentarily stilled. The tranquillity in me drained away when I straightened up, leaving me with a sense of loss. (61)

As she remarks, through Aritomo's act of framing perspective, the transposition of the distant mountain into the garden renders "the effect of seeing the view ... much more powerful than if the sea has not been obstructed" (62). *Shakkei*, in other words, is a method of shaping and manipulating perspective, in a manner that compels the viewer to more clearly and critically perceive an element that might otherwise be overlooked or neglected from consideration.

Importantly, *shakkei* is not simply about composing a garden with a fabricated view. Teiji Itoh, a historian, notes:

In its original sense ... *shakkei* means neither a borrowed landscape nor a landscape that has been bought. It means a landscape captured alive . . . [for] when something is borrowed, it does not matter whether it is living or not, but when something is captured alive, it must invariably remain alive, just as it was before it was captured. (*Space and Illusion in the Japanese Garden* 15)

The significance of what Itoh terms capturing landscape "alive" gains greater clarity in light of the separation between inside and outside, which is "an important one at various levels in Japanese society" (Hendry, "Nature Tamed" 86).<sup>30</sup> In bringing what is outside *in*, "alive" and unchanged, *shakkei* transgresses the crucial boundary between inside and outside, self and other, in a manner that re-composes the relation between the two.<sup>31</sup> With its borrowing from the

---

<sup>30</sup> The distinction between the inside and outside in Japanese culture can be perceived through the example, as Joy Hendry cites, of the "porch between the inside and outside worlds [which] provides a place for shoes to be left: their removal marks the transition from one world to the other" (86).

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Nute elaborates that *shakkei* as a process where "the frame is positioned to trim the raw view aesthetically, while at the same time obscuring many of the spatial depth clues which would normally indicate the true distance between the observer and the far-off landscape. This concealing of the intervening space has the effect of bringing the distant

scenery that lies beyond, particularly as *shakkei* invokes “both possession – the remote scene becomes part of the garden – and symbiosis, as the nearby and the distant add life to each other” (Main and Platten, *The Lure of the Japanese Garden* 24), the garden ceases to be restricted to the boundaries of its physical compound, and instead becomes an expansive composite that is, in effect, constituted by the elements in and of its surroundings.<sup>32</sup>

In *The Garden of Evening Mists*, the novelist transposes the principle of *shakkei* to reflect both a borrowing from time, particularly as Yun Ling renews her understanding of her past through the perspectives and experiences that she gains with the passage of time, and also from the personal histories and memories of the various other border-crossing individuals who make up the character landscape of the novel. At first glance, the stories that these other characters bring to the novel appear tangential to Yun Ling’s own. However, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, these other stories in fact become an integral part of Yun Ling’s process of *re-membering* her past, as she negotiates the landscape of her memory through the perspectives that these other stories offer.

The effect of *shakkei* in the narrative is twofold. On the one hand, it situates Malay(si)an history against the wider flow of peoples and stories in the global postcolonial landscape, creating ground for the sharing of experiences and the forging of new intercultural connections from the various forms and legacies of colonial history. On the other, it forces Yun Ling to contemplate the trauma of her past in relation to the personal sorrows and losses experienced by the other characters, in a manner that enables her to move from a subjective focus on her own pain and guilt, and on to a more objective view of her experiences within the coordinates of

---

natural scene forward so as to appear part of the built foreground” (*Place, Time, and Being in Japanese Architecture* 21).

<sup>32</sup> Hendry explains it in terms of “the garden [being] enclosed, but the enclosure by no means ignores and seals off the world outside itself” (88).

global history. Importantly, while the effect of *shakkei* does not mitigate the *fact* of her traumatic past, it allows her to choose how she wishes to remember and relate to that past.

Adding to the depiction of *shakkei* in the novel is Tan's borrowing of forms that are non-indigenous to both the Malay(si)an cultural imaginary and the literary form of the Anglophone novel alike. For a literary work focused on depicting the traumatic history of Malaya in the second world war, *The Garden of Evening Mists* reveals a distinct interest in seeking out aesthetic forms and images that are incongruous to those which are commonly rendered in Malay(si)an literature. While Tan's adoption of these Japanese images and forms resembles the insertion of Islamic and Persianate aesthetic elements in *The Wasted Vigil* (to be addressed in Chapter 3), which advances a reclamation of the cultural heritage to which Aslam belongs, the enactment of Japanese aesthetics in *The Garden of Evening Mists* critically departs from the motivations that inform Aslam's manoeuvre. It can instead be thought of as a conscious authorial act on Tan's part that draws upon non-native cultural traditions to challenge narrow conceptions of nation and culture that govern assumptions about what a post-war Malay(si)an novel should look like. In what can be understood as an act of *shakkei*, Tan 'borrows' from Magnus' Majuba Tea Estate, an "English garden in the tropics" (*Garden* 22), as well as Aritomo's Yugiri, the "only one" (56) Japanese garden in the country, and sets the development of Yun Ling's narrative against the "liminal transcultural space" (Poon, "Transcultural Aesthetics and Postcolonial Memory" 192) framed by the two. While Majuba estate's "meticulously shaped hedges and voluptuous flowerbeds" with their "herbaceous borders" and "roses" (*Garden* 22), and Yugiri's "liquid mirror" (214) together with the "mountains borrowed by the garden", with the "wind, the clouds, the ever changing light" (36) add to the richness of the images that the narrative evokes, these non-indigenous gardens curate a portrait of Malay(si)a that departs

sharply from the nation's "corpus of 'independent' local writings in the English language, characterised by local ideas and local experience, or writings that hold up a mirror to the local reality" (Quayum, "Malaysian Literature in English" 178).<sup>33</sup> Beyond the rendering of the gardens, the novelist casts attention upon the physical aesthetics of *kyudo*, the Way of the Bow, outlining the harmonious oneness between the arrow and shooter that *kyudo* cultivates: "Hold it with your mind, tell it where you want it to go, and guide it all the way to the *matto*. And when it strikes, hold on to it for a moment longer" (*Garden* 157). On the one hand, these cross-cultural borrowings, which play a crucial role in shaping the revelation of the plot, critically alter the mood and tone of the novel, and demand a shift in the philosophical and aesthetic perception through which the reader responds to the narrative. On the other hand, the novelist's performance of *shakkei* is an act of defamiliarisation, reorientating the reader away from the discourses and interpretative frameworks that are commonly employed in the representation of Malay(si)a and the Japanese Occupation, and exhorting the reader to look upon these subjects anew.<sup>34</sup>

Importantly, when Aritomo speaks of gardening as an act of "composing a picture within this frame" (97), the notion of the frame itself is, perceivably, as significant as the picture

---

<sup>33</sup> Post-independence Malaysian writing in English has tended to focus on the divisive issues of race, religion, and language that have continued to cloud the formation of a cohesive national and cultural identity in the country. These issues are examined, for example, in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour*, Lee Kok Liang's *Flowers in the Sky*, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*. Other themes include the diasporic consciousness of Malaysia's immigrant minorities, as K. S. Maniam explores in *The Return* and *In a Far Country*.

<sup>34</sup> The Japanese Occupation in Malaya is often thought of as a watershed event that brought about the collapse of British colonial rule and later Malaysian independence, as well as an event that reified the racial tensions and divisions in the country. Paul Kratoska, a historian, notes that "[p]opular understanding" of the Occupation often revolves around the ideas that "the war caused Britain to abandon its colonial empire; Japan conquered Malaya to obtain the peninsula's rich natural resources; the Japanese ruled autocratically and used terror to control the population; the Chinese were hostile to the Japanese, the Malays collaborated, and the Indians were won over by the promise of support for Indian independence" (*The Japanese Occupation of Malaya* 1). While *The Garden of Evening Mists* addresses some of these issues to an extent, it draws attention to the nuances of interracial cooperation and intercultural syncretism that are often overlooked by observers of the event.

rendered within it. Even as the novelist employs principles of Japanese aesthetics as a frame for his narrative, the novel itself is further ‘framed’ by the works and forms to which it claims intertextual lineage. In addition to the eponymous Japanese garden, the novel draws from the aesthetic traditions of the *ukiyo-e* and *horimono*, which are rendered as prominent motifs in the novel. Beyond their narrative function as motifs that interrogate the workings of memory – a point that I will explore in further detail later in the chapter – these visual forms act as a “companion piece” (335) to the narrative, depicting in images the hybrid literary form that the novel aspires to. Aritomo, who is an acclaimed woodblock artist in addition to being an imperial gardener, creates *ukiyo-e* whose “subject matters”, to Tatsuji’s historian’s eye, are “unusual” (115), for “the style is Japanese but the designs are not” (335). A “well known *ukiyo-e* of Aritomo”, Yun Ling tells us, is “a vista of the tea fields of Majuba estate”, a work whose “iconic status has increased over the decades, surpassed only by Hokusai’s *The Hollow of the Deep-Sea Wave*” (114). Each of the woodblock prints that Aritomo leaves behind “contains recognisable elements of Malaya: lush tropical jungles; lines of rubber trees in estates; coconut trees bowing towards the sea; flowers and birds and animals that are found only in the equatorial rainforests – a Rafflesia, a pitcher plant, a mouse deer, a tapir” (115). The *horimono* that Aritomo creates on Yun Ling’s back likewise depicts “exquisite drawings of flowers and trees seen only in the forests of the equator” (335).

The novelist’s rendering of these Malay(si)an-inspired Japanese works within the narrative is a move that is both political and aesthetic. On the more overtly political front, Tan’s retrieval of such native, natural imagery “juxtaposes social realism in the recent history of Malaya ... with an alternative ecological vision” (Fincham, “Ecology, Ethics, and the Future” 126). In positing a recourse to an “ecological vision” (126) through an excavation of natural

motifs and symbols that are uniquely Malay(si)an, Tan draws upon the *longue durée* of ecological time as a means to contest the presentism of racial and nationalist frameworks through which Malay(si)an cultural identity is often articulated. In ‘unusually’ situating distinctively Malay(si)an imagery within the Japanese form of the *ukiyo-e*, and having Aritomo respond to this aesthetic tradition in Hokusai’s lineage by sending his work back to the Japanese cultural metropole, the novelist also highlights the dynamism of intercultural contact, and challenges the notion that the processes of cultural transfer and engagement are unilateral. Additionally, in drawing upon the aesthetic traditions of the *ukiyo-e* and *horimono* – which, as the narrator takes pains to impress upon us, are derived from the *Suikoden*, the Japanese version of the Chinese Ming-dynasty novel 水滸傳 (Shui Hu Zhuan), most commonly translated into English as *The Water Margin* – Tan situates his novel in the line of aesthetic *and* cultural translations that can be observed from the movement of the original Chinese text into Japan, and further into the descendant Japanese pictorial traditions.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, even as Tan acknowledges the indebtedness of the *ukiyo-e* and *horimono* forms to the *Shui Hu Zhuan* – early in the novel, Tatsuji relates that “there has always been a close link between the woodblock artist and the *horimono* master ... They dip their buckets into the same well for inspiration”, the well in this instance being “a novel from China, translated into Japanese in the eighteenth century. *Suikoden*” (28) – the novelist reveals an intriguing keenness to *more overtly* trace an intertextual relation to the Japanese *Suikoden* instead of the original Chinese work. Tan even has a copy of the *Suikoden* make an appearance within the narrative:

---

<sup>35</sup> According to Erin Schoneveld and Sarah Laursen, the *Shui Hu Zhuan* “was widely published in China from the Ming Dynasty (1368– 1644) onward and was first introduced to Japan as *Suikoden* in the early eighteenth century, when Japanese scholars were interested in learning vernacular Chinese in an effort to gain a better understanding of the essence and nuances of Confucian texts” (“Representation, Adaptation, and Preservation at the Frontiers in East Asian Art” 57).

[Aritomo] unlocked the box and carefully lifted out a book. ‘This is a copy of *Suikoden*. It is two centuries old,’ he said. ‘The illustrations were hand-printed by Hokusai himself.’ Seeing that I had no idea who he was talking about, he sighed. ‘You must have seen the picture of a big wave, frozen into stillness as it is about to crash back into the sea,’ he said. ‘There is a small boat caught in the hollow of the wave, and in the distance, Mount Fuji.’

‘Of course I’ve seen it. It’s famous.’

‘Well, that was made by Hokusai.’ He wagged a cotton-white finger at me. ‘Most people think they know him, if only because of *The Hollow of the Deep Sea Wave*. But he was much more than that. (159)

Tan’s authorial decision to draw from the *Suikoden* is, I argue, a significant political manoeuvre that ‘borrows’ from the history of cultural transmissions and translations in pre-modern East Asian literary circles. Commenting on Tan’s position as a diasporic Malaysian writer, Weihsin Gui posits that

If one important aspect of postcolonial literature is (to paraphrase Salman Rushdie’s famous phrase) the empire writing back to the metropole, then what we are seeing in the novels of Twan Eng Tan ... is the postcolonial diaspora writing back-to-back, responding to both the metropole and their nation-state, transforming the oppositional counter-movement in the dialectic between the (former) colony and metropole into a negative dialectic that triangulates the metropole, the postcolonial nation-state, and diasporic cultural space. (Gui, *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics* 163)

I would argue that *The Garden of Evening Mists* presents an added dimension to Gui's observations, in that Tan doesn't only 'write back' to the Anglophone literary marketplace and the nationalist Malaysian literary landscape; in rendering *ukiyo-e* and *horimono* where "the style is Japanese but the designs are not" (*Garden* 335), Tan also 'writes back' to the Japanese cultural metropole, showing that Japanese forms themselves can be transformed as a result of the encounters with the cultures and societies with which Japan has had historical contact. In foregrounding the intertextual reference to the *Suikoden* after alluding to its Chinese predecessor, Tan similarly reinforces this idea of continuing cultural adaptation and transfer within the novel.

Crucially, when *ukiyo-e* artists were engaged to produce illustrative accompaniments for the *Suikoden* text, "the original Chinese brigands were reimagined as Japanese" (Schoneveld and Laursen 58), giving rise to an aesthetic work where the narrative form remains Chinese, but the literary and visual imaginary evoked is distinctly Japanese.<sup>36</sup> The history of this aesthetic reformulation in the *Suikoden* lends itself not only to the reconceptualisation of these Sino-Japanese aesthetic encounters, where, often, historiographic analysis runs the "potential risk of presentism" by "tak[ing] the contemporary nation-states China and Japan as its basic conceptual starting point" (Hedberg, *The Japanese Discovery of Chinese Fiction* 6), but additionally to the novel's insistence on its liminal setting, which implicitly resists the boundaries of identity and culture inscribed by the idea of the nation-state. The presentism that influences the frames through which such pre-modern texts are interpreted creates "tenuous ground", particularly as "questions of language and identity are often far from isometric with

---

<sup>36</sup> Tan additionally makes it a point to highlight that "the practice of designing gardens had originated in the temples of China, where the work was done by monks" (*Garden* 89). The narrator elaborates that "the earliest reference to designing gardens in Japan had been recorded in the Heian Period, about a thousand years ago, which ... was marked by an obsession with all aspects of Chinese culture" (89-90). In fact, "there was a legend that the first Nakamura [Aritomo's ancestor] had been a Chinese monk in the Sung dynasty who had been banished from China" (93).



contemporary political demarcation lines” (6). The Sino-Japanese historian, William Hedberg, in turn, posits that this history of pre-modern East Asian cultural engagement and transference “provides a new avenue by which to interrogate the binaries that have traditionally served as ideological anchors for Japanese and East Asian literary historiography” (180). In fact, commenting on his own field of inquiry, Hedberg points out that

If anything unites the wide-ranging and disparate group of scholars and topics grouped under the categorical umbrella of Sino-Japanese studies, it is an interest in demonstrating how nationalism and its attendant cultural myopias have warped our perception of the ways in which residents of earlier eras conceived of literature, language, script, and culture. (6)

In situating the processes of cultural translation that brought about the *Suikoden* as a reference within his text, Tan retrieves not only East Asia's rich literary and cultural heritage, but also the defiance of nationalistic thinking that hampers appreciation of the border crossings that are inherent within the fabric of history and culture. In doing so, Tan queries and challenges the narrow(er) discourses and dictates of the nation-state as a starting point for thinking about both the appearance and function of Malay(si)an literature, and shifts understanding of how the history and literary production of Malay(si)a can contribute to wider discussions of post-conflict reconciliation in the global postcolonial landscape. In this way, unlike the act of preserving history that motivates Aslam's excavation of Islamic and Persianate aesthetic forms, it is an investment in transforming the interpretative frames through which history is conceptualised that informs Tan's retrieval of these Japanese aesthetic traditions.

On the aesthetic front, Aritomo's woodblock prints populate the narrative with verdant symbols and imagery of Malay(si)a's natural environment that are rendered in a distinctly

Japanese visual form, training the reader's eye on the beauty that is produced by this intercultural encounter even as the narrator excavates the traumatic history of the Japanese Occupation in Malaya. The duality implicit in this authorial manoeuvre reflects the duality within the form of the *ukiyo-e* itself, bringing to mind the notion that, even as Aritomo's *ukiyo-e* serve as a "companion piece" (*Garden* 335) of sorts to the novel, the narrative enacts a textual rendering of the *ukiyo-e* that Aritomo creates. To begin with, the term *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵) is a compound word that brings together 浮世 (floating world), and 絵 (picture/painting). The tradition of *ukiyo-e* has its roots in the pleasure halls of seventeenth-century Japan, where "courtesans, prostitutes and entertainers ... create(d) a truly rich pageant of daily pleasure-seeking that cried out for expression via a richly-coloured palette. *Ukiyo-e* artists did just that" (Fleming, "Ukiyo-e Painting" 61). In the seventeenth-century work *Ukiyo Monogatari* (Tales of the Floating World), the Buddhist priest Asai Ryōi writes that

living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry-blossoms and the maple-leaves, singing songs, drinking wine, and diverting ourselves just in floating, floating, caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current: this is what we call *ukiyo*. (qtd. in Lane, "The Beginnings of The Modern Japanese Novel" 671-672).

This celebration of the physical and sensual aspects of life connoted by the term 浮世 is, in turn, carried over to the form of *ukiyo-e*, and reveals itself in the artistic impulse to depict nature and life in their fleeting pleasures and beauty. Early *ukiyo-e* works thus depicted scenes of "beautiful courtesans, Kabuki actors, romantic sagas and famous landscapes" (Saluti, "Defenders of the Floating World" 30).

However, the word *ukiyo* (浮世) that Ryōi describes calls up its homonym, 憂き世, which, while identical in pronunciation, differs in the initial kanji character. In contrast to its epicurean cousin, 憂き世 has its roots in Buddhist philosophy and literature that predate the *ukiyo-e*'s aesthetic tradition, and pertains to the notion of a “world of sorrow and grief”, a “world of pain and suffering” (Hickman, “Views of the Floating World” 6) – meanings to which the Buddhist priest, Ryōi, could not have been oblivious. The indulgence in ephemeral pleasures that is celebrated in Ryōi's depiction of the floating world – which, in turn, gave rise to the *ukiyo-e* tradition – is thus both a response to, and inherently constituted by, an awareness of the sorrow and grief that underlie life in its transience.<sup>37</sup> This way, just as the beauty of the *ukiyo-e* is derived from a celebration of life's fleeting pleasures, it recognises at the same time the austerity of impending sorrow that makes these pleasures all the more precious. Mirroring the duality embodied in the origins of the *ukiyo-e*, in its portrayal of the Malay(si)an historical and cultural landscape, then, *The Garden of Evening Mists* reveals a commitment to revealing both the beauty and pleasures that arise from such intercultural contact, as well as the pain and grief that follows when such contact takes the form of violence and traumatic conflict. The duality in this rendering will prove critical to the novel's politics of remembrance and its future-oriented vision of reconciliation, which I will take up in further detail later.

The form of the *ukiyo-e*, which the narrative builds upon, mediates the uneasy relation between the aesthetic and the ethico-political demands of the violent history that *The Garden of Evening Mists* interrogates. Tan's borrowing from the *ukiyo-e* is closely interwoven with his rendering of another Japanese aesthetic principle, *mono no aware* (物の哀れ). From the outset,

---

<sup>37</sup> Erin Schoneveld and Sarah Laursen comment that “tattooing was in a way the ultimate expression of the “floating world” [*ukiyo*] aesthetic, which celebrated life's fleeting pleasures; once the tattoo owner died, the artistry of the suit could no longer be viewed or appreciated” (62) – unless, of course, the skin were preserved post-mortem.

the urgency of remembrance that drives Yun Ling's impulse to set down her memories in writing is coupled with the growing inaccessibility of language and memory that renders the act of writing increasingly difficult. She relates that, "unfolding a letter from an envelope, I gradually become aware that the paper in my hand is filled with unrecognisable scribbles ... The writing on it is also illegible. Lifting my gaze to a pile of books on the desk, I find the titles on their spines to be indecipherable" (*Garden* 176). The simultaneous pressures exerted by the urgency of recollection and the imminence of forgetting leave the narrative in a suspended moment, just as when "the remaining petal is about to fall" (175). Elsewhere in the narrative, Yun Ling speaks of Yggdrasil, the mythological Norse Tree of Life, "doomed from the moment it is planted" (127), and eternalised in the moment before it falls and leaves the world in perpetual darkness. Like the aforementioned petal and Yggdrasil, both poised at the threshold between life and decay, Yun Ling's narrative emerges at the cusp where memory is about to give way to the blank slate of aphasia. The suspended moment wherein her narrative takes place sets the beauty in the events she apprehends afresh against the sorrow that underlies both the fact of their having passed, as well as the momentariness of their revival against the forgetting that is inexorably to follow.

In gardening, as in the novel itself, *mono no aware* is not simply an aspect of appearance or design. When Vimalya, an adherent of indigenous gardening hired by Yun Ling to restore Aritomo's garden, debates about whether Japanese gardening principles are "just about aesthetics", Yun Ling sharply asserts:

Of course not. The garden has to reach inside you. It should change your heart, sadden it, uplift it. It has to make you appreciate the impermanence of everything in life,' I say. 'That point in time just as the last leaf is about to drop, as the

remaining petal is about to fall; that moment captures everything beautiful and sorrowful about life. *Mono no aware*, the Japanese call it. (175)

Yun Ling's use of the contrasting verb and adjective pairs – “sadden” and “uplift”, “beautiful” and “sorrowful” (175) – draws attention to the paradoxical aspect connoted by the term *aware*, the idea central to *mono no aware*.<sup>38</sup> To the philosopher Ōnishi Yoshinori, *aware*, a form of aesthetic experience, occurs at the liminal space where positive and negative emotions come together – such as when one comes to the apprehension of beauty and loss, at the contemplation of a falling petal or the brilliance of a full moon momentarily exposed amidst looming storm clouds. The emergent apprehension of the oneness of the dual encounter “implies a positivity of the aesthetic experience that overcomes both the positive meaning of pleasure and the negative meaning of sorrow – in the same way that ‘will to life’ ... encompasses the positive side of health and growth as well as the negative side of illness and death” (Marra, “Ōnishi Yoshinori and the Category of the Aesthetic” 116). Significantly, the aesthetic pleasure that is gained from this simultaneous encounter with positive and negative enables the perceiver to access a shift from the subjectivity of his personal feelings, and enter into a plane of objective contemplation as he holds the two opposites together – he becomes “grounded in the presence of an objective reality of metaphysical sorrow that liberates the subject from the subjective immediacy of positive (joy) and negative (grief) passion” (116). Such an experience, more crucially, “allows the perceiver to penetrate the metaphysical ground of Being by making him understand the universality of a cosmic sorrow he would otherwise construct as private and subjective” (116-117). *Mono no aware*, in short, brings the perceiver to an all-encompassing view, where he

---

<sup>38</sup> The Japanese word for *mono* (物) translates to ‘thing’ or ‘object’. *Mono no aware* literally relates to the ‘thing’ or ‘object’ that brings about the aesthetic experience of *aware*.

adjusts himself from a self-focussed subjectivity, to a consciousness and appreciation of his relation to what Yun Ling terms “everything beautiful and sorrowful about life” (*Garden* 175).

The third aesthetic principle that the novel draws upon – the appreciation of which would prove indispensable to our apprehension of Aritomo’s mystery, and which in turn sheds light on Yun Ling’s shifting relation to her past – is *yūgen* (幽玄), a “uniquely Japanese phenomenon” that posits “the element of suggestion in [a work as] the source of its beauty” (Keene, “Japanese Aesthetics” 295).<sup>39</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, a philosopher, observes that “*yū*, the first component of the word *yūgen*, usually connotes faintness or shadowy-ness, in the sense that it rather negates the self-subsistent solidity of existence, or that it suggests insubstantiality”, while “[*g*]*en*, the second component of the word, means dimness, darkness, or blackness” (*The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* 27). Taken together, this concept points to “the darkness caused by profundity; so deep that our physical eyesight cannot possibly reach its depth, that is to say, the darkness in the region of unknowable profundity” (27), and emphasises the cruciality of a sensing or perception that extends beyond the openly palpable, in a manner that grasps the unseen or unsaid. Similarly, postulating that “for a Japanese poet precision in language would limit the range of suggestion” and, in turn, diminish the beauty that arises from *yūgen*, Donald Keene locates *yūgen* in “a willingness to admit that meanings exist beyond what can be seen or described” (“Japanese Aesthetics” 298). He further elaborates,

*Yūgen* can be apprehended by the mind, but it cannot be expressed in words. Its quality may be suggested by the sight of a thin cloud veiling the moon or by autumn mist swathing the scarlet leaves on a mountainside. If one is asked where in these sights lies the *yūgen*, one cannot say, and it is not surprising that a man

---

<sup>39</sup> Even as Tan does not explicitly discuss *yūgen* the way that he draws attention to *shakkei* and *mono no aware*, *yūgen* will prove to be integral to our apprehension of Yun Ling’s dawning understanding of Aritomo.

who fails to understand this truth is likely to prefer the sight of a perfectly clear, cloudless sky. (298)

The apprehension of *yūgen* thus depends on the reader's sensitivity to nuance and on his or her effort to read between the lines for what is *suggested*, but not openly expressed in so many words. As I will demonstrate below, *yūgen* holds the key to the central questions of the novel: is Yun Ling, at the culmination of the narrative, able to work through her traumatic experiences of the war, as well as her "sense of abandonment" (342) by Aritomo, to recover a sense of agency? Or is it as David Lim posits, that her relationship with Aritomo "exerts overdetermining force on [her] understanding of her experiences of the historical events that shaped her despite her being entirely unconscious of it throughout the novel" ("The Zen of Japanese Imperialism" 436)? Accordingly, might the novelist's choice to have Yun Ling give up on her decades-long search for her prison camp *possibly* reveal any (alternative) vision of resolution? Or is it, as Angelia Poon asserts, that "instead of a call to decisive action, in Tan's novel, people, memories, and all forms of action, including justice for war crimes, eventually and irrevocably evaporate like mist" ("Transcultural Aesthetics and Postcolonial Memory" 200)?

*"To see all things"*

I suggest that the notion of justice that Poon draws attention to above is, in fact, a central preoccupation in *The Garden of Evening Mists*. However, perhaps more significantly, the novel demonstrates a sensitivity towards the limitations and elusiveness of retributive justice, as well as a consciousness of the impossibility of a continued focus on justice to foster a truly *post-war* future. I advance the thought that Tan retrieves philosophical concepts intrinsic to Japanese aesthetics to offer an alternative way of perceiving the past, as a means to articulate a vision of

reconciliation conducive to imagining new forms of community that extend beyond the victim-aggressor relation inscribed by the violent past. Importantly, while *The Garden of Evening Mists* portrays an account of the Japanese Occupation from a Malay(si)an perspective, Japanese militant expansionism in the years before, and leading up to the end of the second world war, played out over an expansive geographical theatre that ranged from Korea to Taiwan, and “include[d] not only China but Southeast Asia, Australasia, ... India and Hawaii” (Levine, *The Pacific War* 20). While the extent of the military campaigns and the regimes of brutality visited upon the populations in these territories vary, leaving the legacies of the Pacific War and Japanese colonialism in these areas recounted differently as a result, the fact of this shared history would mean that the reconciliatory politics advanced by the novel is not only pertinent for the re-imagining of Malay(si)an-Japanese relations, but also for a wider pan-Asian community at large.

Tan’s partiality towards the ethics of reconciliation finds an echo in the workings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) formed in the wake of apartheid – a relation that may be explained by Tan’s familiarity with South African society and politics, given his residence and employment as a lawyer in Cape Town. Like criminal trials in a court of law, truth commissions, such as that in South Africa, constitute a response to the “question of how to deal with past regime crimes” (Krüger, “From Truth to Reconciliation” 340). While both criminal trials and truth commissions are concerned with nation-building after violent conflict, they differ markedly with regards to the notion of justice. Criminal trials, such as the Nuremberg trials in the aftermath of the second world war, function as “impersonal acts of state- or internationally-sanctioned retribution”, and “serve to break the cycles of revenge that often erupt in spasms of mass atrocity” (Douglas, “History and Memory in the Courtroom” 95). The idea of



retribution via a court of law, as “a fundamental requirement of justice itself”, puts forward “the idea that impunity is a wrong”, and upholds the “fundamental moral norm that no one should benefit from his or her wrongdoing” (95). These courts and the acts of retributive punishment that they perform posit a recourse to justice as a means to equalise relations between conflicting parties. These trials “provide victims with a venue for expressing their pain, and by conferring public recognition upon the suppressed history of their victimisation, serve to reconcile an afflicted people to the sufficiency of legal response to their woes” – acts that memorialise the historical accounts of the victims through the “pedagogical aim of the trial” (95), and, in turn, ensure continued “historical instruction” (95).

In contrast, as opposed to legal prosecution for individual crimes, truth commissions “try to draw as complete a picture as possible of the extent of serious human rights violations and their structural background”, as a means to “construct a historical narrative about the past as well as their own role in overcoming it” (Krüger 343). The significance of these commissions fundamentally lies in “the formation of a new collective identity” through the construction of “an ‘imagined moral community’ which is based on a clear normative demarcation from the past” (343). The South African TRC, moreover, “was the first commission that had the power to grant amnesties in cases of an extensive confession”, with the particular objective of fostering “reconciliation” through “forgiveness” as a “main goal” (348). As such, the hearings of the South African TRC were “not only designed to educate people about the severe and structural human rights violations during the apartheid regime but also as a public arena for the collective catharsis of the South African people” (348).

This notion of a reconciliatory postcolonial vision, however, has not gone uncontested. To Benita Parry, the South African TRC “constituted neither an analytic, active engagement with

history, nor a theoretical demolition of the ideologies underpinning segregation and apartheid” (*Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* 187). Further, in addition to “the consequence that justice was subordinated to the political interest of reconciliation”, the commission institutionalises a “hierarchy of loss” (187) that privileges a symbolic collective mourning over a redressing of the systemic material disenfranchisement that occurred during apartheid. Like Simon During, who holds that a reconciliatory postcolonialism diffuses the interrogation of critical issues such as “self-determination and autonomy” (“Postcolonialism and Globalisation” 31) that ought to be foregrounded in the critique of colonialism and neo-colonialism, Parry asserts that the focus on reconciliation mitigates recollection that “the imperial project was exercised through coercion and violence, and that the formal independence of colonies was achieved through civil and military struggles” (192). In turn, she insists on the “need to recall the long histories of injustice”, for “our best hope for universal emancipation lies in remaining unreconciled to the past and unconsolated by the present” (193).

To Parry and During, a reconciliatory postcolonialism threatens to prematurely welcome a *post*-colonial future that is both built upon and blind to the pernicious structures of inequality left behind from colonialism, which are still operative in various structural and systemic configurations in the present. Their words echo Graham Huggan’s concerns that the term ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ veils the traces of colonialism that still persist, and diminishes resistance to their influence:

When does the postcolonial period begin and when, if ever, will it end? Which parts of the world are affected, or not, by enduring colonial legacies; where are the latest Empires, the latest centres, their latest peripheries? Postcolonial studies’ fascination with the structural forms of colonial power has, at best, brought with it

an inattention to cultural specifics and historical details; at worst, the oppositional force of postcolonial writing risks being reduced to textual politics and aestheticized modes of resistance. (“The Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism” 20)

Nevertheless, even if one of the pitfalls of a prematurely celebratory postcolonialism renders it insensitive to the persistent structures of colonialism, it could be argued that in postcolonialism’s keenness on articulating a movement away from the past, it provides ground for responding to the lessons of the past, particularly in the imagining and forging of relations that are more equitable and just. Furthermore, even while the recollection of the “long histories of injustice” (Parry 193) is undoubtedly necessary to forestall a repetition of injustice, the question remains of whether a continued struggle against the individual or political actors who facilitated the past regimes of oppression, together with a persistent demand for retributive or punitive measures of compensation, fosters the sense of community necessary for “turning a barbaric society back into a human space” (McAfee, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* 92).<sup>40</sup> Armin Wildfeuer, a political philosopher, crucially points out that

---

<sup>40</sup> Poon’s call for “justice for [Japan’s] war crimes” (200) finds company in the way “many critics and activists stress that in order for reconciliation to take place in East Asia [and beyond], Japan needs to issue a clear apology and pay reparations to its former victims” (Shibata, “Apology and Forgiveness in East Asia” 277). Yet, to begin with, in alignment with the terms laid out in the San Francisco Peace Treaty, from the 1950s to the 1970s, Japan offered compensation to “almost all the countries that it had occupied” (277). These schemes of compensation “sometimes took the form of technological or economic assistance, but it was understood that they were meant to serve as wartime compensation” (277). In addition, “most of these treaties contained clauses saying that the compensation issue had been finally resolved by those treaties, and this understanding constitutes the core of the Japanese official position” (277). Importantly, Ria Shibata highlights that “the Versailles Treaty of 1919 demonstrated how excessively punitive post-war treaties can lay the grounds for future conflict”, and “in Japan’s case, preventing a resurgence of militarism or a backlash against the harshness of the post-war treaties were key aims” (277). The War Guilt Clause of the Versailles document, which forced the Germans to accept blame for World War One, as well as the harshly punitive compensatory measures stipulated by the Treaty, were crucial factors that propelled the eventual rise and popularity of Nazi leadership in Germany. The historical precedent makes it clear that harsh punitive measures and relentless blame creates ground that breeds future conflict. Considered thus, an allowance for “turning a barbaric society back into a human space” (McAfee 92) is not merely an ethical injunction, but is essential for staving off future conflict.

There are complex relationships between individuals, groups, and peoples dealing with problems of justice, problems which are so complex that they no longer can be resolved in terms of justice. ... A fair compensation of the mutual claims and of the mutual liabilities is therefore not possible any more. Justice is no longer possible, either. The result is dramatic: the never-ending struggle for the restoration of justice continues, driving the parties into an even deeper conflict. A new beginning for a peaceful coexistence is not possible ... The only possible way out is to reconcile the conflicting parties. Reconciliation is always necessary, I will argue, that where conflicts arise due to a very complicated history of conflict these cannot be resolved in terms of justice alone. (“Justice and Reconciliation” 119)

Wildfeuer’s observation of the “complex relationships between individuals [and] groups” (119) that obstruct a straightforward vision of justice is an idea that *The Garden of Evening Mists* explores as well. In the novel, Yun Ling admits that she “did whatever was required for me to live”:

I gave information to Fumio. I told him who was planning to escape. I told him who was constructing a radio, where it was hidden. I still received my share of beatings, but I got better rations. I got medicines. Yun Hong found out. She begged me to stop. *I refused.* (*Garden* 299, emphasis mine).

While her collusion with her captors testifies to her desperate will to survive amidst the sheer brutality of the camp conditions, her frank admission complicates the simple(r) categorisation of victim versus perpetrator that would facilitate the requirements of justice in a court of law, and also underscores that her survivor’s guilt and trauma are not so easily assuaged by a recourse to

justice in a court of law alone. Additionally, Yun Ling discloses that, in her time working for the War Crimes Tribunal,

The normal rules of court procedure had not been strictly applied in the war crimes hearings. The Tribunal gave weight to uncorroborated information, accepted circumstantial and hearsay evidence from the victims of the Japanese. ... I made sure that the cases I worked on were so well-constructed that the war criminals would never get a reprieve. (210)

Even while the Tribunal is meant to serve “impersonal acts of state- or internationally-sanctioned retribution” (Douglas 95), Yun Ling’s words bear the implicit suggestion that the lines between state-directed and personal redresses of injustice have been blurred – perhaps with her manipulation of evidence or argument in court – particularly in a manner that inordinately criminalises the Japanese. In this way, Yun Ling’s admissions don’t only complicate the processes and meanings of justice that she ardently pursues, but additionally exposes the idea that “justice for war crimes” (Poon 200) might itself be subject to an unjust rendering.<sup>41</sup>

Adding to the possible complications of the novel’s vision, there is also the narrative stylistics through which Tan articulates his take on a reconciliatory postcolonialism – through the use of Japanese aesthetic principles, no less – that might appear somewhat of a paradox. In fact, Lim advances the argument that Tan neglects to acknowledge the way Zen aesthetic principles served as “a ‘forgotten’ ideological tool employed by the militarily aggressive Japan during the Second World War to soften its image and advance its imperial ambitions” (436), and (mis)leads readers to “become partial to Aritomo, to be more easily swayed into underplaying or

---

<sup>41</sup> In articulating the cruciality of reconciliation, Noëlle McAfee posits that what is needed in a society torn apart by war and historical atrocities is for individuals to “reinhabit humanity itself” (92). Importantly, she brings to light the notion that “the atrocities that occur in situations of extremity effectively cut people off from humanity. Perpetrators traumatise victims into an abject, inhumane state, themselves acting inhumanely in the process” (92), in a manner that dooms the various groups involved into a cyclical repetition of violence.

overlooking the very real possibility that even a cultured Zen person such as him could be a duplicitous agent of imperial Japan” (441-442). In Lim’s view, the interpellation of Zen with Japanese imperialism aestheticises the agents and event of the Occupation, and desensitises both Yun Ling and the reader from recognising the barbarity inherent in it.<sup>42</sup> However, we need to note that Tan *does* caution against an amnesiac interpretation of the Occupation that discounts the actual violence of the regime for an aestheticised remembrance of that history. The novelist does not shy away from devoting ample textual space to reminding readers of the brutality that the Japanese troops were capable of. Yun Hong is “raped again and again” (*Garden* 274); an Englishman at the camp had his tattoo “cut ... from his arm and burned in front of all of us” (294); civilians “evacuated from Singapore in a convoy of ships flying the Red Cross flag” were accosted, “the survivors floating were strafed or left to drown. The women were picked up, raped and then thrown back into the sea” (316). Yun Ling’s ordeal is additionally portrayed in sharp visceral detail:

Another guard pinned my left hand on the tabletop and splayed my fingers. I was sobbing, begging Fumio to let me go. He brought his knife up again. I was struggling madly now. I kicked the guards, I stamped on their feet, but their grip never loosened. ... I screamed and screamed as he brought the blade down and chopped the two last fingers off my hand. (270-271)

I suggest that, far from aestheticising Japanese colonialism through Zen principles, Tan expresses a readiness to ensure that the brutality of the Japanese Occupation is not forgotten, even as he sets this historical violence in relation to aesthetic forms and traditions derived from Japanese culture. In fact, Tan’s ready admission of the brutality of the Japanese Occupation underscores that his reconciliatory vision is not antithetical to the oppositional politics that

---

<sup>42</sup> See pages 47-51 of this thesis.

invigorate postcolonialism. Nevertheless, in *The Garden of Evening Mists*, the excavation of this violent history is less a demand for reparations or punitive justice garnered towards a righting of past wrongs, than a rallying call for a collective opposition to these acts and regimes of brutality as a way to forestall their repetition in the future to come. Importantly, rather than postulating an ameliorative or restorative vision of the past, the politics of remembrance that Tan sets forward is directed towards the processes of a future-oriented, cross-cultural negotiation that underpins the creation of a more sustainable and equitable pan-Asian community. In this way, the novelist's retrieval of Japanese aesthetics can be seen as a move that rehabilitates the humanising aspects of Japanese culture within the reader's frame of consciousness, and compels the reader to consider these in conjunction with the various acts of brutality that the novel likewise excavates. Tan himself posits that "I show the Japanese doing what history told us about them, but I also show their human side. I'd like to understand why they did what they did and find the human inside the monster" (Lee, "Malaysian Writer Tan Twan Eng"). In drawing attention to these humanising aspects of Japanese culture, Tan confronts the image of Japanese barbarity that remains as a legacy of the Occupation, and encourages his readers to imagine alternative modes of relation to the Japanese in the spirit of a postcolonial cosmopolitanism.

Before I examine Tan's use of Japanese aesthetics in his exploration of history and memory in greater detail, I seek to outline some integral aspects of the novel's aesthetic vision. The phrase that I cite in the section's heading, "to see all things", comes from Yun Ling's narrative, and rehearses a moment in her apprenticeship when she finally apprehends the frame of perception that she needs in garden-making:

My eyes skimmed over the water to the camellia hedges; to the trees rising to the mountains, the mountains entering the folds of clouds. I never allowed my gaze to

rest too long on any particular object, but to see all things. In that one instant I understood what he wanted from me, what I would need to comprehend to be the gardener he had spent his lifetime becoming. (*Garden* 189)

The idea of looking at the garden as a continuous whole, as a composite rather than in its constituent parts, is as integral to the art of garden design that Aritomo imparts to Yun Ling, as it is to the vision of postcolonial politics with which Tan imbues his novel. While the notion of an all-encompassing view appears reminiscent of modernism's "striving to regain wholeness and totality" (Beiser 12), Tan crucially departs from that modernist yearning in his insistence that in the postcolonial present, that sense of wholeness and totality is both elusive and illusory – hence Magnus, who sought to be tattooed in amelioration of the "feeling of incompleteness" after the loss of his eye in the Boer War, nevertheless remarks that that feeling will "never go away" (*Garden* 195); Tatsuji, who lost his lover in the Pacific War, carries a "sense of loss" that "has been a part of him for most of his life" (180); Yun Ling, who was made to escape the prison camp without her sister at the fall of the Japanese empire, "wondered what I was doing here, living the life that should have been my sister's" (94). The garden too, reveals its beauty only in fleeting glimpses framed by the changing seasons. Yun Ling recalls that "[a] garden is composed of a variety of clocks, Aritomo had once told me. Some of them run faster than the others, and some of them move slower than we can ever perceive. ... Every single plant and tree at Yugiri grew, flowered and died at its own rate" (324). In fact, some plants only flower in "that narrow strip of time, when the start of one season overlaps the end of another" (324-325) – an occurrence that adds to the nuances of what we might conceive of as 'wholeness' in the garden. Is the garden whole because of the selection of plants that it harbours? Or is it whole only when the plants are in full bloom? Or, perhaps, is wholeness itself an elusory concept since the plants



flower at different times of the year, showing only some in full bloom and others bare, and the flowering itself is transient? The reader is tasked, through Tan's narrative strategy, to hold these questions in mind when considering the novel's interrogation of history and memory.

Indeed, even as Tan highlights that the modernist vision of wholeness and totality remains irrecoverable in the postcolonial condition, he crucially remakes that modernist striving, employing *shakkei* to suggest that wholeness can nevertheless be *recomposed* when one enters into a sense of relation with the other(s). In the narrative, in an authorial move reflective of the postcolonial impulse to "transfigure the body into narrative" (Boehmer, "Transfiguring" 274), Tan inscribes upon Magnus, Yun Ling, Tatsuji, and Tatsuji's lover, Teruzen, tattoos that narrativise through visual imagery the way "the colonised body speaks" and "negates its muted condition" (272).<sup>43</sup> In the space above Marcus's heart is a "beautifully rendered eye, the blue of the iris nearly matching Magnus's own", set against "a rectangle of colours [Yun Ling] realised represented the Transvaal flag" (194). On Yun Ling's back is incised a *horimono*, composed of images such as "the camp where I was imprisoned" and a "sun [that] looks just like [the Japanese] flag" (336).<sup>44</sup> On Tatsuji's upper arm is depicted "a field of grey clouds, two white cranes pursue each other in a loop, almost catching one another" (117), and on Teruzen's upper back sits a "pair of herons chasing each other in a circle" (224). Beyond the overt historical significance of Magnus's and Yun Ling's tattoos alluding to the violence of imperial encounters which are written on their bodies, and the visual symbolism of Tatsuji's and Teruzen's tattoos

---

<sup>43</sup> Significantly, the novel makes it clear that even as Tatsuji and Teruzen are Japanese, they are themselves unwilling victims of Japan's aggressive nationalism and imperial ambitions – a point that I will take up later.

<sup>44</sup> The symbolism in Magnus's and Yun Ling's tattoos alludes to the physical maiming that they have respectively endured in the Boer and Pacific Wars, enacting a comment not just on their embodiment of historical trauma, but also on the cyclical repetition of imperial violence across time and space.

testifying to the misplaced fervour of Japanese imperialism that forces them apart, these tattoos ‘borrow’ from the disparate strands of history that each of these characters embodies, and, by virtue of being set in relation within Yun Ling’s narrative frame, transform the characters’ accounts of individual trauma into a visual narrative of cross-cultural community.<sup>45</sup>

This notion of redefining one’s own relation to history through a contemplation of the (interrelated) histories of others informs the novel’s striving towards a vision of wholeness, and underlies Yun Ling’s exhortation to “see all things” (189). More importantly, in *The Garden of Evening Mists*, this expanded historical consciousness is shown to be a mode of perception cultivated through acts of friendship. Marcus shares his experience of the Boer War with Yun Ling over “two frosted mugs of Tiger Beer” (50) – a seemingly quotidian detail that, in fact, alludes to the intimacies of sharing and listening that occur in a space of intercultural friendship. While Yun Ling takes longer to warm up to Tatsuji due to the “subconscious assessment I apply to every Japanese man I have met” (26), querying their involvement in imperial Japan’s war effort, she comes, in the course of the narrative, to apprehend the kinship that she shares with the historian – one forged by the realisation that “we are the same ... The people we loved have left us and we have been trying ever since to go on with our lives” (344).

Throughout the novel, Tan underscores the significance of such cross-cultural affinities in aiding Yun Ling to work through the trauma of her past, in a manner that exemplifies Paul Gilroy’s conceptualisation of a postcolonial cosmopolitanism which “glories in the ordinary virtues and ironies – listening, looking, discretion, friendship – that can be cultivated when mundane encounters with difference become rewarding” (*Postcolonial Melancholia* 67). In

---

<sup>45</sup> The act of tattooing – breaking the skin in the creation of art – layers over the traumatic past with a work of beauty that is, literally, forged through pain. Beyond the narrative connection that the characters’ tattoos establish, the manner in which the act of tattooing memorialises history through a simultaneous rendering of both pain and beauty also lends itself to the aesthetic and political vision of *The Garden of Evening Mists*, and draws attention to the centrality of both historiography and beauty in the narrative.

Gilroy's formulation, as in Tan's novel, this rewarding, albeit "mundane" cross-cultural relation is articulated as a "different idea of cosmopolitanism", whose "value to the politics of multiculturalism lies in its refusal of state-centeredness and in its attractive vernacular style" (67). Significantly, the novel advances this notion of a "cosmopolitan solidarity from below" (80) as an integral aspect of post-conflict reconciliation, as opposed to state-sanctioned apparatuses of resolution – whether in the form of the War Crimes Tribunal that posits punitive justice as a means to restore the sense of equilibrium necessary for repairing social relations, or in the form of the Japan Peace Treaty, which, as Yun Ling fumingly relates, stipulates that

no one – not a single man or woman or child who had been tortured and imprisoned or massacred by the Japs – none of them or their families can demand any form of financial reparation from the Japanese. Our government betrayed us!  
(*Garden* 46)

Yun Ling's angry outburst brings to light the inadequacy of state-directed mechanisms of resolution in bringing about genuine feelings of reconciliation on the level of the individual. Crucially, while Tan acknowledges the necessity of such political means of reconciliation articulated through state agencies – such as the tribunal and peace treaty that Yun Ling discusses – he draws attention to the fundamental gap that exists between these state-led means of resolution and the urgency of healing that still needs to take place within the individual. It is, I argue, in this gap that the novel's vision of reconciliation takes root. Demonstrating the awareness that "reconciliation necessitates not one-off legal or semi-legal trials or testimonies enacted in criminal tribunals or truth commissions" (Tse, "Queering Imperial History" 9), Tan turns his attention to the work that individuals themselves must perform on the path to genuine reconciliation. In the section that follows, I look at the ways in which Tan utilises principles of

Japanese aesthetics to re-frame the idea of what history and memory entail, as he articulates his vision of the processes that reconciliation demands of the individual.

## II. The Past as Composite

For a novel invested in re-shaping the discursive and conceptual frames through which the Japanese Occupation in Malaya is remembered, *The Garden of Evening Mists* devotes significant textual space to the excavation of a set of images and historical strands that, at first glance, appear only tangentially related to a narrative about the Occupation. One such image, particularly arresting in the beauty that it conveys, is the water wheel in Yugiri that had been gifted to Aritomo by Emperor Hirohito. This water wheel bears “inscriptions on the undersides of the paddles”, which Aritomo discloses are:

Prayers carved by monks. With every turn of the wheel, the paddles press into the water, imprinting the holy words onto its surface ... Just think – once, these prayers were carried from the temple in the mountains all the way to the sea, blessing all those they floated past. (*Garden* 110)

Stolen “from a Buddhist temple in the mountains outside Kyoto two centuries ago” when “the abbot had angered one of the Tokugawa shoguns by supporting a group of rebels” (110), the water wheel now sits in Aritomo’s garden in the Cameron Highlands, where Yun Ling pictures:

the stream winding down these mountains, leaving Yugiri, to be pulled into a river. I saw the prayers steam off the water in the morning sun as the river flowed through the rainforest, past a tiger and a mouse-deer drinking from it, past Malay kampongs and aboriginal longhouses and Chinese squatter settlements. I saw a farmer in his paddy field by the river’s edge uncrook his back and gaze upwards

to the sky, feeling a cool breeze on his face and a long moment of unexplained contentment. (110)

The motif of the water wheel – yet another image of duality that Tan evokes, which adds to the gracefulness of the prose while simultaneously attesting to a politically turbulent era of Japanese history – provides a glimpse into the historiographical perspective that the novel conveys. To start with, with Yun Ling focalising on the “prayers carved by monks” that subtly enliven the unnamed farmer in a delightful moment of “unexplained contentment” (110), Tan articulates the importance of drawing from the cultural and spiritual heritage of Asia in search of culturally-resonant symbols and means of reconciliation. The Buddhist prayers, which arise from a mountain in Japan and are now “steam[ing] off the water ... past Malay kampongs and aboriginal longhouses and Chinese squatter settlements” (110), are articulated as symbol of hope for the forging of a non-partisan Malay(si)an community – one that transcends, as the prayers do, the racial, cultural, and linguistic politics that continue to fracture relations in the country, as well as the distrust between Japanese and Malay(si)ans that linger on from that traumatic chapter of the Occupation in history. More crucially, by invoking the imagery of the prayers “carried from the temple in the mountains” of Japan’s Edo period (1600-1868), down to – by an act of the imagination – the rainforests and rivers of Malay(si)a, the novelist demonstrates the impulse to trace history both in its *longue durée* and transcultural, trans-border aspect.

This motivation to explore the Japanese Occupation through the *longue durée* of global history similarly shows itself in Yun Ling’s portrayal of Magnus’s “Cape Dutch house” where “on the roof, the wind pulled at a flag” with “broad stripes of orange, white, blue and green”, which the Afrikaner informs her is “The Vierkleur ... the Transvaal flag” (42). She recalls “how many words [the Malay and Afrikaans languages] both share: pisang, piring ... pondok”, as a

result of the “slaves taken from Java to the Cape” (67) – a historical trajectory that she reiterates when she describes the “stone arch, plastered in white, a bell hanging from it” that she sees in Magnus’s estate, which “had once been rung to announce the end of the working day for the Javanese slaves on a vineyard in the Cape” (132). Elsewhere in the novel, through Magnus’s voice, Yun Ling traces his journey from South Africa to Southeast Asia, a journey which he embarks on after the tragic decimation of his family by the British during the Boer War:

One day – in the spring of 1905, I’d guess – I bought a ticket for Batavia. The ship was forced to dock in Malacca for repairs and we were told it would take a week to complete. I was walking in the town when I saw an abandoned church on a hill ... And what do I find there, but the grave of Jan Van Riebeeck ... [who] founded the Cape. He became its governor.’... the Dutch East Indies Company – sent him there, as punishment for something he had done. [...]

Anyway, seeing his name there, carved into that block of stone, I felt I had found a place for myself here in Malaya. I never returned to my ship, never went on to Batavia. Instead I made my way to Kuala Lumpur.’ He laughed. ‘I ended up in a British territory after all. And I’ve lived here for ... ‘forty-six years. Forty-six!’

(51)

While the histories of the Boer War, Javanese slave trade, and Dutch imperial conquests that Magnus brings to the narrative gesture towards the “plurality, inclusivity, and ostensibly democratic impulse behind the novel’s narrative structure”, the function that such historical threads play within the scheme of the novel exceeds the mere iteration that “there is always a different perspective and a possible connection” (Poon 197). The authorial design that underlies Tan’s excavation of these historical threads is illuminated by the words that Aritomo relates to

Yun Ling on the first day of her apprenticeship: “we are composing a picture within this frame ... When you look at the garden, you are looking at a work of art” (*Garden* 97). The notion of “composing a picture” (97) that Aritomo speaks of illuminates the distinctive historiography that Tan traces in *The Garden of Evening Mists*. Playing upon *shakkei*’s approach to *composing* a garden with a view, Tan advances the conceptualisation of history and memory as a *composite*, with one person’s account and interpretation of the past set into relation with the experiences and memories borne by others. Importantly, just as in gardening, *shakkei* involves a landscape “captured alive” (Itoh 15) in a manner that reveals both “possession” and “symbiosis” (Main and Platten 24), in the novel, Tan’s rendering of *shakkei* invests these tangential strands of history with a dynamism that continually exerts pressure on the questions of how to remember and, perhaps more crucially, how to *relate* to the Malay(si)an history that he recounts.

In “Remembering the Japanese Occupation Massacres”, Frances Tay, a historian, notes that in contrary to the public interest and media attention that surround documented exhumations of mass graves, such as Germany’s Bergen-Belsen, Ukraine’s Vinnytsia, and Spain’s Priaranza, “the response of the Malaysian general public has been largely muted, except in cases where the reinternment of remains has threatened state-sponsored dominant narratives” (221). One of the reasons underlying the relative lack of interest is that “the main ethnic groups in the territory – comprising indigenous Malay and migrant Chinese and Indian minorities – experienced the occupation differently” (221). While the Malay and Indian communities were governed with relative leniency, the Chinese community “in particular bore the brunt of Japanese aggression” (222). A lingering consequence of these race-specific policies is the relative public indifference to the exhumation of Occupation-era mass graves, “largely because the mass graves, the victims contained within, and the events that produced these mass corpses have been perceived (rather

mistakenly) to have affected only the Chinese segment of the population” (232). While this lack of interest points to the continued elusiveness of a “shared collective memory that can be harnessed to fashion a mutually cohesive narrative”, it further underscores the “continued marginalization of minority histories from official historiography of the Occupation” (221-222).

To this day,

the historiography of the Japanese occupation accords primacy to the Malay ethnic majority’s collective memory of the war. This dominant narrative promotes the Occupation as a catalyst in the awakening of Malay nationalism, leading to decolonisation and self-determination. Experiences that diverge from the national narrative are marginalised, including the suppression of Japanese atrocities during the occupation. (222)

Such is the backdrop against which *The Garden of Evening Mists* emerges. From the outset, in stark departure from the Malay-centric “dominant narrative” (222) that predominates the official historiography of the Occupation, the novel is articulated from the perspective of Yun Ling, who speaks as a Malayan Chinese racial minority. In dramatising the horrors of war that Yun Ling and her sister have been put through, Tan's novel insists on the urgency for official Malay(si)an historiography to both account for and engage with the Chinese experience. Yet, any suggestion that the novel might be seeking to put forward the idea of the Chinese as victims of Japanese brutality is complicated by the fact that in the second narrative frame, which ‘borrows’ from the events of the Malayan Emergency (see page 88 in this chapter), some members of the Chinese themselves – those in the Malayan Communist Party – have since become the agents of brutal violence. Termed “communist-terrorists ... or, more commonly, ‘bandits’” (*Garden* 39), these Chinese communist guerrillas perpetrate gruesome acts of brutality, ranging from “killing



the Malays in their kampongs” (68), to “chopp[ing] the headman up with a parang” and “forc[ing] his wife and daughters to watch” (71), to ambushing a couple on the highway and leaving “their bodies hacked into bits all over the road” (77), and slicing the throats of the aborigines and leaving their bodies “in a moat of blood so dark and thick they seemed to be glued to it. Hundreds of flies crawled over their faces, distended bellies and loincloths” (81). Horrific details and images like these are spread across the narrative, ensuring that the grimness and barbarity of the communist guerrilla war, enacted primarily by the Chinese members of the Malayan Communist Party, remain in the reader’s eye.

Poon has argued that Tan’s novel “builds its transcultural imaginary on the strategic appropriation of the Malayan communist guerrillas fighting in the jungle as convenient scapegoats”, where “they are depicted without any sense of higher political ideas”, and are instead “seen as threats to the sanctity of Yugiri and private spaces in the Cameron Highlands”, particularly as they commit “seemingly arbitrary and random violence” (195).<sup>46</sup> Contrary to Poon’s view, however, I suggest that Tan’s ‘borrowing’ from the landscape of the Malayan Emergency is a strategic manoeuvre to situate the events of the Occupation against the wider frame of Malay(si)an history. In the novel, Kwai Hoon, a communist guerrilla fighter who has decided to turn himself in after years of fighting, comments that “I was trained by the British, you know ... Force 136. There were about a hundred of us. They sent us for training in Singapore when the Japs landed. And now we’re enemies” (*Garden* 167). By historicising the roots of the communist insurgency in the counter-Japanese resistance of the Pacific War, Tan contextualises these seemingly “arbitrary” and “random” (Poon 195) acts of violence against a

---

<sup>46</sup> Poon argues that “Tan’s novel provides a smooth and unproblematic version of cultural translation and transculturalism, eliding any allusion to the incommensurability of cultures”, and “steer[s] clear from the hard questions about representability and cultural understanding that postcolonial studies should ask” (194). I argue, instead, that the novel’s interrogation of these issues gains greater clarity when considered in light of the narrative strategies that it employs.

longer history of Chinese oppression and disenfranchisement, and in that brief narrative space humanises the insurgents, even as he demurs from exonerating their indiscriminate acts of brutality. Crucially, in this act of *shakkei*, Tan neither mitigates the suffering of the Chinese during the Occupation through an excavation of Chinese-dominated violence during the Emergency, nor discounts the acts of brutality committed by the Chinese communists by historicising them against the oppression that they experienced during the Occupation. Instead, *shakkei* serves as a strategic move for the novelist to focalise on the myopism inherent in fixating on claims for justice or reparations for one historical event, when shifting historical tides enact a turn in the subject positions of the individuals and communities for whom justice is clamoured. By this consideration, as he situates the events of the Malayan Emergency in relation to the history of the Japanese Occupation, Tan problematises the notion that resolution or closure for any historical conflict can be fully achieved by centring focus on the event itself without consideration of the long(er) *durée* of history.

In the novel, *shakkei* also serves to contest the myopism that hampers the individual from recognising that his or her relation to history is something that can be changed. This aspect of *shakkei* is most prominently revealed through Magnus, who functions as a foil to Yun Ling's character in the first and second narrative frames. As a means to situate the brutality of the Japanese Occupation against the wider frame of global history, Tan interweaves the narrative with Magnus's recollections of the Boer War, where "the Brits tried to take our land. We fought back, but they burned our farms and put our women and children in concentration camps" (*Garden* 161). Significantly, Magnus's experience in the Boer War bears particular similarities to Yun Ling's own under the Japanese: he "was captured by the English less than a year later and shipped out to a POW camp in Ceylon" (50), while his father was shot, and his sister, Petronella,

“sent to a concentration camp in Bloemfontein” (51). Petronella eventually dies in the concentration camp – “survivors later said the English had mixed powdered glass into the prisoners’ food” (51).

When the two share their experiences of the respective wars over beer, Yun Ling crucially asks:

“You’ve forgiven the British?”

He subsided into his seat. For a while he was silent, his gaze turned inward. “They couldn’t kill me when we were at war. And they couldn’t kill me when I was in my camp,” he said finally, his voice subdued. “But holding on to my hatred for forty-six years ... *that* would have killed me ... So listen to me. Listen to an old man ... Don’t despise all Japanese for what some of them did. Let it go, this hatred in you. Let it go.”

“They did this to me.” Slowly I raised my maimed hand, protected in its leather glove.

He pointed to his eye patch. “You think this fell out by itself?” (51-52)

Although Yun Ling, in this first narrative frame, is unable to grasp the significance of Magnus’s advice, she nevertheless reflects on Magnus’s words regarding the provenance of the tea on his plantation: “the first batch of seedlings came from the same estate in Ceylon where I had once worked as a prisoner of war” (79). This is a revelation that underscores Magnus’s active choice in re-mapping his relation both to the place where he was once held prisoner, and also to the British, in whose colony he has now chosen to make a life. Yun Ling makes it clear that Magnus has never forgotten the traumatic history of the Boer War – he, after all, named his estate ‘Majuba’ as a “way of honouring the battle where the Brits were soundly thrashed” (161). He

has, however, chosen to shift the way he memorialises that history, as well as his position within it: “and it gives me great pleasure to know that in Malaya and all over the East they’re taking in a bit of Majuba every time they have their tea” (161). In spite of the fact that Yun Ling doesn’t explicitly acknowledge the impact of Magnus’s experiences, her decision to set his words down in writing suggests that Magnus’s story has become an integral part of the perspective through which she comes to reflect on her own past.

Adding to his rendering of *shakkei*, Tan presents the figure of Tatsuji, who brings to the fore a Japanese soldier’s account of the Pacific War. Even though Tatsuji appears as a somewhat peripheral character, having crossed paths with Yun Ling only near the end of the novel’s chronological timeline, I suggest that Tatsuji is, in fact, central to Yun Ling’s ability to look anew at the events of her past, to apprehend and work through the sorrows of that past. To begin with, Tatsuji has been read as one of Tan’s “sympathetic portraits of individual Japanese characters” (Poon 196). I would argue, however, that rather than detracting from the novel’s capacity to attend to the call for justice and “the politics of bearing witness” (197), the character of Tatsuji brings to light the gaps and fissures inherent in Yun Ling’s understanding of her past, in a manner that enables the novelist to critique both the demand for justice as well as the notion of bearing witness – particularly when these are articulated through a narrower conceptualisation of history that perpetuates divisive relations between individuals and societies.

In what resembles the processes of a truth commission, Tan has Tatsuji recount the acts of brutality that he had committed in his youth:

There was a labour camp a few miles away from our villa. Prisoners of war had been shipped from South East Asia to work in the coal mines outside the town. Every time some of them escaped, the men in the village would form search

parties. One weekend when I was visiting my father, I saw them with their hunting dogs and their sticks and farming tools. They made wagers as to who would be the first to find the escaped prisoners. ‘Rabbit hunting’, they called it. When they were recaptured, the prisoners were taken to the square outside the village hall and beaten ... Once I saw a group of boys club a prisoner to death. (186)

What Tatsuji doesn’t specify, but which Yun Ling surmises, is that “those boys in the village ... you were with them when they punished the prisoners, weren’t you? You took part in the beatings” (187). Later, in the last legs of the Pacific War, Tatsuji, himself the son of an industrialist whose fortune is built on the production of military fighter planes for the Japanese government, is recruited to serve as a *kamikaze* pilot. Before his departure for military duty, Tatsuji returns to his father’s house where he sees his father struggling with the enormity of the realisation that the war is no longer only a business or economic activity, but an event that is about to tear his own family apart. The elderly man sorrowfully laments that “I built the airplanes that sent other people’s sons to their deaths. So it has to be balanced out – my son must die too” (230). Disillusioned, Tatsuji’s father commits *seppuku* (ritual suicide) – an event that renders Tatsuji’s execution of his military duty an impossible choice, for his father’s death would have been in vain otherwise.

While stranded in Malaya due to a malfunction of his plane, Tatsuji re-encounters his former flying instructor, Teruzen, with whom Tatsuji has been in love for a long time. Knowing that they “have lost the war” (232), and thus “are no longer bound by duty to anyone” (231), Teruzen tries to convince Tatsuji to give up on his *kamikaze* mission, pleading with the younger

man “[t]o live out our days here, far from the rest of the world. A house on this beach, and time eternal” (232). As Tatsuji recollects,

[f]or a long moment I let myself be seduced by his dream. I allowed myself a brief moment of all the possibilities which were now opened to me, the life that I could now have ... But I knew it was impossible ... “*If I do not carry out my orders, then my father’s death was in vain,*” I said, trying to find a way to explain my decision to him. (232, emphasis mine)

Tatsuji, however, never gets to embark on his mission: Teruzen assumes Tatsuji’s place in the air raid the next day, and perishes. As Tatsuji recounts, “[i]t was only weeks later that I found out that the Americans had dropped their first atomic bomb on Japan. At that instant, as Teruzen flew off in my place to meet the ship, the war was effectively over” (235).

Tan’s narrative strategy to situate Tatsuji’s account of the war in *The Garden of Evening Mists* can be understood as an act of *shakkei* that doesn’t only shift the frame of perception through which the reader comes to consider the Occupation, but questions the categories of representation through which discourses about the Occupation are articulated as well. Significantly, Tatsuji quotes the following lines from Yeats’ poem, “An Irishman Foresees His Death”, which Teruzen had recited to him earlier in their relationship, and which functions as a motif of their tragic love: “I know I shall meet my fate/ Somewhere among the clouds above” (225). The subsequent lines of the poem that Tatsuji leaves unspoken – and which the novel leaves the reader to uncover – are these: “Those that I fight I do not hate/ Those that I guard I do not love” (Yeats, “An Irish Airman” 5). In the way that he brings the simultaneity of beauty and sorrow implied by *mono no aware* to shape the contours of his narrative, Tan similarly brings the idea of a “beauty born out of its own despair” (“Among School Children” 222) characteristic of

Yeats' late Romantic thinking to bear upon his narrative. In doing so, Tan impresses upon us the idea that in light of postcolonial history, such contrasts within the notion of beauty are unavoidable, as it is certainly sentiments like pain and despair that have engendered the search for symbols and emblems of beauty. Indeed, the beauty of the verses that Tatsuji quotes underlines something of the pain within him – for Tatsuji was implicated in a war that he did not willingly join.

In the narrative, aside from his personal grief, Tatsuji relates that

We had no idea what my country did ... We did not know about the massacres or the death camps, the medical experiments carried out on living prisoners, the women forced to serve in army brothels. When I returned home after the war, I found out everything I could about what we had done. That's when I became interested in our crimes. I wanted to fill in the silence that was stifling every family of my generation. (186)

While Tan doesn't mitigate the actions of the Japanese, he critiques, through the figure of Tatsuji, the slippages within the categories of representation that designate victim from aggressor, which problematise attempts at historicising an event like the Pacific War without consideration of a wider view of history. Far from garnering sympathy for the Japanese, Tatsuji's story illuminates the notion that truth processes "produced final reports ... by 'shrinking' testimony into what one might suspect were predetermined categories of representation" (Simpson, *Truth Recovery in Northern Ireland* 32). Where "these master narratives can replicate understandings of conflict as being the ineluctable result of macro-level 'master cleavages' rather than a complex set of factors and nuanced intersections between individual and collective agency" (33), one might question if

the call for justice is truly just, and if the insistence on bearing witness to just one side of the story hampers a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the event.

At the beginning of their encounter, as Yun Ling speaks of the “assessment I apply to every Japanese man I have met” the question of whether or not they are “old enough to have fought in the war” (26), she gestures towards the way that her traumatic past continues to overdetermine her experiences in the present. However, as her resentment for Tatsuji gives way to the “sorrow” (187) that she feels for him, she reveals a subtle shift away from the victim-aggressor dynamic through which she had conceived of her relations with the Japanese, and underscores her growing awareness that the war may have similarly devastated the lives of ordinary Japanese people as well.

Significantly, near the end of the narrative, recounting the moment that Tatsuji was about to leave Yugiri, Yun Ling relates that

Tatsuji takes out the book of Yeats’s poems from his satchel. He looks at it, and holds it out to me. I shake my head, but he says, “Please, I want you to have it.”

Extending my hands, I receive the book from him. I feel we have known each other for longer than the two weeks he has spent here. We are the same, I realise. (344)

In accepting Tatsuji’s volume of Yeats’ poems, Yun Ling demonstrates a renewed sense of relation that arises from a recognition of their shared losses. Here, Yun Ling’s feelings towards Tatsuji is not a mere response to the “sympathetic portrai[t]” (Poon 196). Rather, it is a moment of *mono no aware*, where Yun Ling moves beyond her subjective focus on her own suffering and loss, and into a more objective perception of the losses that she and Tatsuji both share, where, in



her own words, “the people we have loved have left us, and we have been trying ever since to go on with our lives” (*Garden* 344). Such is a transformative moment where positive emotions associated with mutual compassion and negative emotions associated with loss – essentially, what Yun Ling terms the “beautiful and sorrowful about life” (175) – encounter each other, and bring Yun Ling to a heightened plane of awareness of history and life. While Tatsuji’s poignant story doesn’t detract from the atrocities that he, and other Japanese, have committed during the war – for Tan *does* grant narrative space to recounting Tatsuji’s act of “rabbit hunting” that forestalls any impulse to overlook the violence of the war – it enables Yun Ling to transcend the immediacy and subjectivity of her traumatic past. Importantly, Yun Ling speaks of *shakkei* as a principle that “never allowed my gaze to rest too long on any particular object, but to see all things” (189). Where individual excavation of memory reveals more fissures and slippages that hamper her ability to work through her traumatic past, the composite view that *shakkei* provides doesn’t only enable her to come to terms with her own memories, but also with the lingering resentment towards the Japanese that has had her in a gridlock for forty years.

### III: Releasing the Arrow

As an element of *shakkei*, Tan’s rendering of Tatsuji’s memories represents an authorial manoeuvre that enables both Yun Ling and the reader to apprehend memory as something that holds a “sense of uncertainty, of tension and possibility” (98). As Yun Ling re-visits the events of her past in writing, she doesn’t simply make revisions to the incidents that she recalls; more crucially, she becomes aware of how time, as well as the stories that other characters have brought into her frame of view, has changed her. In a pivotal moment in the narrative, Yun Ling recalls her encounter with the Japanese officer, Hideyoshi Mamoru, who “had been sentenced to

death for the massacre of two hundred Chinese villagers at Teluk Intan” (211). The encounter with Hideyoshi takes place in the first narrative frame, when Yun Ling, working for the War Crimes Tribunal, questions the officer about the location of her camp. He informs her that “from the first day I saw you walking into the courtroom, I knew you would do your duty thoroughly. I knew I would be hung”; “hanged”, she retorts, “not hung” (211). Significantly, as she looks back upon her choice of words across the distance of time, Yun Ling is instilled with a new self-awareness:

Thinking about my own words again, I am appalled. Had I been so unfeeling as to correct a man’s grammar a short while before he was to be hanged? Hung, hanged – what did it matter?

As a judge I have sat in civil and criminal cases. I have sentenced people to death for murder, drug-trafficking and armed robbery. I have always taken pride in my detachment, my objectivity, but now I wonder if these are merely the attributes of a deadened heart. (218)

The hesitancy that Yun Ling now expresses towards her actions in her past reveals not only her shifting relation to the Japanese, but, more importantly, the sense of closure that she has arrived at through the course of the narrative as she moves beyond her resentment of the Japanese. The political scientist, Smita Rahman, observes that “the experience of time is that of a fluid mingling of the tenses, where the present and the past coexist with each other and gnaw into the future, where each tense contains the impress of the other” (*Time, Memory, and the Politics of Contingency* 1). The fluidity of time doesn’t only imply that “the layers of past memories mingle and coexist with the present, lending it depth and vibrancy”, but also afford a “complex experience of time – where time does not seem neatly sequential, or obediently linear, where the

past, present, and future do not seem to follow each other in calibrated intervals” (1). In *The Garden of Evening Mists*, Tan adds to this conceptualisation of time and memory by suggesting that it is not only the past that traverses the linearity of chronology to condition the present and future; the present similarly shapes our memory of the past in a manner that doesn’t only liberate us from the relational structures that dominated the past, but also creates new possibilities of relation and understanding for the future.

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the crux of the novel hinges upon the question of whether Yun Ling’s decision to “not ... search for my camp or the mine anymore” (342) represents a reclamation of agency as she arrives at a sense of closure, or if it points to Aritomo’s subtle but successful persuasion of Yun Ling, through an education in Japanese aesthetics, to “‘let go’ of her desire to know if he was a clandestine agent at the very point in time when she is finally just one step behind the answer she had sought for decades” (Lim 446). In Lim’s reading of the novel, Aritomo is “much more culpable than he might appear in readings drawn solely from the text” (445), and that Yun Ling’s “belated decision to ‘let go’ effectively marks her successful interpellation by the Zen ideology” in a way that “prevent[s] her from seeing the truth about Aritomo, that he was not the Zen figure she takes him to be and that the only thing Zen about him was his use of it to occlude his participation in the imperial cause” (446). In other words, Lim’s view is that Yun Ling

potentially aids Japan in maintaining as secret the location of the Golden Lily loot concealed by Aritomo with *shakkei*. Unwittingly, also, she potentially denies justice and repatriation to the countless number of Asians (and their descendants) who were robbed of their wealth, if not also killed, by the agents of the Golden Lily. (446)

He arrives at the conclusion that “either way, [Aritomo] had clearly done his duty to the emperor” (446) – both in the execution of Golden Lily’s activities, and in the successful deception of Yun Ling as she gives in to complicity with imperial Japan’s war crimes.

Lim’s discussion raises the crucial point that Aritomo *might* have been more complicit with Golden Lily than Yun Ling is willing to admit, and that Yun Ling herself *might* have sought to avoid confronting the question of whether or not Aritomo had been a spy – issues that the novel intentionally leaves vague and unresolved. In contrary to Lim’s line of thought, however, I suggest that Yun Ling’s intentional vagueness regarding these issues stems less from her absorption into a Zen ideology that overdetermines her ability to think critically about her past, than from her nuanced understanding, which she gains in light of *shakkei*, of memory and one’s shifting relation to the past.

In particular, departing from Lim’s conclusion that Yun Ling’s “successful interpellation by the Zen ideology ... prevent[s] her from seeing the truth about Aritomo” (446), I argue that Yun Ling’s education in Japanese aesthetics leads her to perceive a different kind of ‘truth’ about Aritomo that is no less important: his silent struggles between obedience and conscience, duty and love, which the gardener has had to grapple with throughout his acquaintance with her. As I shall demonstrate, her realisation of Aritomo’s ‘truth’ enables her to finally arrive at a point of closure where “that sense of abandonment was fading, like water draining from the pond, leaving behind only sorrow for Aritomo, for the way his life had been wasted, just as mine in its own way had been” (342).

*“Yugiri will always be a private garden”*

I have earlier noted that the principle of *yūgen* holds the key to understanding the significance of Aritomo’s character, as well as Yun Ling’s relation to the discoveries that she makes regarding his involvement in Golden Lily. Derived from Zen Buddhism, the term *yūgen* relates to a sensitivity towards what is suggested and not openly expressed. The English sinologist, Arthur Waley, highlights that *yūgen* “means ‘what lies beneath the surface’; the subtle as opposed to the obvious; the hint, as opposed to the statement” (*The Nō Plays of Japan* 22). Even as Tan does not make explicit mention of this aesthetic principle, the relevance of *yūgen* in the novel can be gleaned from the fact that *yūgen* has traditionally been “the guiding aesthetic” of Japanese art, “influencing not just literature but theatre, painting, and of course the garden” (Keane, *Japanese Garden Design*). The authors of *Japanese Gardens* further highlight that these gardens

use the principle of ‘hide and seek’ to create intimate spaces. Gardens are designed so that visitors do not see all the components of a garden at once. A building or a view may be highlighted and revealed and then again hidden from view only to reappear later, creating a sense of mystery and discovery referred to as *yūgen* in Japanese. (Mehta and Tada 17-18)

This sense of “mystery and discovery” (18) is not merely aesthetic, but is meant to initiate philosophical reflection: “[i]n keeping with Zen Buddhism, *yūgen* was concerned with the true nature of reality that hides behind the illusory aspects of the world” (Keane, *Japanese Garden Design*). In other words, *yūgen* hides in order to reveal more.

In a conversation with Yun Ling, Tatsuji muses that “[e]verything I discovered about [Aritomo’s] life felt natural yet ... *manufactured*. It was like ... well, it was like walking in a

garden designed by a master *niwashi* [gardener]" (*Garden* 314). Like the gardens that he has spent his life creating, Aritomo's character is presented to the reader through a narrative strategy that relies on the subtle and unspoken, and is "visible only when the right conditions are present" (183). At the crux of the mystery of Aritomo is the question of how to perceive his character, particularly as "[o]nly a small portion was revealed to the world, the rest was buried deep within, hidden from view" (99). Looking back upon her memories when she returns to Yugiri after the intervening decades, it suddenly dawned upon Yun Ling that "Aritomo never could resist employing the principles of borrowed scenery in everything he did, and the thought comes to me that perhaps he may have even brought it into his life" (120). In these lines, Yun Ling doesn't merely articulate her awareness that Aritomo may have intentionally concealed an aspect of his past from her, that "there was a part of him that I knew I would never be allowed to enter" (237); in line with her determination "to see all things" (189), she also implicitly questions whether or not the totality of a person's identity can be judged through – or reduced to – the "small portion" (89) that is shown at any given moment. Adding to the nuanced view that Yun Ling now inhabits is her suggestion that a fuller picture of Aritomo's character can only be gleaned by "layer[ing] what I see over what I remember" (10), as she allows not only her memories of the past to be negotiated by the present, but also her memories to *transform* the discoveries about Aritomo that she makes in the present.

In the novel, Yun Ling recalls an incident in the second narrative frame where, after a day of work at Yugiri, she and Aritomo witness a "storm of meteors, arrows of light shot by archers from the far side of the universe" (215) – an event that would later become a motif in the *horimono* that Aritomo inscribes on Yun Ling's back. Yun Ling muses that her nanny used to "warn me that they're bad omens, these meteors" (216). In turn, Aritomo reveals that these

falling stars “remind me of our *kamikaze* pilots” – that, in fact, his “brother was one of them ... among the first batch of pilots to volunteer” (216). When she questions why his brother had chosen to be a *kamikaze* pilot,

“Family honour,” Aritomo replied. That justification, so often uttered by the Japanese prisoners I had met, had always repelled me. “It is not what you think,” he continued. “Our father passed away shortly before I left Japan. Shizuo blamed his death on the troubles I had caused our family.” (216)

It is only in the third narrative frame that Tatsuji gives Yun Ling insight into the “troubles” that Aritomo had brought his family, that “the Emperor sacked him” (224) – an event that “was a tremendous loss of face for him” (184). To Tatsuji, this incident explains Aritomo’s presence in Malaya as an imperial spy. Asserting that “Aritomo-sensei played a small but important part in the war”, the historian wonders “if this was his chance to redeem himself, to repair the damage to his reputation” (185). Even as Yun Ling demurs from articulating in exact detail the impact of Tatsuji’s words upon her, she reflects that Tatsuji’s revelation “has made me re-examine what I know of Aritomo, made me consider what he has said and done in an altered light” (338). As she professes, “I close my eyes for a brief moment, going over again what Tatsuji told me about Golden Lily this morning. On the face of it, it is a preposterous story – except that I know differently” (319) – a suggestion that even as Yun Ling appears to resist Tatsuji’s assertion that Aritomo was an imperial spy, she is, in fact, beginning to re-vision her memories of Aritomo in light of her new discoveries about his past.

While Yun Ling’s remark that she “know[s] differently” (319) seems to suggest a tacit concession to Tatsuji’s hypothesis, her narrative brings to light her continued attempts to “see all things” (198), to situate Tatsuji’s new revelation about Aritomo against the various other layers

of stories and information about the gardener that she has gathered over the years. In the course of writing her memoir, Yun Ling is continually reminded – and as she continues reminding herself – that “Aritomo wasn’t involved in the war” (50). Magnus informs her that “he made sure we weren’t sent to the camps. At one point in the war he had more than thirty people working for him. All of them – and their families – survived the war” (66). Vimalya, the gardener whom Yun Ling employs, relates that her grandfather “often mentioned the Japanese gardener – how he had saved him from being taken to work on the Burma Railway” (174). A Buddhist nun whom Yun Ling encounters decades after Aritomo’s disappearance tells her that “a few years after Mr Aritomo had gone, I found out that during the Occupation, he had been to see the regional commander to have all of the *jugan ianfu* [comfort women] in Tanah Rata released” (311). Engendering a layered portrayal of Aritomo, these accounts furnish a more nuanced conceptualisation of Aritomo's character, and complicate simple(r) categorisations of Aritomo as a “duplicitous agent of imperial Japan” (Lim 442), or a war criminal who “robbed” and “killed” (446) the locals.

Yun Ling similarly recalls that after she tells Aritomo about the suffering that her sister was put through in the Japanese internment camp, “it struck me that he had not bowed to the portrait of his emperor. In fact, the photograph, I saw, was no longer hanging on the wall” (284). Aritomo in fact confides that “before I met you, before you came here, I never knew anyone personally who had lost friends or family during the Occupation ... I kept myself above all of that. I kept out everything that was unpleasant” (216). His emergent disenchantment with Japanese imperialism illuminates the notion that just as Yun Ling’s relation to her past changes with the discoveries that she makes in her present, so, too, does Aritomo’s position vis-a-vis the imperial cause that, as it is rumoured, underpins his presence in Malaya. While Yun Ling never



fully professes whether or not Aritomo is an imperial spy, her words suggest that as Aritomo perceives the devastating impact of the Occupation in greater clarity after hearing about the brutality that she had witnessed at the camp, Aritomo himself begins to negotiate his relation to his past by resisting Japanese imperialism and the emblems that speak for it.

Adding to the layers that furnish a fuller picture of Aritomo is the *horimono* that he creates on Yun Ling's back. To start with, in his transposition of the *horimono* – a form of body art that in its originary Japanese culture carries “negative connotations as a result of prohibitory laws that conventionally curtailed its spread and stigmatised both users and wearers” (Ho, “Negotiating a Personal Experience”) – as an emblem of beauty in the novel, Tan alludes to the possibility that even the painful chapter of the Japanese Occupation can open up renewed forms of transcultural understanding and relations in the post-war period. What this renewed transcultural understanding might entail is suggested by the aesthetic form of the *horimono* (彫物) itself. Made up of the compound words 彫 (hori – carving/ to carve) and 物 (mono – thing), the term (literally carved thing or thing of carving) implicitly brings to mind the homonym 掘 (hori – digging/ to dig). Lending itself as a metaphor for the excavation – the *digging up* – of memory, the *horimono* adds shape to what we might think of as the contours, nature, and function of memory.

Looking at her *horimono* through the mirror for the first time after its completion, Yun Ling notices an empty space, “a rectangle the size of two cigarette packs above my left hip”, musing that “[t]he emptiness looked unnatural, sickly” (327). Aritomo, however, informs her that even in its completion, “[a] *horoshi* [tattoo artist] will always leave a section of the *horimono* empty, as a symbol that it is never finished, never perfect” (327). In “A View of Japan through Japanese Art”, Peter Drucker illuminates that whereas “Western painting is ... geometric”,

premised upon “linear perspective” and “the subordination of space to geometry”, Japanese painting is “by contrast topological” and “deals with the properties of surface and space in which shapes and lines are defined by space” (193). Significantly, even as “Japanese paintings are dominated by empty space”, it is “not only that so much of the canvas is empty. The empty space organises the painting” (193). The *horimono*, which Aritomo tells us is derived in part from the principles of Japanese landscape painting, as well as the attendant processes of memory that it sheds light on, can be understood to similarly be structured upon the centrality of the blank space. Importantly, Drucker’s words highlight that the empty space is not absence or imperfection, but a structural principle that heightens the contours of the other elements that are present.

As a metaphor for memory, the *horimono* communicates the dynamism – the “tension and possibility” (98) – implicit within the act of remembering as memory itself takes new shape with each recounting. In *In Praise of Shadows*, Tanizaki speaks of this dynamism, brought about by the interaction between light and emptiness, as a phenomenon that conveys its own particular form of pleasure. He draws attention to the “magic of shadows” that confers upon the “depths of an alcove to which the sunlight had never penetrated” an “immutable tranquillity” (20). “Were the shadows to be banished from its corners”, he writes, “the alcove would in that instant revert to mere void” (20). What Tanizaki refers to as the aesthetic pleasure that one derives from the “magic of shadows”, which enables the perceiver to see in “mere void” (20) shimmering nuances of darkness, we might read in the light of the novel as the pleasure of (re)discovering new shapes and forms of memory with each recounting, each excavation. Indeed, as Yun Ling gazes upon the *horimono* again three decades after its completion, she observes that “[o]ne of the figures in the horimono appears to move, but it is only a trick of the eye” (336). Even as it remains “a trick of

the eye” (336), the seeming movement of the *horimono* captures Yun Ling’s gaze and compels her to frame her memoir through its aesthetic form. As she draws attention to the *horimono* on her back, Yun Ling implicitly suggests that it is not simply what one remembers and what eludes remembrance that shapes memory – it is, perhaps more significantly, the interaction between the elements of memory and the empty spaces within that enables new forms of memory to emerge, and new discoveries to be made about the past. This rediscovery of the past, as we shall see, ultimately brings to Yun Ling a sense of closure that we might also read as a form of pleasure.

*“A sense of uncertainty, of tension and possibility”*

When Tatsuji first encounters Yun Ling and presents the information that Aritomo might have been a spy for Golden Lily, the historian makes it clear that “[a] man of [Aritomo’s] upbringing, and with his background ... He would have been obligated to carry out his duty properly. All the way to the end” (319). The reverence that Aritomo would show to his country also means that even if he had possessed information about Golden Lily’s activities, “[i]t is not the sort of information he would have left lying around” (319). Tatsuji’s confidence in Aritomo’s obeisance is, however, challenged by his later discovery that the *horimono* that Aritomo has created on Yun Ling’s back might actually sketch out the location of her camp, and accordingly, Golden Lily’s buried loot. These revelations that Tatsuji brings to the novel raise intriguing questions of whether Aritomo had betrayed his mission and failed in his duty by revealing the location of the camp to another person, or that he had carried out his duty in full by preserving the map on Yun Ling’s back. Nevertheless, I suggest that in line with Tan’s narrative strategy, these revelations represent surface information about Aritomo. In alignment with *yūgen*, the

reader is asked to “dig deep” (98), to excavate what is intentionally hidden and “visible only when the right conditions are present” (138).

Departing from the implicit suggestions that follow from Tatsuji’s revelations, I set forward the thought that the *horimono* in fact enables Aritomo to explain to Yun Ling, through the “[a]rcane, inexplicable symbols [that] have been sewn in the tattoos” (335), private information about his life that the concept of ‘duty’ prevents him from communicating to her otherwise. The *horimono*, as Yun Ling reveals near the end of the narrative, depicts a number of symbols that pertain to her experiences: “the camp where I was imprisoned”, “a meteor shower”, a “sun [that] looks just like your flag, Tatsuji”, as well as “a blank rectangle” (336) that corresponds to the coordinates of Yugiri in the Cameron Highlands. We are led to perceive the relation between Aritomo’s earlier remark about his brother’s death as a kamikaze pilot and the meteor shower. Similarly connected are Tatsuji’s suggestion that the disgraced gardener had participated in Golden Lily’s cause as a means to redeem his and his family’s honour and “the camp where [Yun Ling] was imprisoned” (336). These textual threads forge a link between the details of Aritomo’s past and the mysterious symbols in the *horimono*. The idea that Yugiri might relate so intimately to an aspect of Aritomo’s past – a past that he struggles with – lends greater relevance to the moment where the gardener, as “[s]adness eclipsed his eyes”, articulates that “Yugiri will always be a private garden” (210). Yun Ling thus muses that “Aritomo’s life seemed to glance off mine; we were like two leaves falling from a tree, touching each other now and again as they spiralled to the forest floor” (193) – a suggestion that even as she demurs from affirming or denying the allegations that Aritomo is indeed a spy, she is beginning to work through the implications of the suggestion that he might have been unwittingly involved in the traumatic events of her past.

Perhaps more crucially, Tan's narrative strategy engenders the possibility of reading the *horimono* as a depiction of Aritomo's unspoken emotions, which reveal the gardener as a poignant figure encumbered by the tragedy that has befallen upon his family, beleaguered by his (alleged) complicity in imperial Japan's war crimes, and torn between the loyalty that his country demands of him and his love for Yun Ling that persists in spite of his guilt. Significantly, after he completes the *horimono* on Yun Ling's back, "he began to spend more of his time in the *shajo*, shooting invisible arrows" in the practice of *kyudo*. In her study of this Japanese martial art form, Diana Soeiro observes that "*kyudo* promotes synchronism between body and mind exercising them simultaneously in order to generate an experience of release creating a sense of oneness: dissolution experienced as one being part of cosmic harmony and not as fragmentation" (202). Importantly, "release takes place when one ... releases the arrow and not when one realises that one has hit the target"; for "you can hit the target and experience no harmony and you can miss it and experience harmony" (202). In this way, Aritomo's act of "shooting invisible arrows" (*Garden* 328) can be read as a metaphor for release as he confesses his past to Yun Ling. In this view, Yun Ling's intentional vagueness concerning the allegations regarding Aritomo is not to be perceived as a simple refusal to come to terms with his possible duplicity; rather, it gestures at her tacit admission to the possibility that people, like gardens, "change over time" as their "original designs are lost; erased by wind and rain" (118). Just as "[t]he gardens Aritomo-sensei made no longer exist in their original forms" (118), Aritomo, too, cannot be affixed within the particularities of a subject position that fails to accommodate the possibilities of change.

It is thus ultimately the sentiment of *mono no aware* that underlies Yun Ling's decision to relinquish her longstanding quest to seek the remains of the camp, as she transcends the confines of her personal experience and approaches a wider understanding of the positionalities that she

and Aritomo both inhabit as historical lives entrenched within an unfolding tide of traumatic events, from which neither are able in the moment to evade or escape. For the reader of Yun Ling's narrative, this revelation imparts both the beauty and sorrow of *mono no aware*. We are reminded that Yun Ling's renewed understanding of Aritomo, which frees her from the resentment and sense of abandonment that she has harboured for the past thirty years, occurs at the cusp of her aphasia, where her thoughts and memories will soon "be unintelligible to me" (30). We are led to see that, like the seasonal blooming flowers in the garden, this quiet bliss of release and closure emerges in "[t]hat narrow strip of time, when the start of one season overlaps the end of another" (324-325) – indeed, in "that point in time just as the last leaf is about to drop, as the remaining petal is about to fall" (175).

Providing a glimpse into this moment that "captures everything beautiful and sorrowful about life" (175), *The Garden of Evening Mists* invites the reader to think through the gaps and nuances of history that don't readily present themselves to dichotomisation and politicisation. In an interview, Tan comments that "Yun Ling had experienced – first hand – the war on one side of the battlefield, and I wanted her to hear the other side of it. In war, there are always casualties on both sides of the conflict" ("On Art and Artifice" 18). In his interrogation of the Japanese Occupation in Malaya, Tan encourages the reader to consider the possibility of looking beyond the strictures of unrelenting reaction and contention for punitive justice. In doing so, he echoes the sentiment that Gloria Anzaldúa advances in *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank shouting questions ... A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed ... A counterstance [is] ... a step towards liberation ... but it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the

opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once [...]. (100)

Indeed, the Japanese aesthetic principles that shape Tan's narrative form engenders a "new consciousness" (100) of what reconciliation might look like in the globalised present, and offers the reader an expanded view of what postcolonial politics might entail. In contrast to seeking a politics of resolution by continuing to contest the injustices of the past, Tan encourages readers to also consider the experience of the other, to arrive at the possibility of forging new forms of intercultural relation that transcends, even as it remembers, the traumatic chapters of history.

## Chapter 2

### Reading *Anil's Ghost*: History, Politics, and the Inventions of Form

#### 1. Introduction

In Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000), the eponymous character recalls a sign that she encountered at a temple on the Mihintale mountain peak:

At the top of that flight of steps leading to the hill temple was a sign in Sinhala that must have once said, WARNING: WHEN IT RAINS, THESE STEPS ARE DANGEROUS. Sarath was laughing at it. Someone had altered one Sinhala syllable on the sign, so it now read, WARNING: WHEN IT RAINS, THESE STEPS ARE BEAUTIFUL. (*Anil* 192)

In this vignette, a passing thought in Anil's memory, Ondaatje brings the paradoxical relation between danger and beauty, borne by a single Sinhalese syllable, to touch upon the narrative. As it is in the Sinhalese language, where one syllable could hold in tension danger and beauty, the destructive and the pleasurable, so in *Anil's Ghost* Ondaatje enacts a similar doubleness. The novel impresses upon the reader the various contrastive ways in which a given action could be put to effect or a single event, construct, or phenomenon be apprehended. He highlights, for instance, that the intimacy of touch underlies the impulse to nurture as well as kill. Gamini, an Emergency doctor who spends his time attending to the victims of the civil war, "believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night" (119). Sarath, a local



archaeologist and Gamini's brother, recalls once witnessing a similar form of physical closeness during an abduction in the south of the country:

He had no shoes on. And he was blindfolded. They propped him up, made him sit awkwardly on the crossbar of a bicycle. One of the captors sat on the saddle, the one with the rifle stood by his side. When I saw them they were about to leave. The man could see nothing that was going on around him or where he would be going. 'When they took off, the blindfolded man had to somehow hang on. One hand on the handlebars, but the other he had to put around the neck of his captor. It was this necessary intimacy that was disturbing. (154)

In the first instance, the gesture of touch is a protective act that reaffirms the affection between mother and child; in the second, however, the "necessary intimacy" (154) between the abductee and his possible killer exposes a cruelty in that physical closeness, and reiterates the brokenness of the community that has rendered the killer insensible to the intimacy of the gesture as well as the significance of his victim's life.

This exploration of doubleness is at the heart of the novel's postmodernist interrogation of the Sri Lankan civil war, and serves as the point of departure for my reading of *Anil's Ghost*. Importantly, the idea of doubleness underlies the novel's (re)making of beauty. Jean-François Lyotard writes that "[t]he postmodern would be that which ... searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (*The Postmodern Condition* 81). In *Anil's Ghost*, beauty constitutes an aspect of Ondaatje's search for ways to underscore the unrepresentable and incommensurable in war. The various emblems and gestures of beauty in the novel, as I will show, present a corresponding tunneling into the depths of trauma and human suffering that narrative and history cannot fully capture. Throughout the

novel, the reader is made to encounter images that are unmistakably beautiful – I speak here, for instance, of the ancient rock carving of the mother and child that Sarath encounters (157) and the Buddha sculpture “cut in another century” (304) in the novel’s epilogue.<sup>47</sup> Bearing the imprint of the earlier ages in which they were carved, these images undeniably stand in an “eternal present moment” (Donoghue 190) that communicate the materiality of what their makers considered beautiful in their respective times. Carried over into the context of the twentieth-century Sri Lankan war, however, these images come into an inherent doubleness: are they beautiful because of the ‘eternal’ beauty etched into their forms? Or are they beautiful because they testify to the ideals of love and peace that seem hopelessly elusive during war? Does the violence and suffering of the twentieth century, then, in some way help to illuminate or even *constitute* a part of the beauty that we perceive in these images?

This postmodernist doubleness that *Anil’s Ghost* ascribes to beauty, I wish to argue, serves as a way of impressing upon the reader that ideas of beauty must nevertheless become commensurate with what historical notions of beauty insufficiently anticipate. Steven Connor has remarked that “postmodernist texts were excited by the prospect of the illegitimate, the unspeakable, and the unknowable” (“Postmodernism and Literature” 70). These reflections on postmodernist art carry over into the ways that postmodernist works shape our understanding of aesthetics and beauty as well. As a postmodernist text, *Anil’s Ghost* probes at the margins of what constitutes beauty, advancing the thought that contemporary conceptions of beauty need to accommodate what might traditionally be considered ‘illegitimate’ ideas of the beautiful. By suggesting that beauty itself can testify to the scale of horror and human suffering that exists even centuries after their making, *Anil’s Ghost* conveys the notion that, as the conditions of the present change, our ways of reading beauty ought to change accordingly as well.

---

<sup>47</sup> See pages 154-155 and 162-174 of this thesis.

The fact that these carvings nevertheless speak to us in the novel's present – albeit in what is likely a markedly different way from that which the makers had originally intended – is not to say that these earlier conceptions of beauty are deemed irrelevant. Rather, as I wish to argue, *Anil's Ghost* advances the idea that what constitutes the 'eternal' or enduring quality of beauty is not necessarily the consistency of form, but that the emblems of beauty are able to gain new meaning and new relevance *in spite of* the change in historical or political conditions. Lamarque posits that a crucial aspect of 'great' art consists in "the ability of the greatest works to retain an interest well beyond, perhaps centuries or millennia beyond, their context of origin" – that, in fact, "the great works of art, even those with a strong initial usefulness in personal, political, or religious terms, tend to grow into a benign uselessness as time passes and conditions change ... They attain a new dimension of value, toward art, one might say, away from utility" ("The Uselessness of Art" 211). The durability of art across ages understandably arises in conjunction with the fact that these works remain relevant even as the conditions of their reception – that is, our way of reading them – shift. If so, I would argue, the changing conditions of their reception would also constitute a part of what makes art 'great'.

It has also been observed that Ondaatje's narratives frequently demonstrate a "desire to express, but not reconcile mutually opposed ideas in the same act" (Leckie, "Michael Ondaatje" 26). In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje reveals a similar stylistic inclination as he invites the reader to contemplate the Sri Lankan civil war – and Sri Lanka itself – through the various other tropes of doubleness that structure the text. Connor remarks that "[p]ostmodernist art (and postmodernist writing in particular) is ... thought to know that it cannot match up to what goes beyond comprehension in contemporary experience" (Connor 67). I suggest that the self-awareness of narrative's incapacity to capture the full extent of the war is an inherent aspect of Ondaatje's

exploration of doubleness, as well as his “unwillingness to take sides” (Scanlan, “Anil’s Ghost and Terrorism’s Time” 303) in his rendering of the conflict. One strand of criticism directed towards *Anil’s Ghost* is that the novel neither “maps out a political milieu, debates social ideas” (Kertzer, “Justice and the Pathos of Understanding” 117) nor “offers ... political analysis and foresees ... political solutions” (131). It is, however, my argument that as he writes from a postmodernist view of history, Ondaatje demurs from representing the civil war in broad, totalising strokes, and – as I shall demonstrate in the pages to come – questions the notion of history itself.

Indeed, the novelist is quick to impress upon the reader that his narrative highlights but an *aspect* of the truth and not the *whole* truth. This idea that truth is to be gleaned in fragments rather than a totality, in stories rather than a single story, is reflected in the narrative structure of the novel.<sup>48</sup> *Anil’s Ghost* depicts the Sri Lankan civil war through a clutch of five primary characters whose differing viewpoints and experiences alert readers to the deeply divergent ways through which the war unfolds in the lives of those caught up in it. There is, first of all, Anil, a forensic pathologist trained in the methods of Western empiricism, who spent the past fifteen years away from the country in pursuit of her education in England and America, and “had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze” (*Anil* 7). Like the younger Yun Ling of Tan’s *The Garden of Evening Mists*, who sought the restorative powers of criminal trials as a means of conflict resolution, Anil expresses an investment in the forensics of “bones and sediment” as a means to arrive at a “truth” (259) that she believes would put an end to the war. Working for a Swiss human rights organisation to investigate the Sri Lankan

---

<sup>48</sup> Ondaatje has commented that “I don’t believe stories are told from A to Z anymore; or, if they are, they become very ponderous. ... We discover stories in a different way ... That sense of discovery, of memory, and how we reveal ourselves to each other – none of that is chronological” (Wachtel, “Michael Ondaatje” 59).

government's involvement in political killings, Anil brings the discourse of international justice and conflict resolution into the narrative.

She comes up against her local partner, Sarath, who holds that the value of truth depends on the “character and nuance and mood” (259) of the social and political context. While “as an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use”, he nevertheless cautions Anil about the “dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you” (157). Sarath's warning arises from his understanding that the acts of terror themselves are no longer committed in the name of political goals, but have become its own “mad logic” (186), since “war having come this far like a poison into the bloodstream could not get out” (156). The various other characters also pose a counterpoint to Anil. The aged epigraphist, Palipana, whose “exhaustive research” into Sri Lanka's ancient cuneiform inscriptions and meticulous insight into the “languages and techniques of research” (80) have led him to an “unprovable truth”, one that is only revealed by the fleeting dance of “water fill[ing] a cut alphabet and link[ing] this shore and that” (83), holds that “truth is just opinion” (102). Gamini, whose work as an Emergency doctor has led him to perceive the war not through “any cause or political agenda” (231), but through bodies in suffering, where “the only reasonable constant was that there would be more bodies tomorrow – post-stabbings, post-land mines” (120). There is also the sculptor, Ananda, whose wife's political disappearance at the height of the conflict has led him to seek compassion for the living and peace for the dead, both in the forensic reconstructive work that he undertakes for Anil and the communal restoration of Buddha statues at the end of the novel.

Gamini, in particular, mounts a powerful critique of Anil's Western approach to the Sri Lankan conflict without actual “love ... for the place”:

The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit. (286)

As the paragraph above might indicate, even as *Anil's Ghost* focalises principally on the events of the civil war, the narrative itself conveys characteristically postcolonial undertones. Running through the novel is the distinctively postcolonial question of whether systems and structures of knowledge from without can adequately represent and resolve the issues that post-independence societies face. Using Gamini's observation above as a lens through which to engage with a postcolonial reading of the novel, I suggest that Ondaatje raises critical questions about the Western model of, and assumptions about, the processes of conflict resolution in post-independence societies like Sri Lanka. In staging an encounter between Anil's Western ideas of transitional justice with the local, communal forms of healing embodied by the other characters, the novel does not only challenge the universal applicability of the discourse of transitional justice, but additionally suggests that such 'global' discourses are nevertheless subjective and partial. In the novel, then, such transitional justice as a "grand narrative" (McGonegal, *Imagining Justice* 88) gives way to local and culturally-resonant forms of community-(re)building. I further suggest that in its suspicion towards the discourse of international tribunal justice, *Anil's Ghost* demurs from putting forward a literary politics of endorsing judiciary prosecution for one party and material compensation for another. Instead,

Ondaatje's refusal to be ensnared into the near-sightedness of a totalising interpretation of the war leads him to advance an alternative view of politics itself – one founded upon private morality and individual compassion, where concern for the suffering of the other functions as the starting point of political action.

In a move that reflects his diasporic situatedness, Ondaatje simultaneously looks to the literary postmodernism of the West and the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka as he puts forth his singular vision of what healing for the splintered nation might look like.<sup>49</sup> Taking a cue from postmodernism's ethical commitment to the other,<sup>50</sup> as well as Buddhism's focus on "the intrinsic worth of human lives" (Premasiri, "A 'Righteous War' in Buddhism?" 84), Ondaatje advances the notion that genuine peace requires a reconstruction of the fundamental idea of politics itself: politics ceases to be thought of as a mere struggle for privilege and control over other humans, and is instead conceived of as an ethical *responsibility* towards the other. Indeed, by highlighting the inadequacy of political and judicial systems – both international and local – Ondaatje intimates that the way to peace is not to be sought through a recourse to these external structures of politics and governance. Instead, seeking lasting peace necessitates a venturing beyond – in fact, a *transformation* of – the present climate and conception of politics. The ethico-political

---

<sup>49</sup> Michael Ondaatje was born in 1943 in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). He moved to England at the age of 11, and later attended university in Canada, where he has lived ever since.

<sup>50</sup> Expounding upon the centrality of the other in "western thought", which "can be seen to underlie almost all responsible work in postmodernism", Robert Eaglestone posits that "postmodernism, implicitly or explicitly, is about ethics before it is anything else" ("Postmodernism and Ethics against the Metaphysics of Comprehension" 183-185). He builds upon the analysis that Levinas has put forward to remark that even as western thought has been wont to engage with otherness by 'consuming' it into its own hierarchies and structures of interpretation, "there are also ways in which western thought is, unawares, based on the relation with the other" (188). Levinas' belief that "the other can be encountered in a 'non-allergic relation' ... through the cracks and boundaries of western thought" (188) underpins postmodernism's ethical drive, as it calls for a departure from 'knowing' the other through "an inverted projection of the same" (189), privileging instead a means of apprehending the other without assimilating the other within the ontological structures of western thought itself.

stance that Ondaatje maps out in the novel reverberates with the observation posited by the former Sri Lankan president, Chandrika Kumaratunga, that “[p]eace is more than a simple absence of war. It entails the active engagement in a battle for reconstruction, for identifying and rectifying the root causes of war and conflict” (qtd. in Gunawardana 177). A root cause of the rampant violence of the war, the novel seems to suggest, is a fundamental disregard for the value of human life, and a submission to the notion that human lives serve as a means to political ends. Rectifying this cause would, accordingly, necessitate an alteration of this view and a refocalisation on the precarity of human life, as well as a resistance against the notion that violence serves as a justifiable means to a political goal.

In the pages that follow, as I inquire into the postcolonial undercurrents that run through *Anil's Ghost*, I interrogate the narrative strategies through which the novel problematises the question of how to ‘read’ the Sri Lankan civil war, and, accordingly, how to imagine the possibility of healing. In resonance with the idea that colonialism has bequeathed upon modernity the epistemological hierarchies and structures of knowledge that had animated colonialism in a previous era, *Anil's Ghost* explores the ways in which post-independence Sri Lanka nevertheless remains enmeshed in a global system of knowledge and governance that continues to efface local/native ways of knowing and doing. In the novel, Ondaatje excavates local forms of subjectivity implicit in the characters’ strategies of coping with and resisting the violence of the civil war, and sets these local, unhistorical forms of resistance in dialogic relation with the global system of transitional justice often brandished as a necessary step towards reconciliation in post-independence societies.<sup>51</sup> In doing so, he argues for the urgency for local,

---

<sup>51</sup> In an inquiry into the sustainability of international transitional justice systems, Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern note that “development co-operation has been reformulated in legal terms and more and more international effort has gone into building courts, writing laws, punishing perpetrators of human rights abuses, supporting human rights NGOs, and generally promoting the rule of law abroad” (“Whose Justice?” 266). More importantly, such discourses of transition represent a “top-down”, “one-size-fits-all” approach that hampers



culturally-resonant strategies of healing and peace-building to be recognised alongside the pressures for transitional justice from without.

## II. Between History and Historiography

Written and published in the midst of the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2000), where an “almost unwavering commitment to war and virtually unparalleled intensity of militarism” (McGonegal 91) led to an “everyday experience of warfare and state terror” (Seoighe 1), *Anil’s Ghost* takes on the monumental task of imagining a way to peace, even when the conclusion to the terror seemed remote. The novel depicts the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and sketches out a landscape of “continual emergency” abounding with “[t]he disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses” (*Anil* 43) – a landscape that “exposes the intractableness of a conflict that arguably rules out the possibility of a different, more peaceful future” (McGonegal 86). In Sarath’s initial meeting with Anil, he sketches an outline of the war in the midst of which they find themselves:

The bodies turn up weekly now. The height of the terror was ’eighty-eight and ’eighty-nine, but of course it was going on long before that. Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. Every side. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign power. ... You had, and still have, three camps of enemies – one in the north, two in the south – using weapons, propaganda, fear, sophisticated posters, censorship. Importing state-of-the-art weapons from the West, or manufacturing homemade weapons. A couple of years ago people just

---

“popular participation and local agency” (265). These master narratives of transitional justice “can act to deny the genuine exercise of rights and the promotion of active political agency on the part of their populations”, and, as the authors conclude, “are far less likely to have legitimacy, be effective, and therefore sustainable after the sponsors leave” (291)

started disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There's no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are. ... What we've got here is unknown extrajudicial executions mostly. Perhaps by the insurgents, or by the government or the guerrilla separatists. Murders committed by all sides. (*Anil* 17-18)

Sarath's deliberately vague description of the war, which echoes the Author's Note that prefaces the novel where Ondaatje describes the war as "a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north", has been appropriately observed as a "gross simplification" (Kokkola 122) of the war's actual political complexities. The novel's dearth of "hard information about Sri Lanka" (Allen 63) has in fact been critiqued by various readers. Kanishka Goonewardena, who observes that history "is much less evident in *Anil's Ghost*, which (just like *Running in the Family*) can be and has been appreciated without any awareness of the political upheavals in Sri Lanka", remarks that "*Anil's Ghost* reads like a story about people dragging a constant flow of dead bodies out of a river that has no hint of what's happening upstream. Who is throwing the bodies in? Why? Is that not worth knowing?" (1-2). In a similar vein, Ranjini Mendis mounts the charge that

Arguably, Ondaatje's aim may not be to give his viewpoint of the civil strife in question. He may be exercising the writer's privilege to re-create the situation to suit his artistic ends ... The absence of detail in historical context, however, works against an informed reading, leaving just a general impression of self-destructive violence as the major thread of the novel. (9)

It could be argued that Ondaatje's refusal to plainly name victims and killers is constitutive of a narrative strategy that seeks to mirror the lived reality of chaos, fear, and

repression engulfing the characters – in other words, that “this culture of terror can also influence the production of literature” (Scott, *Affective Disorders* 130). The authorial choice to elide the specificities of the political context, however, raises the question of exactly what sort of historical vision the novel is invested in. In fact, the way in which the novelist circumnavigates the contextual specificities of the Sri Lankan war gains starker prominence in contrast to the unambiguous manner in which he identifies the government as the perpetrator of the Guatemalan genocide – an event against which the novel sketches out the Sri Lankan war. “So it’s secret gangs and squads”, the narrator comments, “not like in Central America. The government was not the only one doing the killing” (*Anil* 17). Ondaatje’s contrastive approaches to depicting the Guatemalan and Sri Lankan conflicts beg the question of what significance his intentional vagueness regarding the Sri Lankan civil war – for intentional we must now think it – communicates on the issues of historicisation and narrativisation. For, even as Ondaatje “does not offer a political novel” (Kertzer 117) in the conventional sense, he does offer a political commentary on the question of how to approach and interpret the event.

Before I move into a discussion of the historical vision that *Anil’s Ghost* conveys, I seek to highlight some key aspects of the civil war that present particular challenges to the task of narrativisation. It has been observed that Ondaatje’s postmodernist take on the war in *Anil’s Ghost* might not only stem from his interest in excavating the “unhistorical, unofficial” (“Michael Ondaatje in Conversation with Maya Jaggi” 7) account of the war, but could be attributed to the complexity of the situation itself:

the politics of Sri Lanka ... seem to reflect back postmodern notions of the collapse of grand narratives, the fragility and impermanence of identity, the failure of history to provide us with a coherent account of our origins, and the

moral ambiguities of action and character in a world where cause and effect are endlessly complex. (Scanlan 303-304)

Historians have observed that the civil war in Sri Lanka was a “distinctly post-colonial war” (Seoighe 13). Broadly conceived, the island’s descent into political crisis can be attributed to the socio-political divides set in place during the British colonial era. Under British rule, the Tamil minority, which made up about 25% of the island’s population, held a position of privilege in relation to the Sinhalese majority.<sup>52</sup> The widespread adoption of the English language in the schools of the island’s northern, predominantly Tamil areas meant that the Tamils gained better access to jobs within the British colonial system. This led “the bureaucracy of the colonial state to be dominated by the Tamil minority, who did not view themselves as a minority, but rather as equal counterparts to the Sinhalese majority” (Castellano, *Civil War Interventions and Their Benefits* 129). Following the island’s independence from the British in 1948, the availability of jobs in the civil service gradually declined; in 1956, a coalition of Sinhala-dominated parties led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, which rode on a wave of Buddhist nationalism, defeated the incumbent government in a general election. One of the most pressing demands made by the newly-elected government was that the Sinhala majority should have proportionate access to jobs in the civil service. The new government further advocated “an apartheid-type political, cultural, and social separation with the Tamil minority” (130) – a situation further exacerbated in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Sinhalese moves at institutional reforms aimed at blocking Tamil access to higher education, government employment, and other economic opportunities.

According to the anthropologist, Jonathan Spencer, the “single most obvious factor in the decline into political crisis has been the failure of successive governments to settle the grievances of the minority Tamil population in a way that is nevertheless acceptable to the majority Sinhala

---

<sup>52</sup> See Castellano, *Civil War Interventions and Their Benefits* pp. 129.

population” (“Introduction: The Power of the Past” 1). While there had been attempts to arrive at a political solution in the intervening years between the elections of 1956 and the outbreak of the war in 1983, “occasional outbreaks of violence” (2) nevertheless occurred between the two groups. In the mid-1970s, Tamil frustration at the discriminatory policies of the government led to “militancy of a new kind” (2), particularly in the calls for separatism and the founding of the new state of Eelam – calls that became the official policy pursued by the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), an opposition movement conceived against the Sinhalese government led by Jayewardene following the 1977 elections. The TULF, however, was itself overshadowed by the young militant groups that had emerged – such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which had been the most threatening of these groups – which sought recourse to terrorist attacks against the Sinhalese-led administration. The government, in turn, responded with counter-terror measures in an increasingly violent register, which eventually resulted in the 1983 killing of several thousands of Tamils in the Sinhala-dominated south after an LTTE ambush on 13 members of the Sri Lankan army – an event widely considered to be the beginning of the civil war.

Even as the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE were the primary belligerents of the conflict, the fighting itself was punctuated by incursions by the Indian government, which undertook support for the LTTE both before and during the course of the war (Spencer, “Introduction: The Power of the Past” 1), as well as the leftist militant Sinhalese group known as the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) , whose participation in the war was driven by rebellion against the “increasingly authoritarian government of President J.R. Jayewardene” (Spencer, “Foreword”, *Violence, Torture and Memory in Sri Lanka* iii).<sup>53</sup> As the historian, Jagath

---

<sup>53</sup> Spencer elaborates that “although the JVP insurrection does not fit easily into the bipolar logic of the 30-year civil war, we should nevertheless see it as very much of the same history” (“Foreword” iii). The immediate cause of the JVP insurrection, as Spencer explains,

Senaratne, asserts, the number of belligerents involved in the conflict meant that it was not always clear who the perpetrators of violence were, for “undisciplined police and armed forces ... carried out murders and robberies while masquerading as guerrillas” (*Political Violence in Sri Lanka* 147). As the 1989 Amnesty International report on the situation in Sri Lanka notes,

Violence is now so widespread that it is often difficult to establish with certainty who the agents of specific killings were – or even to identify the victims whose bodies were sometimes grossly mutilated, burned to ashes or transported long distances from the scene of arrests or abduction before being dumped. (qtd. in Senaratne 146).

The end of the war in 2009 brought little clarity to the events that had transpired. Rachel Seoighe observes that “[i]n Sri Lanka, the state and the LTTE have trafficked in claims and counter-claims of victimisation: to sustain identities of victimhood and to seek political gain and international legitimacy” (100). “The category of the ‘victim’”, Seoighe elaborates, “has been used to legitimise the continuing military assault led by the Sri Lankan state forces and also to further the military and political goals of the LTTE” (100). The mutual culpability of the Sri Lankan and Indian governments, the LTTE, as well as the JVP, in the perpetration of human rights abuses during the conflict poses particular problems for the questions of how the event is to be narrated and remembered – an issue that is further exacerbated by their competing claims of victimhood. How to speak and how to remember become ethical issues fraught with slippages and overlaps. As Seoighe astutely notes, “[i]n the post-war environment, the question of how the

---

was “the government’s agreement to Indian plans for a ceasefire and a political settlement with the Tamil rebels, plans that involved the arrival of Indian troops to police the unconvincing and short-lived peace” (iii). Further, “the participants in the insurrection were strikingly similar to the participants in the Tamil uprising – young people, with a leadership from the ranks of the better-educated youth, and foot soldiers mostly recruited from poorer and lower-caste young people” (ix). “The bigger story”, Spencer concludes, “which includes both the JVP insurrection and the civil war with the LTTE”, is predicated upon “a close but unstable link between populist democracy and authoritarian rule” (ix).

war should and can be remembered – by the Tamil community and wider Sri Lankan society – is a contentious one” (1).

In fact, the 2011 United Nations report on the Sri Lankan civil war gestures towards the chaotic nature of the attacks and the difficulty of ordering the events within a coherent narrative structure. On the one hand, the report details the way that government officials “sought to intimidate and silence the media and other critics of the war through a variety of threats and actions, including the use of white vans to abduct and to make people disappear”; “shelled on a large scale in three consecutive No Fire Zones, where it had encouraged the civilian population to concentrate, even after indicating that it would cease the use of heavy weapons” (ii); and “subjected victims and survivors of the conflict to further deprivation and suffering after they left the conflict zone” (iii). On the other hand, it also draws attention to the LTTE’s use of civilians as hostages, “at times even using their presence as a strategic human buffer between themselves and the advancing Sri Lanka Army”, the “point-blank shooting of civilians who attempted to escape the conflict zone”, as well as their carrying out of “suicide attacks outside the conflict zone” (iii). The UN’s preliminary findings indicate that “a wide range of serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law was committed *both* by the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, some of which would amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity” (ii, emphasis mine). Historians have in fact also noted that Sri Lanka’s civil unrest “is yet more unusual” not only because of the “tense ethnic relations” that have led to the LTTE’s separatism, but also because of the “terrorist acts” (Sriram, *Confronting Past Human Rights Violations* 101) committed by members of the Sinhalese-dominated JVP against the government.

It has been observed that sympathy, as an affective response towards victims of violence encountered in fiction, “purports to be an ethic”, but is, “in fact, grounded in oppositional positions that define a political dynamic” (Marais, “Violence, Postcolonial Fiction, and the Limits of Sympathy” 98). In staging the relation between a perpetrator and a victim, “the literary text requires its readers to do exactly what the agent of the violence of which they read has failed to do” (97) – to recognise the suffering caused by the violent act. Yet, when readers encounter textual scenes of violence, they do not merely sympathise with the victim. In fact, their sympathy distances them from the perpetrator to whom they “usually feel altogether less kindly disposed” (97). The effect of the perpetrator-victim dynamic within a literary text does not merely revolve around the evocation of sympathy for the victim; this dynamic itself acts as a form of politics, compelling the reader to identify with one party and alienating the reader from the other. After all, “the form of sympathy elicited by phonocentric realism in the context of ... oppression often presupposes the reader’s occupation of such oppositional positions: the text secures his sympathy not only through emphasizing the humanity, individuality, and normality of the victim but also through denigrating the violator” (98). Literary representation of such ‘oppositional positions’ is thus not simply political because of their subject matter, but because of the unspoken ways in which narrative structure moulds political affinities. In the context of the Sri Lankan war, where atrocities were committed by all opposing factions, and where the categories of victim and oppressor diffuse into each other, a narrative politics premised upon eliciting sympathy for one side and denouncing another amounts to an insensitivity towards the subtleties of the war. Crucially, as one of Ondaatje’s characters articulates, “[t]he problem up here is not the Tamil problem, it is the human problem” (*Anil* 245). The Sri Lankan war was, in effect, a conflict of such political complexity and terror for those caught up in its midst. Representing the conflict in



its entirety exceeds the structure of any narrative that seeks to cleanly map out the war in terms of oppositional factions and cause-and-effect relations.

In his attempt at conceptualising the Sri Lankan war, the historian, Ananda Wickremeratne reflects that “[t]here is no history. There is only historiography” (“Historiography in Conflict and Violence” 114). In *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje renders in literary form that very same observation. Demurring from presenting the events of the war through the structure of a historical novel, Ondaatje foregrounds instead, in the literary form of *Anil’s Ghost*, the contours of the historiographic process. In doing so, he diverts attention from the idea of history as a recoverable past that presents itself readily to narrativisation; rather, he problematises the question of how to read the war as a historical event, especially given the myriad perspectives and modes of interpretation available to the historian (and, accordingly, to the reader of the novel). Early in *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje gives the reader some clues into the issue of how to interpret the narrative. I speak of the italicised sub-section in the first chapter where the narrator abruptly draws focus away from the plotline focused on Anil, and delves instead into the National Atlas of Sri Lanka. The atlas, as the narrator makes clear, does not merely render in pictorial or graphical form the social and geological history of Sri Lanka. Containing “seventy-three versions of the island – each template revealing only one aspect, one obsession: rainfall, winds, surface waters of lakes, rarer bodies of water locked deep within the earth” (*Anil* 39), the atlas in fact depicts an exercise in historiography, making it clear to the reader that a full(er) picture of the past is, and has to be, composed of various layers of different maps. A single map, after all, reveals “only *one aspect, one obsession*” (39, emphasis mine). Several chapters later, the narrator depicts Anil in Colombo’s Archaeological Offices, where she “moved down the hall from map to map. Each one depicted an aspect of the island: climate, soil, plantation, humidity, historical

ruins, birds, insect life. Traits of the country like those of a complex friend” (146). Here, as in the earlier discussion of maps in the atlas, the narrator takes pains to emphasise that each map depicts but *an aspect* – a partial truth – of the island.

While the narrator’s discussion of the atlas has been described as but one of the “peripheral subtrajectories” traced in relation to the main plot, I suggest that this seemingly “digressive” (Scott 138) narratorial move provides an important glimpse into the formal vision of the text. Speaking summarily before I explore the formal aspects of *Anil’s Ghost* in greater detail in the following section, I put forward the thought that this seemingly tangential episode in fact maps out, as it were, two distinct objectives underpinning Ondaatje’s use of form. As my previous paragraph has suggested, the first aesthetic objective centres upon the novel’s focalisation on historiography, as it compels the reader to not merely read history, but to grapple with the notion of how history is written and how it should be read, particularly in consideration of its elisions and slippages. The second, I suggest, revolves around the distinctly postcolonial concern with *re*-presentation, where the novelist embarks on an attempt to remap Sri Lanka in the imaginary of the Anglophone reader. I use the word ‘remap’ consciously. For one, the textual space that the narrative devotes to the “seventy-three versions of the island”, which includes a glimpse into the “peat in the Muthurajawela swamp south of Negombo, coral along the coast from Ambalangoda to Dondra Head, pearl banks offshore in the Gulf of Mannar”, the “bird life” and “reptile map”, “isobars and altitudes”, as well as “winds and rainfall and barometric pressure” (40), focuses the reader’s eye on the natural beauty of the island. In reflection of the motif of doubleness that runs through the text, the narrator’s evocation of these images adds spatial depth to the imaginary of Sri Lanka, compelling the reader to contemplate the natural beauty of the island alongside the scenes of the civil war.

The cultural geographer, Doreen Massey, posits that space is not a static entity but is always transforming, and may be apprehended as “a simultaneity of stories-so-far”; places, in turn, are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space” (*For Space* 130). Massey’s theorisation of the relation between space and stories provides insight into Ondaatje’s narrative vision at work in *Anil’s Ghost* – a vision behind which, as I have earlier alluded to in my discussion of *In the Skin of a Lion*, lies the question of how the postcolonial writer can create beauty in the face of the pain and suffering experienced by the people about whom he writes. In another aspect of remapping, Ondaatje focalises on the private stories of grief, loss, and trauma that the characters carry within them as he compels the reader to contemplate the war not solely through matters of politics, but also through the bonds between individuals that persist in the midst of – in spite of – the violence that tears them apart.

Alongside the story of Anil’s investigation, the novel narrates the war through the stories of relationships that are both torn apart by and (re)forged because of the violence. The narrator explores, for example, the lifelong sibling rivalry between Sarath and Gamini that began from childhood, their competing love for the same woman, and the profound affection between the two that comes to light only when Sarath is killed. The narrator also recounts the relationship between Ananda and his wife that is cruelly torn apart when the latter is kidnapped and presumably killed by government officials – an event that motivates Ananda to seek compassion for those who have suffered in the war, and which leads him to sculpt Sailor’s face with “a calm [he] had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim” (*Anil* 187). Through these “random time-capsules of unhistorical lives” (55), Ondaatje redirects the readers’ gaze towards the love and tenacity of human relationships that persist in the midst of violence – such is a form

of beauty that becomes all the more apparent and impactful amidst the blatant disregard of human life in war.

In fact, one of the most beautiful stories in the novel revolves around the aged Palipana and his young niece, Lakma, whom he rescues in the early years of the war. In alignment with the other tropes of doubleness that Ondaatje explores in *Anil's Ghost*, the story between the old man and his young niece holds in tension terror and beauty, destruction and healing. Even while this story narrates the war trauma that has beset Palipana's family, it is rendered in a poetic register that draws the reader's eye to the tenderness of kinship between the two – a kinship that doesn't only enable the young girl to survive, but in her reciprocal love and kindness, similarly enables the man to thrive in his old age and blindness. A witness to her parents' brutal murder, Lakma had come into Palipana's care deeply traumatised, the "shock of the murder ... had touched everything within her, driving both her verbal and her motor ability into infancy" (103). The flashbacks from the murder "continued for Lakma, who was unable to deal with the possible danger around her" (103). Seeking to return to the girl a sense of safety, and striving "more than anything to deliver her from the inflicted isolation", Palipana brought her to live in a secluded grove away from the chaos of warfare, where he spent his time imparting to her "the mnemonic skills of alphabet and phrasing, and convers[ing] with her at the furthest edge of his knowledge and beliefs" (104).

The girl, we are told, never spoke again. She "watched him and listened ... a silent amanuensis for his whispered histories" (105). Instead, Lakma's responses to Palipana are conveyed through reciprocal gestures of care.<sup>54</sup> The girl "would bound over to him if he was

---

<sup>54</sup> The gestures of care between Lakma and Palipana reveal the novel's emphasis on the tactility of love and compassion as a contrast to the instrumentalisation of physical touch in the service of political ends. Milena Marinkova observes that "[f]orensic investigations, medical interventions, political rhetoric, and religious discourse in *Anil's Ghost* subject the human body to an economics of exchange, whereby it loses its vitality, singularity, and integrity" (87); these impersonal, objectifying instances of touch are contrasted with "the

walking towards a root” and each day “she wet his face with water she had boiled over a fire, and then shaved him” (106). These scenes, which paint an intimate portrait of the daily acts of love and kindness that help individuals survive terror, emerge as radiant moments of beauty amidst the landscape of indiscriminate violence. Like iridescent flashes of light, such scenes of tenderness captivate the reader’s imagination, layering over the narrative of wanton murder and violence with a gentler picture that attests to the tenacity of human bonds – bonds which, as the relationship between Palipana and Lakma affirms, ultimately gives life meaning.

Not only do “unhistorical” (55) stories like that of Palipana and Lakma add to the sense of beauty that the reader experiences from the novel, they constitute, through the same beauty that they evoke, an integral aspect of the novel’s political vision as well. The significance of these scenes in the broader political vision of the novel can be grasped in the rites that Lakma performs for Palipana shortly before he dies. In what is a powerful scene in itself, Lakma, as the narrator tells us, “cut one of his phrases into the rock, one of the first things he had said to her, which she had held on to like a raft in her years of fear” (107). In fact, in the days leading up to Palipana’s death, the girl

climbed down against the wall of submerged rock and banged and chiselled, so that in the last days of his life he was accompanied by the great generous noise of her work as if she were speaking out loud. Just the sentence. Not his name or the years of his living, just a gentle sentence once clutched by her, the imprint of it now carried by water around the lake. (107)

Beyond the deeply poetic register through which the scene is narrated, what might be considered beautiful about the scene is the transition between life and death, silence and speech, that gives

---

embrace of tactility [which] indicates the potential of corporeality to resist identitarian inscriptions” (83).

their time together a wholeness and the sense of an ending – a closure not granted to many of the victims of political violence in Sri Lanka. We see, in the single sentence cut in the rock that Lakma ‘returns’ to Palipana at his deathbed, the redemptive power of Palipana’s love and kindness that has enabled Lakma to survive. That single sentence, the words of which we are not given to know, becomes not only a symbol of Lakma’s survival as a victim of war trauma, but perhaps more significantly, a motif of the novel’s insistence that such deeply personal acts appeal to affect rather than reason alone, and hence demand another mode of reading that cannot altogether be compressed within a political interpretation.

Like “imprint ... carried by water around the lake” (107), these scenes depicting the irreducible qualities of love, kindness, and compassion underpin the notion of beauty in the novel; they carry themselves as an ‘imprint’ upon the reader’s consciousness, impressing themselves upon the reader as moments of delight and pleasure that layer over the “mad logic” (186) of violence predominant in the narrative. Such delight and pleasure does not detract or distract from the horrors of war – like gentle flashes of light, they compel the reader to seek these acts of love and kindness, and, in effect, furnish the novel’s resistance against the violence of war. We are told that Lakma “had chiselled [Palipana’s words] where the horizon of water was, so that, depending on tide and pull of the moon, the words in the rock would submerge or hang above their reflection or be revealed in both elements” (107). The fleeting movement of water that both reveals and conceals Lakma's inscription doesn’t only attest to the notion that beauty itself eludes the fixity of political rhetoric; it also impresses upon the reader the necessity to look beyond the mere signs of the material, to seek the “half-revealed forms” (5) that together compose a fuller picture of the war, both in the horrors of violence and the beauty of private acts of love and kindness that counter the discourse of war.

In this way, Ondaatje invites us to seek such images of beauty in the midst of violence, as he draws attention to the everyday, private acts of compassion that enable survivors to pull through the daily horrors of the war. Returning to the relation between stories and space that Massey formulates, I suggest that as an aspect of the postcolonial impulse that underpins *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje's aesthetic vision – his literary remapping – involves bringing these various other aspects of Sri Lankan life to meet up against the narratives of indiscriminate violence, state impunity and crippled judiciary processes that predominate public conception of the island as a result of the war. After all, if literature serves as a way of orientating readers to space and place, then postcolonial literature can be perceived to have a peculiar interest in reshaping the reader's relation to the places depicted, particularly if these places remain overdetermined by narratives and stories from without that continue to efface local/native forms of knowing and doing.

### *Reading for the 'truth'*

As Ondaatje reorientates the reader to Sri Lanka as *place* through the stories that he recounts, he similarly orientates the reader to encounter stories – and storytelling – as an art form. Michael Wood has observed that in contemporary fiction, “[s]tories come back, more often than not, *inside* novels – even take over novels, so that there is scarcely any novel left” (*Children of Silence 2*, emphasis in original). Indeed, *Anil's Ghost* consists of multiple stories that call for alternative readings. It could be argued that with the failure of any single story or grand narrative to capture the war in its complexity and enormity, Ondaatje centralises the art of storytelling in emphasis that, perhaps, the only way through which we can apprehend the war is through slivers of stories and the singular form of perception that the art of storytelling fosters.

Walter Benjamin observes that the “inherent power” peculiar to the “nature of true storytelling” is to be found in the duality or even multiplicity of interpretations that the art of storytelling brings to the fore: that “[t]he story can be interpreted this way. Yet there is room for other explanations” (“The Art of Storytelling” 36). In Benjamin’s view, stories are fundamentally juxtaposed to narratives that seek to explain events and incidents for their readers. Where “at least half of the art of storytelling consists in keeping one’s tale free from explanation”, expository narratives are “permeated with explanations” particularly in a way that “nothing occurs to the story’s benefit anymore, but instead it all serves information” (35). As it shies away from explanation, the art of storytelling privileges an intentional openness of interpretation, cultivating in the reader or listener the skill of perceiving the various ways in which a person or event could develop, and also expanding the scope of perception itself so that the reader or listener is able to apprehend the various or even contrastive facets that might present themselves within a single phenomenon. So it is that the story of Palipana, which unfolds in a secluded forest grove with his traumatised and non-verbal niece, is at once a story of a disgraced scholar in self-exile after having been ostracised by the academic establishment for forgery, as well as a story of love and tenderness in an old man caring for a distraught young girl. The story of Sarath and Gamini, as we shall see, is one of lifelong brotherly conflict as it is of unspoken love. The way in which Ananda remakes Sailor’s face with his wife’s features alludes to the imprecision of his forensic reconstruction, yet narrates the continuing love that the sculptor bears for his wife. This nuanced and layered perception that the art of storytelling nurtures in the reader or listener is, as I demonstrate in the paragraphs to come, central to the novel’s interrogation of the war.

In his critique of *Anil’s Ghost*, Jon Kertzer laments that Ondaatje “writes one kind of novel in the guise of another, so that what seems to be a familiar murder mystery, in which truth



is discoverable and justice prevails, turns into something more troubling” (117). To Kertzer, Ondaatje’s appeal to and transgression of the murder mystery genre is symptomatic of a myopic focus on “eliciting sympathy for a tormented nation” (117) without broader consideration of the questions of justice and reconciliation. That is, Ondaatje’s writing “both encourages and baffles the pursuit of justice” (117), in a manner that renders the novel an ineffective piece of political writing. While I agree that addressing the issue of justice is imperative, I argue in this chapter that Ondaatje’s aim in *Anil’s Ghost* is far from imagining symbolic justice for the war-torn nation, as Kertzer seems to expect; rather, the novelist’s objective lies in the exposure of the slippages and discontinuities that hamper access to the pursuit of justice itself.

In the author’s note that I mentioned earlier, the novelist sketches out a political milieu of a “crisis that involved three essential groups”, and outlines that “*Anil’s Ghost* is a fictional work set during this political time and historical moment”. The author’s note is followed, almost immediately, by the depiction of a forensic excavation in Guatemala – the reader is given to know, pages later, that the scene refers to the Guatemalan civil war and genocide (1960-1996). Indeed, the narrator primes the reader to expect from *Anil’s Ghost* the trajectory of a historical novel, where resolution is envisioned for the conflict that haunts the narrative at the beginning. This generic expectation is all but underpinned by the entry of some of the characters in the opening chapter as seemingly “representative types” (Foley 145), which sketch for the reader a narrative milieu dominated by several recognisable social tropes: a Western humanitarian worker investigating human rights abuses in a post-independence conflict state; a local archaeologist who might or might not be complicit with the government, against whom the aforementioned researcher would have to remain on guard; a mysterious skeleton, evidence of the state’s unlawful political killings and the sheer brutality of the state’s regime. In this narrative scheme,

the Western investigator is presumed to possess knowledge or expertise that eludes the locals – a notion conveyed, for instance, when Anil informs Sarath that “[t]wisting happens to bones that get burned when they are ‘green’, that is, flesh-covered. ... This one was barely dead, Sarath, when they tried to burn him. Or worse, they tried to burn him alive” (51).

These trappings of a historical novel accompany the generic conventions of detective fiction that *Anil's Ghost* appears to play into as well. The plot begins with the return of Anil, in a manner that invites the reader to perceive Anil as the character through whose perspective the events of the plot are to be interpreted. Trained in the methods of Western empiricism, and energised by the rhetoric of criminal justice that underpins the global discourse on human rights, Anil “had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries” (54). In alignment with her ‘representative type’, Anil – as well as the reader, through her – reads the situation in Sri Lanka as a narrative of forensic detection, where science can be used to arrive at an irrefutable truth that would not only facilitate the processes of retributive justice in criminal court proceedings, but also encourage reconciliation through the “capacity of truth to vindicate victims” (McGonegal 94). “The truth”, as Anil maintains, “shall set you free” (102) from the climate of fear and the “mad logic” (186) of revenge that perpetuates violence.

Anil’s ideas are put to the test when, assigned by the government to work with the local archaeologist Sarath, she stumbles upon a twentieth-century skeleton (which the pair nicknames Sailor) cunningly re-buried and concealed amongst ancient graves. Aware that the site in which Sailor’s skeleton was concealed is a government-protected zone, Anil and Sarath come to the realisation that the skeleton constitutes physical evidence of the government’s engagement in political murders. Anil sets out to interrogate the forensics of “bones and sediment” as a means to arrive at a “truth” (259) that will bring the government to account for its crimes in an

international tribunal, achieve representational justice for the victims, and facilitate the process of reconciliation for the nation. In a move that approximates the quest of the detective in crime fiction, the novel traces Anil's investigation of the murder, and builds narrative tension upon the question of whether or not she is able to use the skeleton to bring the government to justice. In this literary genre, catharsis is premised upon the successful resolution of the narrative's central mystery. In part, this catharsis, born of both relief and the release of narrative tension, stems from the detective's orchestration of a return of the depicted world to order. The detective, in other words, stabilises that world through what Northrop Frye terms "an epiphany of law, a balancing and neutralising activity in society, the murderer discovered at the end balancing the corpse that we normally find at the beginning" (*The Secular Scripture* 90). By alluding to the conventions of this genre at least at the beginning, Ondaatje leads his readers to expect, through Anil's forensic investigation, a return to some kind of social equilibrium premised upon the ascendancy of justice and order as a counterbalance to the chaos that predominate the narrative. The reader's expectation is, then, that "the truth can still be discovered, despite the slipperiness of evidence and the limitations of the detective" (Keen 154).

Todorov, who articulates a faith in the modernist striving for a recoverable truth, asserts that crime fiction "contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation"; here, "the first story, that of the crime, ends before the second begins. But what happens in the second. Not much. The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them: a rule of the genre postulates the detective's immunity" ("Typology of Detective Fiction" 122). In alluding to the conventions of detective fiction, the novel compels us to consider several fundamental questions: is there a singular approach to T/truth, accessible by any particular representative character or ideology?

Will the recovery of T/truth – if it is at all possible – catalyse a return of social order? Also, from a more distinctly postcolonial standpoint: are the Western idea(ls) of conflict resolution, dependent upon the unveiling of ‘truth’, and exemplified by investigators like Anil herself and “those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel” (*Anil* 44), sufficient to meaningfully impose a semblance of order where local systems of justice have failed? These questions beg further consideration of whether the international politics of retributive justice that Anil and her Western-educated counterparts espouse, based on the proceedings of the Nuremberg trials as earlier discussed in the chapter on *The Garden of Evening Mists*, is an adequate means of arresting and resolving violent conflict in emergent post-independence societies.

In spite of his misgivings about Anil’s quest, which stem from his understanding that “[p]olitical secrets are not powerless, in any form” (259), Sarath aids her in tracing Sailor’s identity and the circumstances surrounding his untimely death. He brings her to his mentor, the aged epigraphist Palipana, who advises them to seek help from Ananda to reconstruct Sailor’s face, with the hope that someone would be able to recognise and give a name to the skeleton. Eventually, the pair identifies Sailor as Ruwan Kumura, a man they believe had been murdered by the government in suspicion of being a “rebel sympathiser” (269) – though, as one critic rightly points out, their discovery of Sailor’s identity and the events leading to his murder ultimately “carries very little significance within the narrative as a whole and does almost nothing to alter its overall trajectory” (Scott 139). After the investigation into Sailor’s murder, Anil finds herself apprehended by the government for her investigation. Sailor’s skeleton is, accordingly, confiscated by the authorities. In other words, the novel critically violates the conventions of detective fiction, and defers the narrative resolution and catharsis that would

otherwise come from the successful breakthrough in the investigation. Indeed, the novel undermines this generic expectation, particularly as Anil's solving of Sailor's murder ultimately does little to restore any order: as the same critic notes, "there is really nothing that we as readers can do with this information, and nothing much that the characters can do either. What should have been a pivotal moment in the novel, a moment of resolution and vindication, has become just another inconsequential aside" (Scott 139).

In *Anil's Ghost*, the conventions of detective fiction are both utilised and subverted to accommodate the postmodern bent of the war, and to foreground the notion that "reconciliation as a grand narrative" (McGonegal 88), dependent upon the causal chain of truth, persecution, and justice, no longer suffices as moorings for interpreting the conflict. Wood has commented that contemporary detective novels "place us in a world where a mystery's solution is called for but is finally the least of our problems"; instead, "the frightening question is what to do with the truth when it surfaces; what it means, who can be trusted with it" ("Contemporary Novel" 967). Indeed, by critiquing the political complexities of the conflict through the structure and conventions of detective fiction, *Anil's Ghost* draws attention to the dangers inherent in the pursuit of truth, particularly in a situation where speaking the truth becomes a catalyst for further chaos. Even as conventionally "the detective becomes a sign which is essential, secure, stable, the last grounded sign" (Malmgren 104), the narrator of *Anil's Ghost* diffuses our investment in Anil as the central narrative anchor. In a moment of foreshadowing halfway through the novel, the narrator uses Sarath's perspective as a foil to expose the limitations of Anil's vision:

Sarath knew that for her the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside

irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you. As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use” (*Anil* 156-157)

As Sarath muses, Anil’s stark belief in the recuperative power of truth could instead lend itself to misuse, and lead to a reverberation of violence that would defy the purpose of her investigation. The fact that Sarath does indeed give his life for Anil’s pursuit of truth highlights the insufficiency of truth alone – as well as the judicial processes that depend upon it – as the foremost remedy to the complexities that often surround the local politics of conflicts such as the Sri Lankan war. Further, it displaces the value of truth in engendering meaningful change for a community torn apart by violence and fear. Even as truth constitutes one aspect of the process towards peace, it cannot be conceived as the primary way of arriving at peace.

### *Reading between genres*

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon highlights that postmodernism is itself “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (3). These contradictory tendencies are most prominent in the way postmodernism engages with the past and the traditions, literary or not, from which it stems: “it is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic ‘return’. Herein lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism” (4). In the ways that *Anil’s Ghost* both resemble and diverge from the historical and detective novel, Ondaatje can be thought of to engage in an act of postmodern parody, drawing upon the expectations and conventions of these genres only to expose their

limitations in representing and narrativising the Sri Lankan civil war. Yet, as my earlier citations from Kertzer might suggest, the generic expectations that accompany the process of reading nevertheless shape the reader's perception of what the narrative reveals. *How* one reads is, in other words, as crucial as *what* one reads. This notion of *how to read* is, in fact, a central obsession that runs through *Anil's Ghost*. We, the readers of the novel, are confronted with multiple forms of reading and ways to read, as well as various fragments of stories and histories that jostle for our attention.

To begin with, in a move that recalls what Hutcheon terms a "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (5) that is distinctive of postmodernist writing, the narrator of *Anil's Ghost* adroitly – and repeatedly – cautions the reader to resist an over-reliance on the expectations of genre as a means to guide our reading processes. In an instance of omniscient narration refracted through Anil's memory of her lover, Cullis, the narrator muses that

Lovers who read stories or look at paintings about love do so supposedly for clarity. But the more confusing and anarchic the story, the more those caught in love will believe it. There are only a few great and trustworthy love drawings. And in these works is an aspect that continues to remain unordered and private, no matter how famous they become. They bring no sanity, give just a blue tormented light. (150)

The suggestion that the contrivances of narrative cannot be relied upon for clarity is echoed elsewhere in the novel in one of the medical texts that Gamini, in his early days as a doctor, had "become excessively fond of" – that "[i]n diagnosing a vascular injury, a high index of suspicion is necessary" (118). The narrator's emphasis on the necessity of a "high index of suspicion"

(118) – whether in reading the signs of injury, narrative, or, as it can be argued, history itself – resonates with the notion that even as narratives provide a semblance of ordered patterning, there nevertheless remains “an aspect that continues to remain unordered and private” (150) which challenges that very idea of order.

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje explores the “unordered and private” (150) that problematises the notion of reading and interpreting history. For instance, we are told that with “her reading of the bones”, Anil is able uncover Sailor’s “markers of occupation” (177), which is a key factor in enabling her and Sarath to discover his identity and the story of his abduction by the government. In departure from the empirical lens through which Anil reads her bones, however, Sarath reads for “character and nuance and mood”, in effect “read[ing] a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel” (151). His dream, we are told,

was to write a book someday about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed. Not a wall of it remained, but he wanted to tell the story of that place. It would emerge out of this dark trade with the earth, his knowledge of the region in chronicles—its medieval business routes, its presence as a favourite monsoon town of a certain king, as revealed in poems that celebrated the city’s daily life.  
(29-30)

Sarath’s inclination towards the subtleties of context gives him a rich imagination and appreciation for historical and cultural milieux that is not always present in Anil. The contrast between Sarath and Anil’s modes of reading is exemplified in the scene where he recollects an earlier excavation in China, where he was part of a team that unearthed a water tomb with “a lacquered coffin of an ancient ruler” together with “the bodies of twenty female musicians along with their instruments” (260). Sarath muses,



They were there to accompany him, you see. With zithers, flutes, panpipes, drums, iron bells. They were delivering him to his ancestors. When they removed the skeletons from the coffins and laid them out there was no damage to any of the bones to reveal how the musicians had been killed, not one fractured bone. (260)

As he recounts the excavation, Sarath marvels at the significance of the find – one that is clarified by his appreciation of the singular historical circumstances that surrounded the burial:

Music was not entertainment, it was a link with ancestors who had led us here, it was a moral and spiritual force. The experience of breaking through barriers of slate, wood, water, to discover a buried women's orchestra had a similar mystical logic to it, do you understand? You must understand their state of acceptance somehow of such a death ... It was another world with its own value system that came to the surface. (261)

While seemingly digressive, the story of these “twenty murdered women” (261) cannot be dismissed as merely tangential in a narrative concerned with human rights abuses. Even as the reader is given insight into Sarath's “mystical” (261) appreciation of beauty – a beauty that is perhaps, to Sarath, all the more startling because of the distance afforded by time – the narrator is quick to remind us of the materiality of the horror that surrounds their deaths through Anil's reading of the situation: “they were strangled ... Or suffocated. Or poisoned. A study of the bones could have told you the truth” (260). The narrator, in characteristically postmodernist fashion, refuses to privilege either of their perspectives. The reader is, instead, given to see the limitations of both modes of historical reading. On the one hand, Anil's adherence to the notion that bones point to an irrefutable truth about the abuses of human rights – the same in ancient

China, as it is in twentieth-century Guatemala and the Congo and Sri Lanka – hampers her from grasping the ‘truth’ that lies in cultural and historical nuance; that perhaps, as the narrative seems to suggest, the twenty women might have come to terms with dying so as to fulfil what they perceived as their “moral and spiritual” (261) destiny. On the other hand, Sarath’s confidence in reading the “character and nuance and mood” (259) of history gives him a confidence in relativity that obscures him from the fact that the women had been murdered, and possibly through violent means. The disjuncture between Sarath and Anil’s interpretations of the archaeological find resonates with Hayden White’s observation that “history, in the sense of both events and accounts of events, does not just happen but is made. Moreover it is made on both sides of the barricades, and just as effectively by one side as by the other” (*Figural Realism* 13). Overlooking the constructedness of history is, accordingly, a “genuine” failure of “historical understanding” (13). In a similar vein, Ondaatje makes it clear to the reader that history itself cannot be read without an acknowledgement of its slippages. What the reader is presented with in the novel, then, is not so much a historical account of the Sri Lankan war, as the historiographic process of negotiating between different accounts and interpretations of the event.

### *Reading through absences*

Significantly, Anil departs from the novel roughly twenty pages before the end, taking both Sailor’s skeleton and her quest for justice along with her. Picking up the narrative after she leaves are Gamini, who identifies and dresses Sarath’s dead body, and Ananda, who, as a ritual eye-painter, works on restoring a Buddha that had been recently desecrated by robbers. The work that these local Sri Lankan characters perform after Anil’s departure conveys the image of them

quite literally *picking up the pieces* left over from her investigation – Gamini with the corpse of his brother who had been implicated in her quest for punitive justice, and Ananda with the violence that continues to plague the nation, which the broken Buddha embodies. Frustrated with Ondaatje’s refusal to lend his novel to a historical reading of the war, Kanishka Goonewardena asserts that the author “only deals with the symptoms of the Sri Lankan crisis, as he paints a picture of the everyday life there in a time of terror” (2). Yet, it is the very “picture of the everyday life there” (2) and the care attendant upon his description of concrete details that enables Ondaatje to critique the West’s continuing imposition of what the historian, Walter Mignolo, terms “global linear thinking” (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity* 85), where knowledge is deemed to ‘flow’ from the epistemic centre of the West to the peripheries. Reading symbolically, echoes of the postmodern incredulity towards grand narratives can be perceived in Ondaatje’s figuration of the work that Gamini and Ananda are left to face after Anil’s departure, situating Anil’s discourse of conflict resolution as yet another grand narrative that posits “disingenuous claims to objectivity when it comes to intervening in postcolonial conflicts” (Davis 25). As Ondaatje affirms, “[w]e leave Anil and go off with what she’s left behind. I think that remark by John Berger, ‘Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one,’ is really true” (Jaggi and Ondaatje 6). By highlighting the continuation of personal and social activity even after Anil departs from the country, Ondaatje sets the discourse of resolution that she idealises against the work quietly performed by the locals as they, unable to pack up and leave just as Anil does, go about their lives amidst the trauma of war. This way, Ondaatje interrupts Anil’s vision of resolution with the events left on the periphery, and in doing so, exposes the gulf between the ideals that she embodies and the quotidian reality of war that her ideals are unable to transform.

Significantly, Gamini and Ananda's work prefigure the centrality of the broken body, whether in the form of an actual corpse or a blown-up sculpture, adding to the imagery of broken bodies that recur as a motif throughout the novel. Even from its very first page, *Anil's Ghost* demonstrates a preoccupation with dismemberment, both in the "half-revealed forms" (*Anil* 5) pulled out from mass graves, as well as dis-membered relationships. The novel's prologue, for instance, concentrates on the forensic excavation in Guatemala that takes place in an undisclosed moment before the events in Sri Lanka. There, Anil seeks to uncover the remains of those murdered in the Guatemalan genocide. She witnesses the "vigil for the dead" undertaken by the family members of the disappeared, as they guarded the "half-revealed" (5) skeletons unearthed by the forensic team. With a focus on the act of excavation – that is, bringing into sight the remnant traces of those who hitherto remain unseen – the prologue foregrounds the novel's preoccupation with the interrelation between absence and presence that is to continue into the rest of the narrative. As yet another example of the narrative's investment in the trope of doubleness, even as the victims of the Guatemalan genocide are prefigured as absence, neither appearing nor speaking within the prologue, their very absence catalyses narrative action through their lingering impact upon the living. As Anil recalls,

[t]here was always the fear, double-edged, that it was their son in the pit, or that it was not their son – which meant there would be further searching. If it became clear that the body was a stranger, then, after weeks of waiting, the family would rise and leave. They would travel to other excavations in the western highlands.

The possibility of their lost son was everywhere. (5)

While the dead remain at a physical remove from the narrative, they are nevertheless "everywhere" (5) through the emotional bonds that the living maintain of the victims, which

drive the vigil to seek their bones. The narrative draws particular attention to Anil's memory of "a woman sitting within a grave ... looking down at the remains of two bodies" (5-6). The omniscient narrator reveals that this woman "had lost a husband and a brother during an abduction in this region a year earlier. Now it seemed as if the men were asleep beside each other on a mat in the afternoon" (6).

Next comes the narrator's focalisation on the woman's memory that,

she had once been the feminine string between them, the one who brought them together. They would return from the fields and enter the hut, eat the lunch she had made and sleep for an hour. Each afternoon of the week she was part of this.

(6)

This scene, first of all, depicts a cruel irony that both emphasises, and yet problematises, the distinction between life and death, presence and absence. The depiction of the woman as "the feminine string" between the two men is paralleled with the image of her "sitting within [the] grave", looking down at what might possibly be their remains; the image of the men "sleep[ing] for an hour" under her watchful care is, again, paralleled with the skeletons "asleep beside each other" (6) while she gazes upon them. Even as the men are dead at this moment in the narrative, the woman's sorrowful remembrance – what the narrator describes as her "grief of love" (6) – transforms their absence from life to a spectral presence in death, enabling them to appear as a form of narrative presence despite their being, to borrow Derrida's term, "never present as such" (*Spectres* xvii) within the narrative's time frame. Testifying to an earlier violence, these spectral presences foreground the injustice in local politics that resulted in their bodies being callously dumped in a mass grave, interrupting the contemporaneity of the present with the unresolved

issues of the past. Absence, therefore, stages an encounter with history and enacts its own call for a presencing.

These events in Guatemala find a counterpart a few pages later. Immediately before our introduction to Sarath, in an important moment of foreshadowing, the narrative draws attention to Cave 14 in China. Once “the most beautiful site in a series of Buddhist cave temples in Shanxi province” with “the panorama of Bodhisattvas – their twenty-four rebirths ... cut out of the walls”, it is now the scene of

a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off. None of the bodies remained – all the statuary had been removed in the few years following its discovery by Japanese archaeologists in 1918, the Bodhisattvas quickly brought up by museums in the West. Three torsos in a museum in California. A head lost in a river south of the Sind desert, adjacent to the pilgrim routes. (12)

Here, we meet the Bodhisattvas in their partial absence: “none of the bodies remained” (12), having been plundered and shipped off overseas. Yet, the scene left behind with “all the statuary ... removed” (12) testifies to their once-presence, just as the “[h]ead separated from bodies” and “[h]ands broken off” (ibid) focalise not only on what still remains, but just as importantly, on what has been taken away as well. Absence and dismemberment thus become a material trace. I use this term in Derrida’s sense of the word, where “[t]he trace is not only the disappearance of origin”; the persistence of the trace “means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (*Of Grammatology* 61). In this way, the trace acts as a “track, footprint, imprint” (*Of Grammatology* xv) to what had come before, and enacts a call for a (re)collection and (re)membering of the missing pieces. For, as the novel warns, without a proper reckoning with

these missing pieces that testify to the injustices that plague history, attempts to resolve contemporary conflicts would approximate the fruitlessness of people walking along “the pilgrim routes” seeking contact with the sacred, all the while not knowing that the sacred lies near, “lost in a river south of the Sind desert, adjacent to the pilgrim routes” (*Anil* 12).

While the events in Guatemala and China appear auxiliary in a novel dedicated to an interrogation of the Sri Lankan conflict, these scenes, situated in the early pages of the novel before Anil’s investigation takes shape, act as a lens through which the narrative prefigures its aesthetic vision. The novel’s preoccupation with re-presenting alludes to its investment in a mode of relation that thinks through the absent other. In alignment with his postmodern slant in *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje adopts a deconstructive mode of relation that eschews knowing through the materiality of presence. Instead, he enacts a form of relational politics akin to what Derrida terms *hauntology*, which, following postmodernism’s insistence on meaning as ultimately deferred, posits the insufficiency of ontology’s focus on the primacy of presence as a primer for political action. To Derrida, a hauntological politics is premised upon doing right by the absent other that is embodied by the figure of the spectre. Treading the line between absence and presence, the spectre “is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, is *never present as such*” (*Spectres* xvii, emphasis in original), but nevertheless disrupts presence and the immediacy of the moment by signalling interminably towards another time and space, compelling the present to grapple with what is not here, not now. In his formulation, justice, “never ... reducible to laws or rights”, necessitates an ethical responsibility towards those whom the spectre embodies:

It is necessary to speak *of the ghost*, indeed, *to the ghost* and *with it*, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognise in its principle the respect for those

others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice ... and once again we are not speaking here of laws – seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or already dead” (xviii, emphases in original).

The idea of engaging with ghosts has a more immediate and compelling resonance within the novel itself. In the epilogue, which depicts events that take place after an unspecified amount of time following Sarath’s murder, Ananda, who is in the midst of performing *Netra Mangala*, the Buddhist eye-painting ritual, reflects: “[h]e and the woman would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena” (305). Ananda’s thoughts provide a stunning revelation: Sarath is, in fact, Anil’s ghost, the titular ghost whose spectral presence haunts the narrative from the front cover of the novel, even to its very last pages. Where, before, the detective story centred on Anil was given prominence, with the revelation of Sarath as the titular ghost, the narrator impels the reader to re-read the novel through an altered focus, and to reconsider what *other* readings the novel might present. This way, we are led from thinking of *Anil’s Ghost* as a mere historical narrative. We are invited to consider the novel as a way of reading into the gaps within history, an excavation of the absences – the ghosts – that haunt official history itself. In yet another act of doubleness, the narrator offers yet another possible way to read the war – not through the brutality of killings committed by the government, nor through the discourses of transitional justice that highlight the blatant impunity of the government and the fissures that continue to splinter the nation, but, instead, through the register of compassion and self-sacrifice that Sarath embodies.



### III. Re-reading *Anil's Ghost*

In her account of *Anil's Ghost*, Mrinalini Chakravorty notes:

The sheer magnitude of human loss signals the impossibility of properly recognising the full humanity of all the actors in this conflict, much less grieving their loss. The usual ways of memorialising individual deaths that denote a singular, subjective life – through details such as place of belonging, linguistic and familial ties, ethnicity, name, age, and occupation – become insufficient for explaining the losses that are incurred. (*In Stereotype* 119)

Such violence, in other words, necessitates a different form of memorialising and communing with the dead. As Chakravorty posits,

*Anil's Ghost* presents us with a 'human problem' of a different order, one that parlays collective death in generalisable terms and, by extension, our common vulnerability to violence into a new subjective experience. *Anil's Ghost* enacts a humanity haunted by the ubiquity of death – anyone can die, anywhere, and instead of anyone – and in doing so demands that we alter how we respond to and recognise humanity itself. (120)

Indeed, in the climate of indiscriminate violence, where human life is seen as a means to a political end that seems increasingly capricious – where, essentially, “the reason for war was war” (*Anil* 30) – Ondaatje arbitrates a return to the precarity of human life, shifting focus away from ideologies and systems as a means of envisioning healing for the nation. It is of particular note, as I will explore in further detail as the chapter progresses, that the two prominent forms of beauty in the novel relate, firstly, to representations of the body in stone and sculpture, and

secondly, to the wounded physical human body. As I shall demonstrate, through these motifs, Ondaatje foregrounds the materiality and frailty of the body as a site through which to grasp at the preciousness of human life that both transcends and defeats the logic of war. The compassion that the vulnerable human body calls for, then, takes centre stage in the novel's political vision, articulating just action as that which acknowledges and responds to the inherent vulnerability of the other.

In a quiet moment mid-novel, the narrator brings to the fore Sarath's memory of an event that had occurred years before, "[w]hen he and Palipana entered unknown rock darknesses" (156). This took place "during the worst political times, alongside a thousand dirty little acts of race and politics, gang madness and financial gain" (156). Even then, the civil structures of society had already given itself over to the "mad logic" (186) of war, with social order engulfed within a rampage of lawlessness, violence, and murder. Sarath recalls in quick succession: "[t]he night interrogations, the vans in daylight picking up citizens at random. That man he had seen taken away on a bicycle. Mass disappearances at Suriyakanda, reports of mass graves at Ankumbura, mass graves at Akmeemana" (156). The language structure of Sarath's recollection reveal the powerlessness of the individual against the rising tide of chaos and murder. In these sentences, which depict a flurry of activity, individuals neither occupy the subject positions of any sentence nor command any activity, and are instead spoken for by phrases that convey the progressive stages of violence: "night interrogations", "vans ... at random", "[m]ass disappearances", "mass graves" (ibid). In this way, Sarath's recollection alludes to the unstoppable reproduction of chaos and senseless violence within the Sri Lankan body politic: "[w]ar having come this far like a poison into the bloodstream could not get out" (156).

In the midst of this climate of terror, Sarath and Palipana stumble upon “images carved into or painted on rock” in a secluded part of the country, testament to events “from another century” (156-157). In particular, Sarath’s attention is drawn to “a single line depicting a woman’s back bent over a child” (156). As he relates,

He remembered how they had stood before [the image] in the flickering light, Palipana’s arm following the line of the mother’s back bowed in affection or grief. An unseen child. All the gestures of motherhood harnessed. A muffled scream in her posture. (157)

In a moment that recalls Derrida’s exhortation to “learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the company, or the companionship” (*Spectres* xviii) of those whose absence calls forth their presence, Sarath’s meditation upon this rock carving enables him to perceive the present reality of war through the gaze of the mother’s “affection or grief” (157) from a different time period. Where the war has enacted itself in a senseless tautology “where the main purpose of war had become war”, and human lives are subjugated under the self-consuming cacophony of “gunmen in love with the sound of their shells” (98), the sombreness of the image on rock, with the “muffled scream” of the mother revealing the fullness of love and grief for the life of her “unseen child” (157), creates a sudden disjuncture that brings to the fore the “human problem” (245) at the core of the novel. In the “muffled scream in her posture” (157), the mother demonstrates a desperation to defend, to cherish, to cling to life, and reveals a resistance against the wanton disregard for human life that characterises the war. The moment of transport that emerges in the contrast between the stillness of the image and the flurry of violence in the background, as well as the intense drive to stave off death as represented in the carving in juxtaposition with the wantonness of massacre in the war, registers for Sarath – as it does for us –

both a moment of beauty that testifies to the irretrievable value of individual lives, and a profound horror at the war's blatant disregard for life.

The carved image compels both Sarath and the reader to grasp the violence portrayed in the narrative not merely in objective terms of forensic evidence or numbers of casualties, but through that primal emotion of loss and horror articulated in the mother bending over her dead child. The affective impact of this powerful scene approaches the emotional transport characteristic of the sublime, and compels both Sarath and the reader to relate to the war through a more profound register.<sup>55</sup> We are led to apprehend the enormity of the war not merely through empirical details, but through the anguish of survivors who have lost loved ones – an anguish that exceeds accounting in the discourses of international justice or sectarian politics.<sup>56</sup>

It is suggested that Sarath's encounter with this image, preserved from a different age, serves as the catalyst for his self-sacrifice for Anil. Coming into a stark awareness of both the precarity and preciousness of life that the rock carving elucidates against the indiscriminate

---

<sup>55</sup> A precursor to Kant, Edmund Burke situates the sublime as a quality located within the external natural world that evokes terror in the perceiver: "[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (*A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* 51). This "strongest emotion" elicits in the perceiver a moment of transformation that renders it "impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible" (73). While Kant likewise situates the object of the sublime in the natural world, he departs from Burke in articulating the sublime as a quality innate to the perceiver, positing instead that "true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement." (*Critique of Judgment* 257). To Kant, it is "the mind [which] feels elevated in its own judgment of itself when it contemplates these" (257).

<sup>56</sup> Ondaatje's enactment of the sublime in this scene is juxtaposed to the sublimic view that Ananda perceives in the novel's epilogue (discussed at the end of this chapter) when the sculptor participates in the Buddhist eye-painting ritual. In both episodes, the sublime catalyses in Sarath and Ananda a sense of transport beyond the particularity or subjectivity of their lived realities. We are given to see that Ananda's experience of the sublime represents a "seduction" (*Anil* 307) that enables him, at least momentarily, to grasp at a sense of freedom from the emotional pain that follows from his wife's disappearance. In contrast, the sublime compels Sarath to apprehend the war through the anguish of loss that is not his own, to arrive at a compassion that is not motivated by personal experience or any form of self-interest.

massacres taking place in the city – an image, the narrative notes, “that ha[s] altered Sarath’s perceptions of his world” (156) – he is moved to give his life in defence of life itself. As the narrator muses,

There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you. As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use.

And privately (Sarath would consider and weigh this before sleep), he would, he knew, also give his life for the rock carving from another century of the woman bending over her child. (157)

Sarath’s devotion to the image of the mother clinging onto her child’s life suggests that even as he willingly gives himself up to the government by helping Anil smuggle the skeleton out of the country, he defies the “mad logic” (186) of indiscriminate killings, and writes, with his death, a commitment to life. His willing submission to death in defence of life, alongside the narrative’s later revelation of the “hundred small traumas” (287) that mark his lifeless body, forges a moment of sublime beauty that decentres self-perpetuating violence as the principle of order within the narrative. It is through Sarath and his self-sacrificial commitment to the other, then, that the novel’s political impulse realises itself.

One of the most impactful episodes in *Anil’s Ghost* takes place after Anil’s departure, when Sarath’s tortured body turns up at the hospital where his brother works. Where, until this point in the novel, we “never usually translated the time of death into personal time” (13), Sarath’s death marks the collapse of the personal into the social, and the emotional into an impartial accounting of the war. Prior to Sarath’s murder, the depiction of the violence that takes place within the spatio-temporal scope of the narrative has occurred at a remove, where the fact

of violence is rendered either through distance, such as when Sirissa, Ananda's disappeared wife, is "about ten yards from the bridge when she sees the heads of the two students on stakes, on either side of the bridge" (174); or time, when Sailor's last moments are recounted by Anil only after he has turned to bone:

She could read Sailor's last actions by knowing the wounds on the bone. He puts his arms over his face to protect himself from the blow. He is shot with a rifle, the bullet going through his arm, then into the neck. While he is on the ground, they come up and kill him. (65)

Even the violence of Gunesena's "crucifixion", which Sarath and Anil encounter while on the road, is rendered through the impersonal register of a pathologist attending to the injured:

Anil soaked a handkerchief in the saline solution and squeezed it onto his palm, the bridge nail still in it ... Anil saw that what she was squeezing into his palms was now bloody water. Still she didn't stop, because the movement kept him calm and awake, kept him from drifting into shock. (112-113)

With Sarath's death, however, the narrative dispenses with the distant, belated, impersonal focalisation through which our relation to the rampage of violence in the novel has been structured. Instead, through Gamini, Sarath's death becomes an event that ceases to be abstract and remote, and occurs instead within a frame of immediacy and privacy mediated through the dynamics of their relationship.

Importantly, as the narrative mediates Sarath's political murder through Gamini's perspective, the reader comes to experience Sarath's death in terms of an 'unhistorical' anguish that eludes representational, official accounts of the war. As a doctor, Gamini had sought to keep himself from encountering his patients in their individuality, neither "us[ing] names" (125) nor

taking notes of “profession or race” – he “liked it this way” (126). The distance that he imposes abstracts from the immediacy of the singular lives of his patients, enabling him to relate to his patients in the form of impersonal “[t]ags ... put on the right wrist, or on a right foot if there was no arm. Red for Neuro, green for Orthopaedic, yellow for Surgery” (125-126). It is suggested that the imposition of distance serves as a means for him to cope with the sheer multitude of daily victims; for Gamini, we are told, “had no wish for contact”,<sup>57</sup> preferring to set himself at an emotional remove “where he was a stranger and felt safer” (127). The protection and safety of anonymity, however, is later dealt an assault when the image of Sarath’s dead body turns up in a pile of “fresh, almost-damp black-and-white photographs, seven of them this week” (287). Even with their “[f]aces covered” (287), Gamini recognises his brother through the familiarity of the latter’s body:

When he got to the third picture he recognised the wounds, the innocent ones. He left the reports where they were, went down one flight of stairs and ran along the corridor to the ward. It was unlocked. He began pulling the sheets off the bodies until he saw what he knew he would see. Ever since he had picked up the third photograph, all he could hear was his heart, its banging. (287)

Significantly, while Sarath was alive, the brothers had shared a tenuous relationship, each withholding himself from the other, both barricading themselves “in the darkness they had invented around themselves” (289). Earlier, Anil notices that “[t]here had been no touching between him and Sarath, not a handshake” (129),<sup>58</sup> the wall between them so great that they

---

<sup>57</sup> See footnote 53.

<sup>58</sup> The etymologist, John Ayto, illuminates that the “underlying notion of contact is not surprisingly one of ‘touching’. It comes ultimately from Latin *tangere* ‘touch’, source of English tactile, tangent, and tangible” (129). Gamini’s disinclination towards contact – towards touch – reverberates with his avoidance of touch with Sarath. The etymological resonance adds to the affective impact of the scene where Gamini tends to Sarath’s dead body (see pages 155-156), as Sarath’s death renders their relationship more palpable, more

communicated to each other only by proxy, “talking again to Anil” (131) even while addressing each other. The sight of Sarath’s wounded, lifeless body, however, catalyses in Gamini a desperation to recuperate and memorialise that relation as it should have been, to “talk to him in this moment, admit himself” to the “beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath” (288).

Where in life, Sarath had stood as “an opinion that Gamini refused to accept” (289) and “a counter of argument” against which he had to defend himself, in death, Sarath “lay on the bed undefended” (289). Gamini comes to the realisation that “Sarath’s chest said everything ... It was what it was” (289): stripped of the “arguments” and “opinions” (289) that had antagonised him, the ultimate vulnerability of Sarath’s life is testified to by the materiality of his wounded body. The sight of “the acid burns, the twisted leg” (287), attesting to the torture through which Sarath faded into absence in death, evokes in Gamini a sudden desperation to bring Sarath back into presence: “[h]e began washing the body’s dark-brown markings with scrub lotion. He could heal his brother, set the left leg, deal with every wound as if he were alive, as if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back to life” (287).

The stillness of Sarath’s lifeless body evokes in Gamini an impulse to excavate the remnants of their relationship, to seek a recuperation of their relationship that had thus far been elusive. Each touch of his brother’s body – in contrast to their avoidance of touch in life – engenders in Gamini a corresponding tunnelling into their relationship, as he peels away at the layers of resentment to uncover their fundamental relation to each other. Looking at the marks on Sarath’s body, Gamini recollects, “[t]he gash of scar on the side of your elbow you got crashing a bike on the Kandy Hill. This scar I gave you hitting you with a cricket stump. As brothers we ended up never turning our backs on each other” (288). Crucially, “plac[ing] the warmth of his

---

tangible than before, in a way that reveals all the more compellingly a “beauty born out of its own despair” (Yeats “Among School Children” 222).



hand against the still face”, Gamini comes to an awareness of the foremost principle that had run their relationship:

Their marriages, their careers on this borderland of civil war among governments and terrorists and insurgents ... Each of them felt most at ease, most free, when not conscious of the other ... *Each refused to show hesitation and fear, it was only strength and anger they revealed when in the other's company.* (289, emphasis mine)

The significance of this revelation is clarified two paragraphs down, when the narrator relates that Gamini

had seen cases where every tooth had been removed, the nose cut apart, the eyes humiliated with liquids, the ears entered. He had been, as he ran down that hospital hallway, most frightened of seeing his brother's face. It was the face they went in for in some cases. (289-290)

At the “borderland of civil war” (289), it was fear, then, that propelled the brothers to turn away from each other. As an emergency doctor, Gamini's intimate knowledge of the indignity of torture experienced by victims of political killings engenders within him an intractable fear of one day seeing his loved ones lying on the autopsy table; unable to reveal this fear in front of his brother, he turns away to “crash alone in the darkness [he] had invented around [himself]” (289).

Significantly, even as Sarath's murder was motivated by the government's political impulse to *silence* him, to make him *disappear*, the materiality of his lifeless body elicits in Gamini an impulse to conjure Sarath's spectral presence as he retrieves his inherent love for Sarath from the fear that had kept it repressed. The narrator painstakingly elaborates that “all Gamini knew in his slowed, scrambled state was that this would be the end or it could be the

beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath. If he did not talk to him in this moment, admit himself, his brother would disappear from his life” (288). Reading this scene, Michael Barry comments that

Families are destructive, but there is also a fine sentiment that shows itself in the desire to protect family members. People try to lie below the radar of politics and warring factions, not because they fear being sacrificed themselves, but because they insist on protecting loved ones. It is another instance in which war exploits the most admirable of human sentiments, and in this way, it encourages despair. But it reinforces our notion that there might be such a thing as a fine human sentiment after all. (“Archaeology and Teleology in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*” 152)

The “fine human sentiment” (152) that Barry speaks of is, fundamentally, a love that resists closure, a love that recoups itself all the more when closure looms near. As an emergency doctor, Gamini administers the touch of healing to scores of patients on a daily basis. Yet, it is the personal touch of love that Gamini seeks: “[h]e believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night” (*Anil* 119). In his rounds at the hospital, “[i]f he had a few free hours he avoided the doctors’ dormitory and came [into the paediatric ward] to lie on one of the empty beds, so that even if he could not sleep he was surrounded by something he would find nowhere else in the country” (119). Privately, he “wanted a mother’s arm to hold him firm to the bed, to lie across his rib cage, to bring a cool washcloth to his face” (119). Crucially, it is this personal touch of love that Gamini gives to Sarath when he dresses his brother’s dead body, “plac[ing] the warmth of his hand against the still face” (289). Gamini’s motion here reveals

itself as a profound gesture of love that resists and undermines the principle of fear that predominates the war. The depiction of Gamini “admit[ting] himself” (288) to this “fine human sentiment” (Barry 152) in spite of fear and despair – or perhaps, all the more because of these – enacts for the reader an experience of the beauty that is to be found in love, kinship and familial affection. Such is a beauty that resists the logic of violence and terror. The brothers were, indeed, victims of the violence that engulfed their country; yet, it also is the love and kinship between them that negates the domination of this violence over their lives.

### *Narrating compassion*

*Anil's Ghost*, I wish to argue, places emphasis on a politics centred upon compassion. The suffering inherent in human life and the compassion that such suffering calls for is further illustrated through Ondaatje's interrogation of Buddhism within the narrative. In yet another instance of doubleness, the novel juxtaposes two contrastive Buddha statues in the epilogue. The chapter begins with the narrator's description of the first statue, 120-foot-high, which “had stood in a field in Buduruvagala for several generations” (*Anil* 299). The narrator notes that together with the “more famous rock wall of Bodhisattvas” that stands “half a mile away”, the “stone bodies [rose] out of the earth, their faces high in the sky”, and would often be “the only human aspect a farmer would witness in his landscape during the day” (299). This towering statue is a product of Ondaatje's authorial imagination. However, in likening the statue to the historical Buduruvagala rock wall, the narrator establishes an implicit allusion to the fraught relation between Buddhism, “a religion which values *ahimsa*, non-violence” (Harris, “Buddhism in War” 198), and the violence of the Sri Lankan civil war taking place in the fields that surround it. Indeed, seemingly oblivious to the brutal acts of war taking place in the country, these stone

Buddhas “gazed over in the stillness, over the buzz-scream of cicadas”, unheeding of the “human forms that walked on bare burning feet towards the sacred statues” (*Anil* 299).

At present, however, the 120-foot-tall Buddha is set alight with explosives by three men – and as the striking prose describes it, “the statue buckled and the torso leapt towards the earth and the great expressive face of the Buddha fell forward and smashed into the ground” (300).<sup>59</sup> The narrator’s vivid description of the statue as it collapses, in turn, parallels the view that the statue witnesses as it is brought to the ground. Far from looking over the stillness of cicadas, the Buddha, now on a level with the human figures that walk before it, perceives that:

the ‘neutral’ and ‘innocent’ fields around the statue and the rock carvings were perhaps places of torture and burials. Since it was mostly uninhabited land, with only a few farmers and pilgrims, this was a place where trucks came to burn and hide victims who had been picked up. These were fields where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century. (300)

In this chapter, Ananda is commissioned to reconstruct the fallen statue. The work that Ananda performs, the narrator remarks, is “complex and innovative” (301). After the broken pieces were assembled, “metal bones [were] to be poured in, tunnels between the hips and torso, between the shoulders and neck to the head” (302) – these were “giant red veins slipping down the hundred-foot length” (303). Ananda “spent most of his time on the head” (302) piecing together the “one hundred chips and splinters of stone brought together” (303). Through the sculptor’s reconstructive work, the face of the Buddha “looked quilted” (302) as it gazes out of “the lidded grey eyes someone else had cut in another century, that torn look in its great acceptance” (304).

---

<sup>59</sup> The narrator makes it clear that the destruction of the Buddha is not an act of religious or ethnic strife: “this was for once not a political act or an act perpetrated by one belief against another”. The men were trying to find a solution for hunger or a way to get out of their disintegrating lives” (*Anil* 300). As Minoli Salgado describes it, “the destruction of the statue is therefore a result of a breakdown in social order and is committed by those who are followers of the religion that it represents” (*Writing Sri Lanka* 144).

While he “had planned to homogenise the stone, blend the face into a unit”, when “he saw it this way Ananda decided to leave it as it was” (302), the splintered face of the Buddha reflecting that “it had seen the wars and offered peace or irony to those dying under it” (304). The narrator takes pains to relate that the work of reconstruction is a communal effort. In an exemplification of compassion towards his fellow Sri Lankans, Ananda “brought in some of the villagers to work ... women as well as men”, for “it was safer to be seen working for a project like this, otherwise you could be pulled into the army or you might be rounded up as a suspect” (301-302).<sup>60</sup>

Shortly after his reconstructive work on this Buddha, Ananda participates in the ritual consecration of a new statue, made of plaster, built a short distance away to “replace the destroyed god” (301). As the sculptor is hoisted up to paint the eyes of the new statue, Ananda “looked past the vertical line of cheek into the landscape”, and sees “the figure of the world the statue would see forever, in rainlight and sunlight, a combustible world of weather even without the human element” (306). These events in the epilogue have been read in a number of ways that emphasise the political symbolism of the statues. For instance, in a reading that underscores the privileging of Sinhalese culture and nationalism, Qadri Ismail sees the erection of the two statues as “a metaphor for restoring a pure Buddhism in war torn Sri Lanka” (28). From another angle that posits the “main political focus” of the novel as “the violence committed by the Sinhalese upon each other”, Minoli Salgado posits that “the two fictional statues of ‘Distance’ are used to create an alternative foundational myth that differentiates between the historical construction of a Buddhist past – one riddled with cracks and bound by the molten iron veins of war – and a creation of a communal, hybridised, pluralistic Buddhism in the present day” (144). In departure from an overtly political interpretation of these events, however, I suggest that the two Buddhas

---

<sup>60</sup> Salgado reads this communal reconstructive work as symbolic of Ondaatje’s vision of reconciliation, where the “communal, agentive act – dissociated from war – ... serves to link people across class” (144).

– showing themselves as “scarred grey rock” and “white plaster” (304-305) – correspond to two competing visions of Buddhism that Ondaatje mediates in his search for healing for the splintered nation.

In his depiction of the Buddha lying prone in the field and made privy to the “torture and burials” (300), juxtaposed with the towering, pristine new statue who gazes upon “a combustible world of weather even without the human element” (306), the novelist gestures towards the disjuncture between the violent socio-political reality of Buddhist fundamentalism, and the ideals of kindness and compassion that Buddhism inspires. In addition, Ondaatje recalls the tension that exists between the figure of the Bodhisattva,<sup>61</sup> whose goal remains his own emancipation from the world of suffering through enlightenment, but who nevertheless “postpones release from the world and its suffering in order to help others on the path”, and the Arhat, who “seeks enlightenment through retreat from the world and embraces escape from rebirth when he achieves it” (McClure, *Partial Faiths* 182). The Buddhist scholar Edward Conze outlines in greater detail the important distinctions between the two. The term ‘Arhat’, as he writes, relates to “the ideal man, the saint or sage at the highest stage of development” (*Buddhism* 93). In Buddhism, the use of this term “is restricted to the perfect saints who are fully and finally emancipated” – Gautama Buddha himself, for instance, “is habitually called an Arhat” (93).<sup>62</sup> In

---

<sup>61</sup> I discuss the figure of the Bodhisattva in further detail on page 169 of this chapter. The significance of the Bodhisattva in the narrative vision of *Anil's Ghost* is in fact first alluded to in the description of the plundered Chinese cave in the first chapter, where the Bodhisattvas stood with “heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off” (*Anil* 12). The depiction of the plundered statues act as a reminder that gods themselves cannot remain impervious to the sufferings of humans.

<sup>62</sup> An example of the wisdom and emancipation of the Arhat from worldly desires can be gleaned from his relation to the Buddhist Noble Truths. Conze highlights that the first of the four Noble Truths, the idea of the universality of suffering, “does not immediately stand out as a self-evident fact” even amongst some Buddhists, for “we tenaciously cling to the belief that some happiness can be found in this world” (Conze, *Buddhism* 45). The scriptures, however, posit that “only the accomplished saint, only the Arhat, can fully understand the first Truth” (45).

contrast, as opposed to pursuing emancipation from this world of suffering only for himself, the Bodhisattva is focused on “*pulling others out of this great flood of suffering*” (126, emphasis in original). Held up by Mahayana Buddhists as “the ideal man” who embodies “the aim of the Buddhist effort”, the “all-compassionate Bodhisattva” is one who has “abandoned the world, but not the beings in it” (128). Along this frame of interpretation,

Whereas wisdom had been taught as the highest, and compassion as a subsidiary virtue, compassion now came to rank as equal with wisdom. While the wisdom of the Arhat had been fruitful in setting free in himself what there was to be set free, it was rather sterile in ways and means of helping ordinary people. The Bodhisattva would be a man who does not only set himself free, but who is also skilful in devising means for bringing out and maturing the latent seeds of enlightenment in others. (128)

Conze’s words bring to mind that the divergence between the figures of the Bodhisattva and the Arhat rests upon the distinction between Buddhist wisdom as it pertains to the pragmatic concerns of human lives in need of guidance and emancipation from suffering, and such wisdom as an ideal, which advances an ultimate, personal liberation from all earthly concerns and attachments in the state of nirvana. In *Anil’s Ghost*, Ondaatje sets these competing visions of Buddhist enlightenment in dialectical relation through the two statues depicted in the epilogue. It is emphasised that the first statue, brought to the ground by the social reality of hunger and desperate poverty that plagues the villages surrounding it, and in turn made to witness the “torture and burials” (300) that testify to the brutality of the war, is “no longer a god, no longer had its graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had found” (307). Indeed, with its “great scarred face” and the “pure sad glance”, this Buddha displays a compassion for those

whom it sees suffering. Commenting that this Buddha is “no longer a god” (307), then, the narrator makes an allusion to the figure of the bodhisattva, who “refuses the liberation of nirvana until all sentient beings are saved” (Nagao, “Bodhisattva Returns” 61). In turn, the second statue, which possesses insight into the panorama of “all the fibres of natural history” (*Anil* 307) and perceives the world for what it is, “even without the human element” (306), makes an allusion to the “gnosis” and “super-knowledge” (Dube, “Arhat Ideal in Early Buddhism” 51) that delineates the enlightenment of the Arhat.

Yet, even as he draws upon these differing versions of Buddhist enlightenment, Ondaatje, significantly, privileges neither of them. The narrator underscores that “the work on the statues had ended days apart, so there seemed suddenly to be two figures – one of scarred grey rock, one of white plaster – standing now in the open valley a half-mile away from each other” (*Anil* 304-305). Indeed, in imagining a landscape where one would not be able to look upon each statue without beholding the other, Ondaatje communicates that it is neither the compassion of the Bodhisattva nor the nirvana of the Arhat that is favoured in his authorial vision. Instead, he suggests that the Bodhisattva’s compassion for suffering beings nevertheless needs to be framed by the ‘higher purpose’ of such compassion, which is to liberate these beings from suffering through entry into nirvana. The gnosis and epiphanic insight that the Arhat possesses, in turn, cannot be detached from a recognition of and concern for the suffering in the world.<sup>63</sup> This way, the novel draws attention to the irony of a nation that founds its social and cultural imaginary upon the ideals and ethics of Buddhism – typified by a “sound basis in denouncing violence and its condemnation of violence” (Deegalle 3) – and which yet perpetrates the very terror and violence that Buddhism itself decries. The novel communicates that the nation’s Buddhist

---

<sup>63</sup> Some Mahayana Buddhists, who advance the compassionate wisdom of the Bodhisattva as the Buddhist ideal, hold that the Arhat’s pursuit of individual liberation leaves him “alone, secluded, jealous, earnest, master of himself” (qtd. in Nagao “Bodhisattva Returns” 61).



self-imaginary can no longer afford to remain impassive to the plight of the “human forms” (*Anil* 299) that come before it.

In his exposition on Buddhist thought in *An End to Suffering*, Pankaj Mishra reveals that the intersection between Buddhism and politics expresses itself in the reconceptualization of politics, in the movement away from the notion of political struggle as a “zero-sum contest, with clearly defined winners and losers” (339) to that of “politics as one of the ways of seeking and achieving meaningful lives, of protecting and serving them” (341). With the “insight into suffering as something universal and indivisible”, a politics grounded in Buddhism centralises compassion as “the basis of political action” (340), and puts forward the view that political action is both a means of expressing and fulfilling the tenets of spiritual faith. As Mishra elaborates,

Regardless of the regimes they lived under ... individuals always possessed a freedom of conscience: the freedom to make choices in everyday life. To exercise this choice correctly – to work with what the Buddha called right view and intention – was to live a moral as well as a political life. It was also to take upon one’s own conscience the burden of political responsibility and action rather than placing it upon a political party or a government. (341)

Importantly, this Buddhist vision of politics resonates with the postmodern commitment to the other, where one’s relation to the other becomes the primary consideration that propagates political action. Instead of a recourse to ideology, then, it is the indivisible humanity of the other that motivates action in the social and political sphere.

It is in the tension between the nation’s celebration of Buddhism and the violent reality of the Sri Lankan civil war, informed in part by Sinhalese Buddhist fundamentalism, that the novel

situates its literary inquiry into the tenets of Buddhism. However, the novel's appropriation of Buddhist mythology in representing the conflict has been taken to task for its problematic representation of Sri Lankan history as well as its purported bias towards the Sinhalese cause. To Ismail, for instance, "Sri Lankan history, to this text, is Sinhala and Buddhist history" (27). Citing the novel's primary cast of Sinhalese characters, with "all of the men hav[ing] names that resonate deeply within Buddhist iconography" (24), Ismail questions the novel's refusal to interrogate "the oppression of the minorities [which] has been carried out in Sri Lanka in the name of the Sinhala Buddhist majority" (29). As he further laments, "[that] Sinhala Buddhism may bear some responsibility for Sri Lanka's misery, does not even merit Ondaatje's consideration" (25). In this way, Ismail criticises the novel for its ostensible bent towards "Sinhala nationalism" (24), and for its failure to interrogate Sinhala Buddhism as an ethno-religious contributor to the conflict.

Here, Ismail is rightly concerned about the novel's seeming bent towards Sinhalese Buddhism, given that Sinhalese interpretations of the Buddhist faith and history have indeed stoked the fires of the conflict. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge, who was first Prime Minister and then President of Sri Lanka (in office from 1994-2006), in fact enacted the notion of 'War for Peace' as "the slogan of [her] administration":

A '*Sudu Nelum*' (White Lotus) movement was started with government backing. Its stated aim was to educate the people for a peace that would involve devolution of power through constitutional reform, but the assumption behind it was that peace would not come without a military victory by the government. (Harris 197-198)

The historian, Tessa Bartholomeusz, further notes that “the protection of Buddhism” has indeed been interpreted as “a criterion for just war” (145), and used as justification for violence against those who threaten its ascendancy:

Though, in traditional Sinhala belief, a *satyakriya* [an act of truth] is a kingly or religious prerogative, in contemporary Sinhala politics, where there is no monarchy, truth acts are performed by politicians who contest for ultimate political power. ... in contemporary Sri Lanka, narratives of Buddhist kings and their acts are not arcane remnants of a former monarchical society. Rather, they are experienced as real and viable paradigms for ethical behaviour in the present.

*(In Defence of Dharma 146)*

The appropriation of Buddhism as a cause for political violence – the fact that “Buddhism has never stood outside the dynamics of power” (Kapferer 108) – is, however, not unaddressed by the novel. Bloody intersections between politics and religion in Sri Lanka, as the novel intimates, are not new to the contemporary period, but come across as phenomena that occur in cyclic repetition in Sri Lankan history. Palipana relates that “[d]uring the reign of Udaya the Third, some monks fled the court to escape his wrath. And they came into the Grove of Ascetics. The king and the Uparaja followed them and cut their heads off” (*Anil* 87). In a time closer to home, Palipana’s brother, Nārada, a monk, “was shot in his room while sleeping” – a murder believed to have been “organised by his own novice” (47-48).

This evocation of the *longue durée* of Sri Lankan history both acknowledges and critiques the irony of the continued enmeshment of Buddhism as spiritual practice in political violence. Reading Ondaatje’s rendering of the *longue durée* as a “reference to the Buddhist view of cyclical time”, John Bolland posits that *Anil’s Ghost* “draw[s] attention to the lack of linear

logic in contemporary events, which occur as ‘catastrophic singularities’ ... in a vertiginous succession of effects without discernible cause” (112-113). Indeed, the novel’s enactment of the *longue durée* gestures towards the Buddhist notion of rebirth, in a manner that focalises on the temporality and transitoriness of political ideas and ideology in the deeper scheme of historical time, and, in turn, the senselessness of violence committed in the name of politics. Buddhist scriptures reveal that

When ... he [the Buddha] saw on the one side the world lost in low views and confused efforts, thickly covered with the dirt of the passions, and saw on the other side the exceeding subtlety of the Dharma of emancipation, he felt inclined to take no action. But when he weighed up the significance of the pledge to enlighten all beings he had taken in the past, he became again more favourable to the idea of proclaiming the path to Peace. (Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* 52)

The chaos and unrest that characterise each rebirth – each cycle of history – are, as the passage reveals, a result of the inability of man to look and act beyond the impermanence and particularities of their situatedness, to conceive of the ultimate objectivity of historical time and existence. As the scriptures relate elsewhere, “[t]he link of causes and effects which now have brought us here together -/ They are like the sound of echoes, the sport of a game of illusion./ Meditate on this illusion, do not seize on them as truth./ ... In permanence they cannot last; in a trice they separate and fall away (92). Alluding to the Buddhist notion of rebirth, the novel underscores that justification of the civil war ultimately arises from the “low views and confused efforts” (52) of men unable to look beyond the limitations and temporality of their notions of ‘truth’ – that is, in the vocabulary of Derrida’s hauntology, an inability or refusal to enter into dialogue with the past, to live with and learn from the ghosts of history. Thus, even while

drawing from Buddhist mythology and spiritual ideals, the novel mounts its criticism towards the perpetrators who advocate war in the name of a 'just' defence of Sinhalese Buddhism.

#### IV. Seeking Beauty amidst War

Let me now pause to re-read the novel's aesthetic vision conveyed in the epilogue in light of the Arhat and Bodhisattva. Perceiving the world through a lofty vision from above, the newly-consecrated Buddha

could witness the smallest approach of a bird, every flick of its wing, or a hundred-mile storm coming down off the mountains near Gonagola and skirting to the plains. He could feel each current of wind, every lattice-like green shadow created by cloud. There was a girl moving in the forest. The rain miles away rolling like blue dust towards him. Grasses being burned, bamboo, the smell of petrol and grenade. The crack of noise as a layer of rock on his arm exfoliated in heat. The face open-eyed in the great rainstorms of May and June. The weather formed in the temperate forests and sea, in the thorn scrub behind him in the southeast, in the deciduous hills, and moving towards the burning savanna near Badulla, and then the coast of mangroves, lagoons and river deltas. The great churning of weather above the earth. (307)

The narrator's focalisation on these forces of nature – from the “smallest approach of a bird” to the “great churning of weather above the earth” (307) – impresses upon the reader a sense of the sublime that, fundamentally, transcends human experience. This perspective from above, embodying the arhat's view of the world, resonates with the aesthetic ideal of Romantic artists, where the sublime serves “to evoke an experience that transcends human imagination” (de Mul

11). For Ananda, this “angle of the world” represents a “seduction” (*Anil* 307), a means to free himself from the suffering that has followed his wife’s disappearance – in death. For, it is suggested, the sublime beauty that he sees from above leads him to momentarily contemplate the idea of losing himself “in the heights ... and in the dark” (307) of the vastness before him, giving himself over to “the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance” (307).

Ananda is brought back, however, by his nephew’s “concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world” (307). This touch is not merely a gesture of kindness from the boy, but, as the narrator seems to suggest, stems from the boy’s recognition of Ananda’s pain. This focus on the pain in the other, in the final act of touch that brings Ananda back to “the world” (307), reflects, as I wish to argue, the novelist’s crucial re-thinking of the Romantic ideal of art, in alignment with postmodernism’s re-visioning of the aesthetic ideals and practices that it has inherited. The narrative impresses upon the reader the notion that the arresting beauty of the sublime nevertheless harbours an inherent danger in the effacement of the lived reality of the human experience, particularly in its striving for “a combustible world ... even without the human experience” (306). After all, in this vision, we never do find out who the girl moving in the forest – the only human presence alluded to here – is. Are we to assume that the girl is Lakma? Are we to read this scene as a suggestion of what has happened to her after the intervening years? From this lofty angle of the world, these questions remain out of reach and unanswered.

In alignment with the trope of doubleness, Ondaatje sets forward the suggestion that the sublime view of beauty from the heights of the new statue must, nevertheless, be coupled with a vision of beauty “that no longer had its graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had

found” in the “damaged stone” (307). This damaged statue, which has now “felt a human shadow” (304), is no longer godlike. The notion of beauty that this statue embodies no longer resonates with the sublime beauty that the other statue commands, but is instead found in the flow of “giant red veins slipping down the hundred-foot length ... [that] would lock all the limbs together” (303). Perhaps more significantly, this is a communal work of beauty involving the effort not only of a single artist, but a collective group of people that have come together in an attempt to survive the war. Embodying the *bodhisattva*'s view of the world, then, this conceptualisation of beauty is grounded in daily acts of living and survival that characterise the human experience, and affirms that these daily acts are, in turn, also received forms of the beautiful.

## Chapter 3

### From Terror to Tragedy: Affective Translations in *The Wasted Vigil*

#### I. Introduction

##### *Islamicate Aesthetics in a Post-9/11 World*

In his 1996 foreword to the reprint of *Covering Islam*, Edward Said speaks of an increasing and “intense focus on Muslims and Islam in the American and Western media, most of it characterised by a more highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility than what I had previously described in my [1981] book” (Said xi). In the climate that Said describes, even before the events of 9/11 took place, there were “journalists making extravagant statements, which are instantly picked up and further dramatised by the media” (xvi). The frenetic portrayal of Islam not only “deliberately created associations between Islam and fundamentalism”, which “ensure that the average reader comes to see Islam and fundamentalism as essentially the same thing”, but also revealed a “tendency to reduce Islam to a handful of rules, stereotypes, and generalisations about the faith, its founder, and all of its people” (xvi). This media frenzy further perpetuated “the reinforcement of every negative fact associated with Islam – its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities” (xvi). A consequence of the above, Said elaborates, is that “[i]t has given consumers of news the sense that they have understood Islam without at the same time intimating to them that a great deal in this energetic coverage is based on far from objective material” (li). He notes that “in many instances ‘Islam’ has licensed not only patent inaccuracy but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred”



(li). This media bias took place “as part of what is presumed to be fair, balanced, responsible coverage of Islam” (li).

The events of 9/11 five years later did much more to propagate the image of Islam that Said delineates above. An opinion piece published in *The Guardian* by the British writer, Ian McEwan, four days after the attacks of 9/11 encapsulates and reproduces the dichotomised thinking that Said describes, already prevalent in Anglophone media discourse. In his article, McEwan advances the notion of a seemingly irremediable gulf between a Western ‘us’ and nefarious Islamic ‘them’:

This is the nature of empathy, to think oneself into the minds of others. ... If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality. ... The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination. (“Only Love and then Oblivion”)

According to McEwan’s thought, the qualities that made the 9/11 attacks possible are essentially the qualities that render morality, human community, and even basic humanity impossible. The lack of “empathy” which occludes the development of “compassion” and “morality” – that is to say, the essential values that facilitate harmonious co-existence within a community – forecloses the possibility of redemption for those similar to, or represented by, the hijackers. The implication that follows, then, is that the tenets of morality and mutual responsibility which

underpin the creation of community cannot – need not – extend to these groups of people, for imagining community with them would be self-defeating. The groups of people represented by the hijackers, in other words, are simply the Other who aren't, and who can never become, human like 'us'.

It is in this climate, where the possibilities of a sense of relation with Islamic peoples are rendered suspect, and the religious affinities of Anglophone Muslims are problematised in light of the negative associations between Islam and neo-fundamentalism enforced in the media, that Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) emerges on the literary scene. Set in post-9/11 Afghanistan, but challenging the country's post-9/11 image as a breeding ground for a threatening atavism and Islamism antithetical to Western values, *The Wasted Vigil* re-presents the land, as well as the imaginary of the Islamicate world of which Afghanistan is a part, through a collage of natural and artistic images, cultural and geological artefacts, historical threads and intertextual literary references, which together sustain the structure of the narrative. These elements – which include Bihzadian miniatures, a Gandhara Buddhist sculpture, Afghan gems, Greek classical tragedies, and the poetics of Sufism, amongst others – are objects of splendour and beauty that testify to the legacies of both the Islamicate world and the pre-Islamic civilisations that flourished in the area before the arrival of Islam.<sup>64</sup> Yet, beyond what might otherwise be perceived as a decorative aspect adding an "Orientalist tenor" (Kanwal 176) to the

---

<sup>64</sup> Aslam has professed himself a "non-believer" (Chambers and Aslam, *British Muslim Fictions* 147). It may be argued that the novelist's treatment of the term 'Islam' situates Islam not merely in terms of a religious identity or affiliation, but, like Shahab Ahmed in *What is Islam?*, traces the "historical and human phenomenon that is Islam in its plenitude and complexity of meaning" (5). In his exposition on Islam, Ahmed asserts, "I am precisely not seeking to tell the reader what Islam is as a matter of Divine Command, and thus am not seeking to prescribe how Islam should be followed as the means to existential salvation. Rather, I seek to tell the reader what Islam has actually been as a matter of human fact in history, and thus am suggesting how Islam should be conceptualized as a means to a more meaningful understanding of Islam in the human experience" (5). The notion of Islam as an aspect of human experience, which Ahmed remarks "is considerably and crucially lacking in the prevalent conceptualisations of the term 'Islam/Islamic'" (6), resonates with Aslam's treatment of the subject matter in this novel.

novel, these elements of beauty put forth an added dimension that layers over the reader's imaginary of the Islamicate world, transporting the reader to a different space and time that reveal themselves in traces amidst the debris of war and deprivation presently cluttering the Afghan landscape.

In this chapter, I explore *The Wasted Vigil* as a post-9/11 novel intent on reframing the imaginary of Islam and the Islamicate world for an Anglophone readership. I argue that *The Wasted Vigil* articulates a stance against the clamour of the retaliative War on Terror waged by the United States – a series of attacks that Neil Lazarus appropriately describes as the “ghastly and colossal (not to say terroristic) violence subsequently visited on Afghanistan and Iraq” (“Postcolonial Studies after the Invasion of Iraq” 10) following the attacks of 9/11. As I shall demonstrate, showing a sensitivity towards the historical and political complexities that have given rise to present-day Afghanistan – such as the “killing epochs” (*Vigil* 415) of Soviet, American, and Taliban warfare, in conjunction with opportunistic Afghan warlords whose financial gain from facilitating foreign militaristic interventions is only met by the regimes of wanton terror and oppression that they visit upon the local populace – Aslam moves away from a recourse to any easy notions of justice even as he draws attention to the urgency of resolution. Instead, he verbalizes the novel's anti-war politics through an aesthetic strategy that involves repopulating the idea of Islam and the Islamicate world through alternative maps, images, and modes of affiliation that allow the Western reader to reconceptualise the phenomenon that is Islam, while simultaneously enabling Anglophone Muslim readers to rediscover the breadth of their cultural heritage, and, in the process, connect with the “various different ways in which one can be a Muslim” (Chambers and Aslam 153).<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> In an interview with Claire Chambers, Aslam relates that “when light travels through a prism, depending on where you are standing, you are either going to see only white light, or all the colours of the spectrum. If there is a theme in my writing, it is that I am standing on the

The force of *The Wasted Vigil* stems in particular from Aslam's borrowing from Persian miniature painting and Sufism. One of the most prominent characteristics of Persian miniature painting is the rendering of axonometry, in which spatial depth is relinquished in favour of a flatness of perspective. Where the composition of Western art conventionally revolves around a linear or scientific perspective that both fixes and proceeds from a specific viewpoint,<sup>66</sup> the axonometric structure of Persian painting brings forth "an abstract equivalent of the actual space" (Orbay Grignon 51). In Persian painting, objects in the foreground and background are afforded similar measures of focalisation, giving rise to a work of art that "incorporates many other viewpoints" (49). The multiplicity of viewpoints often furnishes parallel story structures that appear seemingly unconnected even as they occur within a single compositional frame. On the one hand, this axonometric narrative structure enables Aslam to accommodate and examine various historical trajectories and character viewpoints with equal clarity, in a way that compels the reader to interrogate the particularities of any preconceived notions or perspectives that he or she might harbour towards the Islamicate peoples and cultures represented in the text. On the other hand, as I shall demonstrate in the pages to come, this rendering of axonometry performs a crucial aesthetic function in bringing about the tragic beauty at the centre of the novel.

Just as the aesthetic form of Persian painting enables Aslam to reshape the perspective of the reader, so, too, do the principles of Sufism that permeate the narrative. In *The Wasted Vigil*,

---

side of the prism in which I can see that the light isn't just white. ... Since a very early age I have been acutely aware of the various different ways in which one can be a Muslim" (153). His portrayal of the various Muslim characters – Marcus, the Muslim convert, Qatrina, and also Dunia – provides a contrast to the extremism propagated by the Taliban and embodied by Casa.

<sup>66</sup> The authors of *History of Art* inform us that "[s]ince the Italian Renaissance in the fifteenth century, the Western tradition has settled on scientific, or linear, perspective as the most satisfactory method. It is based on two observations. One is that forms look smaller the farther away they are, and the other is that parallel lines ... appear to converge and vanish at the point in the distance where sky meets earth. Scientific perspective assumes the artist's (and viewer's) fixed position and one or more vanishing points on a horizon line" (Janson and Janson 6).

where the reader repeatedly encounters the violence associated with Islamic fundamentalism, Sufism emerges as an alternative form of Islam that both resists and acts as a counterargument against the militancy and barbarity of Islamism. The Sufi scholar, Eric Geoffroy, impresses upon us that a central aspect of Sufism requires the adherent to “contemplate spiritual realities that lie beyond simple faith”, and embrace “a communion with the divine through intuition and contemplation” (*Introduction to Sufism* 2). Positing “a philosophy of personal experience as a way to seek union with the Supreme Being” (Emadi 61), Sufism distinguishes between the “lesser *jihād*”, which refers to the “defence of the territories of Islam” and the “greater *jihād*”, or the battle against the ego” (Geoffroy 30). Geoffroy further outlines the distinction between the two when he writes that,

[a]fter he had returned from a military expedition, the Prophet said to his Companions: ‘We have returned from the lesser *jihād* to devote ourselves here to the greater *jihād*.’ To those who asked him what the greater *jihād* is, he answered, ‘That of the heart!’ or, according to another account, ‘the struggle of the human being against his passions’ ... For Sufis, this *hadīth* establishes the superiority of the inward, spiritual battle over outward combat. Indeed, although an opposing army only attacks sporadically, the ego harasses a human being incessantly. (132)

In *The Wasted Vigil*, Aslam brings this notion of a ‘greater *jihād*’ central to Sufism to bear upon the violent and militant expressions of faith put forward by Islamic fundamentalists, as he advances a more layered and nuanced conceptualisation of Islam for his Anglophone readers. In doing so, he doesn’t only suggest that the brutal and often barbaric performances of faith by the fundamentalists deviate from the more crucial aspects of Islam, but also draws attention to

Sufism as an alternative element intrinsic to the faith – in fact, one “at the heart of Islamic culture” (Geoffroy xvii) – through which his readers can re-vision Islam.

### *Parallel stories*

In alignment with the rendering of axonometry characteristic of Persian painting, Aslam portrays the narrative through parallel storylines that unravel simultaneously, traversing both geographical and temporal frames. Aslam’s narrative strategy places the reader at a unique position to see across all of the story frames at once, enabling the reader to, in effect, perceive details and connections that elude the characters themselves. The events of *The Wasted Vigil* unfold through the lives of five primary characters: Marcus Caldwell, an English doctor and ex-perfume maker in his seventies, who – in spite of losing his Afghan wife, Qatrina, to the Islamist regime of terror inflicted by the Taliban, and his daughter, Zameen, as a result of covert anti-Soviet operations during the Cold War – remains in Afghanistan in search of his lost grandson, Bihzad; Lara, a Russian art historian, who arrives hoping for Marcus’s help in locating her brother, Benedikt, a soldier who mysteriously disappeared after defecting from the Soviet army during the Soviet invasion; David, an ex-CIA agent and Zameen’s lover, who remains tethered to Afghanistan searching for Bihzad, whom he has come to regard as his own son; Casa, a young local jihadi, who stumbles into Marcus’s basement after suffering injuries while on a mission to terrorise the villagers of Usha; and, later in the narrative, Dunia, the young Afghan woman, who turns up at Marcus’s house seeking refuge and protection from the local cleric out to persecute her. The narrator makes the reader privy to information that remain unbeknownst to some of the characters involved: both Lara and Marcus are unaware that Benedikt had actually fathered Zameen’s child through rape; Dunia is oblivious that Casa, whom she momentarily

develops affection for, had inadvertently contributed to the persecution that she is now facing; Marcus, David, Lara, and Dunia are unaware that Casa had been renamed as a child, and that his original name, as the narrator tantalisingly reveals, is Bihzad. Indeed, Marcus never discovers that the grandson whom he has been searching for is actually in his home, in the shape of the injured young man to whom he is giving medical care; David never realises that the son he has longed for is right by his side; Lara never recognises that she has encountered the progeny of her long-lost brother.

Nevertheless, these characters bring various traces and trajectories of Afghanistan's history to bear upon the narrative – these include, in brief, the British colonial presence that began in the early nineteenth century, the proxy wars of the Cold War in the twentieth century, the Taliban uprising in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion, and the present-day American War on Terror following the events of 9/11. From this cursory view, the novel's cast of characters seems to lend itself to an “all but allegorical” (Gopal 24) reading that critiques the various manifestations of imperialist ambitions in Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup> If the characters are to be read allegorically, “[a]kin to the country itself, Marcus's house becomes an international crossroads, a global meeting point” (Flannery 299); in turn, Casa, who embodies the face of radical and militant Islam, is interpreted as a product of the relentless imperial assaults upon Afghanistan that Marcus, Lara, and David bear the traces of. In their reading of the novel, where they emphasise Aslam's intent on revealing the “irreconcilable political viewpoints and conflicting cultural understandings” that contribute to the “constant violence” in the land, Peter Childs and James Green underscore the novel's representation of “a country and a situation differently perceived by British, American, Afghan and Russian eyes” and its illumination of “Afghanistan

---

<sup>67</sup> In their reading of the novel, Peter Childs and James Green term these often violent imperial manoeuvres the “vast transterritorial forces operating overt and covert stratagems over ... conflicted populations” (115).

as a repeated contact zone for the fraught struggles between the East and the West” (116-117). In this chapter, however, I depart from an allegorical reading of these characters. I suggest that even as these characters facilitate a commentary on Afghanistan’s implication in the routes of global empires, they play a vital role in shifting the frames of perception through which the reader contemplates the country. While these characters inevitably step in the trails of history, they exceed mere allegory particularly as they bring a deeply personal, affective dimension to shape the narrative, whether in the form of a sister searching for a long-lost brother who had played a role in the communist occupation of the country, or a stepfather previously involved in espionage activities, and is now searching for his lost stepson. As I shall show in the pages to come, the affective import of these characters is, in fact, an important means through which the novel impels the reader to re-vision individuals such as Casa who, in the wake of 9/11, are deemed to be outside of “the core of our humanity” (McEwan).

I advance the argument that even as he demonstrates a keen investment in recuperating the historical trails and cultural riches of Afghanistan within the consciousness of the Anglophone reading public, Aslam’s aesthetic vision is first and foremost focused on reconciling his readers to the humanity of those whom he represents in his writing. Reflecting upon his art, Aslam muses that,

[w]e fail as fiction writers when we begin with pages five, six and seven – giving the reader reams of information about union rules in Pakistani textile factories ... or, for that matter, about the day to day workings of an insurance firm in, say, Exeter, England – but forgetting to tell the reader how all that information is connected to a flesh and blood human being. (“Where to Begin”).



This focus on the crucial and irreducible value of the “flesh and blood human being” emerges as the starting point for Aslam’s critique of the yet-ongoing belligerency between the West and Islam. In fact, a particularly notable scene in *The Wasted Vigil* shows Dunia crossing paths with the sullen Casa who, unbeknownst to her, is part of a militant Islamist organisation terrorising her hometown. One evening, while quietly waiting for the young man to finish his prayers, Dunia witnesses his blanket catching fire. Overcome with concern, she suddenly reaches out to him:

Touching her eye she brings away a teardrop that has grains of kohl dissolved in it. She is as amazed as he seems to be when her hand advances towards his face and the dissolved kohl is rubbed onto his right cheek. A small daub. A dark bee-wing. (*Vigil* 318)

Dunia’s “small daub” (318) of empathy for Casa elicits from the latter an unanticipated outpouring of emotion: “‘I ... I wish I didn’t feel alone all the time,’ he says at last, very quietly. ... For reasons she doesn’t understand he brings his hands forwards and displays the palms. He thinks she can see something in his lifelines?” (318).

In the trajectory of the novel, this moment marks a crucial breakthrough for Casa. In much of the narrative prior to this moment, Casa’s thoughts largely take the form of the Islamist dictates drilled into him by the neo-fundamentalist madrassas and jihadi training camps where he had spent the bulk of his childhood and youth. In an earlier scene, when he witnesses Marcus, a Muslim convert, having some wine, Casa immediately delves into a scathing disparagement of Marcus through the lenses of his stringent Islamist worldview, in spite of the fact that Marcus is presently providing shelter and medical care for him:

Marcus, who had claimed he was a Muslim, sits drinking wine at dinner. There is indeed no limit to the cunning of the infidels. He deceived the trusting and amenable Muslims of this land just to marry a woman, but at heart he is still a non-believer. No wonder Allah punished him by deranging her [Qatrina], by taking away his hand. (257)

In a separate episode involving Lara, Casa reveals a similar dogmatic antagonism: “[h]e is relieved Lara wasn’t in the kitchen while he was having breakfast. A woman seen is a Western idea, he had been told by a cleric at a madrassa when he was a child” (218). An antagonism based upon Islamist teaching, in other words, functions as the basis through which Casa ordinarily conducts his interpersonal relationships. Yet, when Dunia’s teardrop touches his face – that is, when she exposes a vulnerability that is motivated by her anxiety over his wellbeing, and when she invites him into a form of relation founded upon compassion – Casa reclaims, even momentarily, a sense of self beyond the iterations of Islamist dogma, and reciprocates by revealing his own underlying vulnerability when he lays bare his heart and hands.

Such a connection bolstered by compassion and a recognition of shared human vulnerability, I argue, is at the heart of *The Wasted Vigil*, and serves as the novel’s central political impulse. Marcus more succinctly articulates elsewhere in the novel that “here everyone is human and must try to understand each other’s mystery. Each other’s pain” (230). In the novel, Aslam’s narrativisation of Casa through an emphasis on a common vulnerability is a formal act that humanises the hitherto demonised Islamist Other. In this instance, Aslam’s demonstration of Casa’s desire for human connection, which reveals itself in spite of Casa’s Islamist indoctrination that propels him to cause harm and terror to other humans in Islam’s name, imparts a moment of hesitancy. Aslam forestalls the reader’s impulse to write off Casa’s character as what Judith

Butler terms an “ungrievable life” (*Frames of War* 38) – a concept underlying the representation of some lives as inherently unworthy of consideration within the norms of moral community, and which, in turn, buttresses the moral legitimacy of enacting violence against these groups or individuals.<sup>68</sup> Importantly, the novelist relates in an interview that “I don’t necessarily want readers to sympathise with Casa ... I want them to better understand where these people come from, and how they arrive at the point they have” (Chambers and Aslam 143). The point, he emphasises, “is not to encourage forgiveness, but is rather about preventing such radicalisation in the future” (143). Aslam’s insistence on humanising an individual like Casa – a hardened Islamist and terrorist – can be seen as a calculated move on his part to foster a cross-cultural political community between its target Anglophone readership and the Islamic/Islamist Other. This political vision situates compassion and a keener historical understanding as integral aspects in counteracting the rise of a reactionary fundamentalism that is both engendered by, and which in turn engenders, the interminable cycle of animosity and war.

Nevertheless, some critical readings of *The Wasted Vigil* have expressed scepticism of Aslam’s political objectives. Reading the novel in light of the “Global War on Terrorism”, Margaret Scanlan gestures towards the limitations of Aslam’s anti-war politics that eschews concrete political solutions in favour of ostensibly indeterminate affective changes within the reader:

Aslam defines his writing as political ... We may not recognise his novels as such, for they offer no blueprints for a better world [in spite of his] aesthetic emphases, his calls for better seeing and more empathy ... Aslam says the novel is a ‘powerful instrument against injustice’, ‘accurately representing the world

---

<sup>68</sup> In *Frames of War*, Butler writes that “[w]e might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all” (38).

and legislating for common understanding'. This Keatsian claim is stirring, but his novels never show us readers and writers deciding when war begins. (113)

To Scanlan, *The Wasted Vigil* uncovers Aslam's aestheticized treatment of history, particularly in the way he stylistically threads together "historical facts ... introduced without transition and bearing at most an ironic relation to the immediate context" (106).<sup>69</sup> Interpreting Aslam's ostensibly arbitrary insertion of these historical facts as a mere stylistic move, Scanlan holds that the novelist insufficiently interrogates political responsibility for the War on Terror, and thus inadequately presents a call for justice appropriate to the violence of the war. While concurring with Scanlan's emphasis on the urgency of a proper historicising, I depart from her sentiment that the political efficacy of Aslam's novel is hampered by his reluctance to put forward a 'blueprint' for justice and his investment in the affective import of the aesthetic. In particular, contrary to Scanlan's view that Aslam's focus on "better seeing and more empathy" offers "no blueprints for a better world" and fails to provide a proper historicising of "when war begins" (113), I advance the notion that the sentiments of empathy and community that the novel foregrounds – prerequisites that an individual needs in order to envision an equitable sense of relation to another – in fact constitute important first steps to intervening in the cyclical reproduction of animosity, violence and war.

War, as Derek Gregory elucidates, is initiated by discourses of relation that structure the representation of the other: "[p]eople go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine and speak of others: that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representation" (*The Colonial Present* 20). Similarly situating the question of the permissibility of war squarely upon the discursive practices that underlie representation, Butler remarks that "[t]he critique of violence must begin with the question of the

---

<sup>69</sup> See pages 218-220 of this thesis.

representability of life itself: what allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way?" (51). Representation, then, is a textual affair with material proportions; it is both an affective practice that shapes the worldview of its reader or viewer, and a constructive act that brings about the socio-political reality that is being represented, through the choices and actions that the reader or viewer undertakes in response to what he or she perceives. Butler's words communicate that the act of representation facilitates, and even legitimises, acts of war when it disrupts the notion of the equality of lives, and obstructs the empathy that facilitates ethical commitment to the other. Representation thus creates the patterns of recognition and disavowal that both enable and disable the possibility of community, and thus bears upon the question of whether war against other groups of people is permissible or not.

Accordingly, as the roots of war lie in representation and perception, it is with the same that resistance and opposition to war can be formulated. In a discussion of *The Wasted Vigil*, Aslam highlights his intent to rehabilitate the frames of perception through which his readers interpret 9/11 and Afghanistan. Determined to contest essentialising notions of the Afghans as "people on the 'other' side of the world, [who] are always fighting each other in the dust and among the stones", unamenable to forms of moral community with the Western world, Aslam emphasises the urgency of a proper historicising of 9/11:

I wanted to write about Afghanistan because I thought Afghanistan had been forgotten. ... what the world did to Afghanistan over the past thirty years ... doesn't seem to be at the forefront of people's minds. For example, when 9/11 happened, the reaction in America was: Who are these people, why do they hate us? It was as though that moment was an aberration. But that moment came out of

the history of America's involvement with Afghanistan ...[.] (Sethi and Aslam, "A Conversation with Nadeem Aslam" 350)

Aslam's insistence on a proper accounting of history in *The Wasted Vigil* is, first and foremost, a critical intervention into the literary landscape that is focused on 9/11, much of which comprises works that centre upon the American interpretation of the events.<sup>70</sup> Crucially, the predominance of a US-centric literary and media engagement with 9/11 in the English-speaking world has meant that the American experience of the event has taken on universalising proportions, giving what is in essence a *local*, American interpretation of the event the semblance of global concordance.<sup>71</sup>

The events of 9/11 largely entered Anglo-American public consciousness through media footage and photographs that depict hijacked planes methodically crashing into the World Trade Centre, and the resultant melee involving the eruption of fear on the ground and bodies falling out of collapsing buildings – what was, in essence, the tools of mass destruction directed towards civilians going about their everyday routine. These coordinated attacks on the New York Twin Towers were significant not only because of their near-cinematic enactment of mass terror and violence as spectacle, but additionally because they, for the first time in the cultural memory of

---

<sup>70</sup> Catherine Morley informs us that "[w]hile many of the initial reactions to the events of 11th September were notable for their uniquely subjective emphasis, with writers discussing what the attacks meant to them, to their art and to their writing, what many writers have also been integrating into their fiction has been the American response to the attacks" (83).

<sup>71</sup> Jo Lampert notes that such literary responses "may seem like universal, or at least universally Western responses to the attacks, but in fact they often represent views of the world that are focally 'American' ... This strongly guides any reading of the texts, as they themselves are written from this narrative perspective and use social and political registers that resonate in familiar (though sometimes mythical and imaginary) 'American' ways" (4). Importantly, Lampert goes on to suggest that "9/11 is essentially an American narrative, and the attacks were largely seen as an American tragedy. 9/11 is an American story" (4). While a focalisation on the American experience in narratives about 9/11 is, clearly, imperative for a nation grappling with the reality of the horrific event on their shores, these narratives have imparted the added dimension of framing Islamic communities – which the attackers are believed to represent – as a fundamental Other that threatens the core of the American body politic, and, consequentially, legitimise acts of violence against these said communities.

the American public, implicated American ground in global conflict. Richard Gray, a literary critic, elucidates that

Prior to September 11, 2001, the last time the United States had been invaded, its borders significantly penetrated, was during the 1812 war with Great Britain, which lasted for three years. The last and, until 9/11, the only time. There had been civil war; there had been an attack on the periphery of American power, at Pearl Harbour. But there had been nothing from outside that struck at the heart of the nation. ... To have war brought home was an unusual experience for America, to have the mainland not only invaded but attacked from the skies and devastated was not only unusual but unique. (4)

In Gray's view, the shock of having the reality of global conflict forced into the domestic landscape of American society registered itself in the minds of the American public by way of "an old story" (4) – one that happens to be a "recurrent tendency in American writing" (2) in the past two centuries – which "moves from the presumption of initial innocence to an encounter with forms of experience that are at once dire and disorientating" (3). Along this (recurrent) narrative trajectory, "[i]nnocence is shattered, paradise is lost, thanks to a bewildering moment, a descent into darkness, the impact of crisis" (3).

Thus, even as 9/11 is popularly theorised in terms of a "historic rupture", a "cataclysm that had changed, if not the world itself then certainly our perception of it" (Mohr and Däwes 2), much of American public opinion of the event, remarkably, employs an interpretative structure that replays a conventional scheme of self-conception that positions the US as an unprovoked party implicated in the complexities of world affairs. The idea of innocence, integral to the American public's self-imaginary, facilitated a collective sense of victimhood that positioned an

American ‘us’ against a nefarious Islamic ‘them’ who are irremediably deficient in fundamental human values.

The predominance of the narrative of American victimhood has had repercussions both at the levels of civil society and US foreign policy. Sarah O’Brien notes that “anti-Muslim rhetoric in the US and the realms of its allies in the months following 9/11 cultivated a cultural climate in which it was acceptable to enact violence against perceived Others in Iraq and Afghanistan” (241); the preponderance of the US-centric 9/11 narrative in American public opinion, in turn, “opened the way for the state to move quickly with its offer of revenge and retaliation as a suitable and legitimate answer to that traumatic tear in the fabric of normality” (Edkins 19). This narrative of American victimhood, underpinned by the characterisation of the attackers as the absolute Other to American morality, was used to garner public support for war. Andrew Norris elucidates that “the second Bush administration ... responded to the attacks in a moralistic and deeply unhelpful manner, calling for a ‘war’ to ‘rid the world of evil’. It is not difficult to see how this approach undermines any attempt to respond with anything other than violence” (“‘Us’ and ‘Them’: The Politics of American Self-Assertion After 9/11” 251). He makes the crucial observation that

the Bush administration’s rhetoric of war succeeded in cutting off whatever self-reflection had been provoked by the attacks. And it did so with the aid of hysterical media that reported as facts mere speculations about what ‘we’ felt (righteous anger) and what we needed (revenge, blood) in the wake of the attacks, which only helped to make them so. (251)

Two points of note can be gathered here. The first is that interpretation, narrative representation (whether in the media or literature) and the apparatuses of war are inextricably



linked in the War on Terror following 9/11. The second is that public support for the war regime was harnessed through a concerted effort – both by the Bush administration and the media – at prescribing ‘moral’ outrage and occluding avenues for independent reflection. According to Norris, the latter is made possible by a pre-existent disconnect between the American public and the history of US foreign policy:

What is the meaning of 9/11? To ask that question in the United States today is immediately to call forth images of the destruction wrought by the terrorist attacks of 2001 ... Almost no one will momentarily recall that September 11 is the anniversary of the U.S.-supported military coup in Chile ... it illustrates how profoundly disconnected the American people are from the history of what has been done with their money and in their name. ... It is in part this disconnect that makes possible the deep sense of victimization that has gripped the United States in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Few asked – or ask – why these attacks took place, what reasons were given for them. Instead of an attempt to understand what had happened and how it might be averted in the future, there was a rush to demonize the attackers and those who either supported or condoned them. (250)

The analysis above suggests that it is, at least in part, an inability to historically contextualise the acts of terror, brought about by the public’s fundamental disengagement with the US’s historical and political relation to the wider world, that facilitated the Manichean interpretation of 9/11. This context enabled the Bush administration and media to present a constellation of interpretative schemes to drive public approval for war, which later led to actual attacks on Afghanistan by the US military.

Now, then, if interpretation and representation form part of the basis for war and underwrite support for the enactment of violence against other groups of people, it follows that reinterpretation and *re*-presentation necessarily constitute part of the resistance against such acts. This resistance against the discursive frames that facilitate war is not merely an ethical injunction, but is also critical for staving off further retaliative acts of violence. Said speaks of “word politics”, a term he uses to describe the “close affiliation between language and political reality”, and which highlights the manner in which discourses and narrative frames used to portray the Other in the “back-and-forth between the West and Islam” (lvi) foster the impetus for reactionary and retaliatory action on the one hand, and obstruct the search for alternatives on the other. In addition to suggesting the centrality of discourse in the reproduction of violence, the idea of ‘word politics’ draws attention to the criticality of reconceptualising the frames of perception that underlie these discourses as a first step to intervening in the cyclical reproduction of hostilities between the two sides.

It is at the triangulation between interpretation, representation, and war that *The Wasted Vigil* derives its aesthetic and political drive. In his epigraph, Aslam cites the medieval Persian poet, Daulat Shah of Herat, in gesturing towards the power of art in confronting the rhetoric and discourses that legitimise war:

And the poet in his solitude  
turned towards the warlord a corner of his mind  
and gradually came to look upon him  
and held a converse with him.

Like the poet depicted in the lines above, from his position as a novelist, Aslam employs the techniques and stylistics of literary form to contest the images and discourses that lend the

vener of legitimacy to contemporary military attacks on Afghanistan. In the novel, the aesthetics of literary form is harnessed as a political tool to collapse the affective distance between the Anglophone reader and the Afghan (and Islamic) Other – a distance that otherwise demarcates the gulf between self and other, us and them, and which forges the distinction between grievable and ungrivable lives that underpins the discourse of war.

## II. The Poet and the Warlord

In *The Wasted Vigil*, Aslam interweaves symbols and formal elements derived from Persian art into his narrative, in a bid to invite his readers to dwell in the imaginative landscape of a different horizon – one populated by djinns and demoiselle cranes, coloured by saffron and lapis lazuli, filled with the music of bamboo flutes and lutes. While Aslam’s objectives in writing the novel are unmistakably political, he devotes significant textual space and attention to the rendering of beauty, whether in the form of images or sentiment, in a manner that compels the reader to pause and take in the richness of narrative detail on the page. He discloses in an interview that “with *The Wasted Vigil*, I wanted the novel to breathe, so such things as font size and layout were important” (Chambers and Aslam 145). What Aslam describes as breathing space on the page, one might apprehend as a kind of aesthetic enjoyment, where, in the words of Anne Sheppard, “we want to stop at the viewpoint and look at the scenery, we want to revisit beautiful places ... [that] we have enjoyed” (*Aesthetics* 64).

In the novel, these moments of beauty and the aesthetic pleasure that they afford are not merely stylistic, even as the idea of “pleasing the eye” is “true to the natural bent of Persian art” (Yarshater 68). Noël Carroll has argued that,

[a]rtists who manipulate appearances for the sake of delivering beauty and engendering pleasure are in fact also fundamentally involved in exploring human sensibility. Their works enable us to make discoveries about ourselves – about the kinds of creatures we are at the level of our perceptual sensibilities. (*Philosophy of Art* 132)

Even as beauty appears as a formal property, encountering and appreciating beauty, as Carroll argues elsewhere, can “simultaneously be a process of deepening one’s own moral understanding” (*Beyond Aesthetics* 285), particularly as these moments of beauty “encourag[e] us to apply our moral knowledge and emotions to specific cases” (283). As we will come to see in *The Wasted Vigil*, these images and sentiments of beauty (re)furnish the reader’s imaginary of Islam and the Islamicate world, enabling the reader to formulate alternative perspectives and affective responses to the spectacles of violence and terror that have come to dominate representations of Islam in the media.<sup>72</sup>

These spaces of beauty are nevertheless “perforated” (*Vigil* 430) with the marks of decades-long violence, with “a spike driven through the pages of history, a spike through the pages of love, a spike through the sacred” (5), as the novelist entreats the reader to consider the devastation that is as much an aspect of the Afghan landscape as is beauty. The novelist’s depiction of devastation and destruction as an underside to beauty functions as a means of communicating to the reader the inherent vulnerability of the lives of those whom he represents. In *Frames of War*, Butler asserts that

---

<sup>72</sup> Michael Rothberg posits that “literature and other forms of art are especially important after 9/11 because they allow us to imagine alternative responses to the violence of terrorism and the spectacles of mass-mediated culture. ... Literature and art can become sites for exploring the intersections between the public and the private and for understanding the feelings that terrorism draws on and produces. ... aesthetic acts (in other words, works of art) allow us to see and to feel simultaneously in a way that is different both from terrorism and from the mass media through which we inevitably experience terrorist acts” (131).

certain kinds of bodies will appear more precariously than others, depending on which versions of the body, or of morphology in general, support or underwrite the idea of the human life that is worth protecting, sheltering, living, mourning. These normative frameworks establish in advance what kind of life will be a life worth living, what life will be a life worth preserving, and what life will become worthy of being mourned. (53)

Butler's words above underscore that even as all human life shares a common vulnerability, the idea of whether *these* lives should be protected, and *those* lives sacrificed to protect these depends on a discursive scheme that either exposes or masks the vulnerability that is, in fact, common to all. The arbitrariness that designates *these* lives as inherently worthy of protection, and *those* lives as "ungrievable" (38) and thus unworthy and undeserving of protection – that is, how wars could be "righteously waged on behalf of some lives, while the destruction of other lives can be righteously defended" (53) – is, further, an aspect fundamental to the word 'precarious' itself. While Butler does not explore the implications of the word 'precariousness' in detail, we learn that 'precariousness' connotes the ideas of "chance or caprice" (Ayto 391), and hence that the precariousness of human life also suggests that life is tethered to configurations and relations of geopolitics that, perhaps more often than not, the individual has little say or control over.

Yet, at the same time, 'precarious' carries within it etymological traces of "prayer", of being "obtained by asking" and "held through the favour of another" (391). These etymological traces bring to light the idea that vulnerability itself posits a call for protection, particularly as each life is, inherently and inextricably, bound up with the actions and favour of others. As I shall demonstrate in the pages to follow, the narrative framework through which Aslam portrays

Afghanistan functions as a means for the reader to respond to this entreaty implicit in the notion of precariousness itself – particularly as the reader is compelled to witness the violence that ravages scenes of beauty, acts of oppression that drown out acts of piety, and the blatant disregard for lives that obliterates the possibility of kinship.

### *Simultaneous Worlds*

The main events of *The Wasted Vigil* take place in a house situated near Usha, a town which, as the novel painstakingly reminds us throughout the narrative, derives its appellation from the word “Teardrop”.<sup>73</sup> As its name already suggests, both the landscape and inhabitants of Usha have been left scarred by a succession of violent militant regimes – the Soviet occupation during the Cold War, followed by the Taliban’s extremist rule, and, in the present time during the unravelling of the narrative, the “unholy alliance” (Clements 107) forged between US secret agents and local Afghan warlords. The opening chapter of the novel discloses that

The house stands on the edge of a small lake; and though damaged in the wars, it still conveys the impression of being finely carved, the impression of being weightless. At the back is the half-circle formed by the overgrown garden and orchard. Shifting zones of birdsong, of scent. A path lined with lilac trees curves away out of sight, the branches still hung with last year’s berries, avoided by birds as they are toxic. (10)

In the description of the house, which sets the stage for the revelation of the plot, the omniscient narrator interweaves a series of contrasts between the elements of beauty and destruction – the seeming “weightless” (10) magnificence of the architecture in juxtaposition with the bullet

---

<sup>73</sup> The reference to the word, “Teardrop”, is first made on page 10, and reiterated on pages 116, 158, and 174 of the novel.

markings that tether it to a tumultuous and violent history; the lushness of the lilac trees in contrast to the surprising toxicity of their fruit. Similarly, the brilliant hues of Afghanistan's lapis lazuli, treasured not only by Cleopatra as a powder to be "brushed ... onto her eyelids" but also "employed by Michelangelo to paint the blues of the Sistine Chapel", is the colour of the sky the day "someone came in and said Zameen had been apprehended" (18-19). The stunning splashes of colour that mark Usha's landscape, canvassed in the making of beauty in ages past, now bear witness to the painful separation in Marcus's family. Marcus and his wife Qatrina would never see their daughter again.

Throughout the novel, the narrator takes pain to illuminate the various embodiments of such contrasts and paradoxes, drawn from both the natural landscape and human craft, in a manner that primes readers to the notion of simultaneity that lies at the heart of the novel's aesthetics. In his study of Persian art forms, Ernst Diez highlights that simultaneity is an integral aspect of Islamic art, whether in architecture or miniature painting. Where, in architecture, one sees "[e]ach structure which combines two elementary forms, such as a quadrangle with rounded corners, or which overemphasizes a form by stretching or other deformation", in painting one encounters the "juxtaposition, intersection, and interpenetration of perfect work with ruin, of geometric forms with naturalistic ones, of life and decay, [which] provide both subjects and formulas of simultaneity" (188).

In *The Wasted Vigil*, simultaneity functions as a crucial structural element in Aslam's attempt to represent Islam. Casa recalls that "cyanide can be extracted from apricots" (*Vigil* 121), and that "gelignite smelled like the sweetmeats made with almond pulp beaten in cream" (222). Marcus reveals that "[t]he wood of a living sandalwood tree has no fragrance ... the perfume materialising only after the cutting down" (7); one of the ingredients that he had used to blend a

perfume for his daughter included “[t]he wood of the Indian oudh tree that has been eaten by fungus” (232), and whose fragrance emerges only at the onset of decay. When apprehended and held in custody after being falsely accused of stealing from an Afghan man the paintings that actually belonged to his wife, Marcus was thrown into “a small chamber at the back of the mosque” where he reflects that “[j]ars of the best rose essence had been given by him to be added to the mortar when this extension of the building was under way years earlier, still fragrant” (242). Near the end of the novel, when Lara witnesses a band of jihadis performing their attack on Usha, she “becomes aware of an intense fragrance ... Their clothing has drenched the air with perfume here. Jihad handbooks warn terrorists not to wear fragrances in airports, as it gives them away as devout Muslims” (421). The examples cited above compel the reader to keep a vigil, as the title of the novel implicitly exhorts the reader to do, for the various ways in which events, people, and objects may reveal or embody opposing qualities at the same time – that what nourishes can also maim; things that have decayed can yet bring pleasure; an occurrence that hints of delight can also bring devastation.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the narrator chooses to use scent as a motif in drawing the idea of simultaneity to the reader’s attention. In the scene recounted above, when Marcus perceives the fragrance of rose in the mosque where he was detained, he is brought to an earlier time in memory when he gifted rose essence to the mosque’s builders. He similarly recalls that “containers discovered in Egyptian tombs were still fragrant after three thousand years” (23). The fragrance released by these containers comes to the present as the trace of an earlier age, and also serves as a trail that enlivens the imagination to the vibrancy and splendour of that age. In that instance where Marcus tells Lara that the sandalwood tree releases its fragrance only when it has been cut down, Lara muses that it is “[l]ike the soul vacating the body after death” (7). Like



the soul, which is both a part of and yet apart from the body, occupying the materiality of the body in life and yet inexorably harkening to another dimension beyond, the motif of scent brings the suggestion of another spatial and temporal dimension to bear upon the narrative, layering over the present just the *hint* of another time or age that has passed, but is nevertheless retrievable in traces from relics in the present.

This notion of simultaneous worlds, embodied in the form and written into the textual space of the novel, is central to the novelist's attempt to reconceptualise Islam and the Islamicate landscape. For example, in the description of the house in the opening pages of the novel, the narrator impresses upon the reader two opposing faces of Islam created by differing interpretations of Islamic tenets. The narrator begins by telling us that

The house was built by an old master calligrapher and painter in the last years of the nineteenth century. He belonged to what was almost the final generation of Muslim artists to be trained in the style of the incomparable Bihzad. When the six-roomed building was complete, the master – who had painted images on the walls of each room – brought to it the woman he wished to make his companion for life. (*Vigil* 12)

Inside the six-roomed house is a collection of Bihzadian wall paintings with images, “each dedicated to one of the five senses” painted in every room, with the final sixth “dedicated to love, the ultimate human wonder” (14). These frescoes are rendered in distinctly Sufi overtones – a matter that the narrator does not explicitly outline, but leaves the reader to discern.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Suhaan Mehta posits that the (Wahabi) resistance towards the use of visual images in representing Islam “raises questions about how Bihzad was able to use figural representation in his paintings” (339). She goes on to elucidate that “Bihzad’s art was legitimized by the poet Jami’s (1414–1492) versification of the ideas of the Sufi philosopher Ibn al-Arabi (1165–1240) ... These Sufis are not distracted by the visible image as an idolatrous object but instead recognize it as a manifestation of God” (339). On another note, in interweaving Sufi poetics into his novel, Aslam reclaims an aspect of the Islamic cultural experience that is both denied by Islamists, and is obscured by the scenes of terror that

Sufism, as I have mentioned earlier, privileges the inner spiritual reality of the adherent over outward demonstrations of faith, and embraces inward spiritual transformation as a means to seek union with God. Significantly, in his rendering of the images on the walls, the Bihzadian calligrapher has sought to dramatise the particular moments at which Sufi principles become manifest in physical action. One such moment rendered in painting is that of how “Subha [a Buddhist nun] in a dancerly gesture presented her eye to a rogue in the forest” (*Vigil* 13), and, in doing so, demonstrates that her spiritual commitment to the strictures of monastic life triumphs over her regard for the physical world. The calligrapher has also painted scenes depicting aesthetic pleasure, with “singers and musical gatherings, a lute with a songbird sitting on its neck” (13), that are integral aspects of Islam as well.<sup>75</sup> These “lovely fiction[s]” (15) of Bihzadian art, rendered in the novel in imagery such as “a beauty mark on one cyclamen cheek”, a “whole moth in flight, wings patterned like a backgammon board” (29), as well as “scenes of lovers either in an embrace or travelling towards each other through forest and meadow”, painted in “a delicate faded gold” (15), furnish the reader’s imagination with a visual reference to the opulence and beauty that Islamic principles bring to art. In this way, through the sensory perception that the imagery enhances, the narrator enlivens the reader’s appreciation of Islam itself.<sup>76</sup>

---

dominate the image of Islam in the Western media. As he informs Chambers in an interview, his work “links with Islamic mysticism, the quest for the beloved, the search for the soul, the need for the soul to connect with something other than what is tangible. Hence the idea of the flame and the moth, *shama* and the *parwana*, the Cypress tree and the dove. On this side of the border, the lotus and the bee, and what have you. These things are linked with the spiritual life of the culture that I come from” (Chambers and Aslam 357).

<sup>75</sup> In “Tradition and Tolerance: Reconfiguring Bihzad in Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil*”, Mehta elaborates on the Bihzadian images in greater detail.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, the *Mantiq al-tair* (Language of the Birds), a fifteenth-century illustrated manuscript that contains several miniatures painted in the style of Bihzad set to the narrative poetry of the celebrated Sufi writer Farid al-Din ‘Attar. The *Mantiq al-tair* is itself a work of allegory that depicts the central tenet of Sufism, the pursuit of the divine. Painted in bright and vibrant colours and with an intricate rendering of detail, the accompanying miniatures

However – and here the reader is presented with an opposing view of how Islam has been put to use – these frescoes are, at present, “made to disappear behind a veil of earth by Marcus”, for “[w]hen the Taliban came to the house they had proceeded to annihilate anything they considered unIslamic within it” (15). The Taliban left “[s]everal of the lovers on the wall ... on their own because of the obliterating impact of the bullets – nothing but a gash or a terrible ripping away where the corresponding man or woman used to be. A shredded limb, a lost eye” (15). The violence visited upon these Bihzadian frescoes finds a counterpart in the physical violence that the Taliban inflicts upon the local populace under the guise of Islamic law. In the scene of Marcus’s forced amputation – a punishment instigated by the Taliban as a response to the (false) accusation of Marcus’s theft of paintings – the narrator focalises on how

A man came and retrieved the amputated hand of the earlier thief from the ground. He held it above the heads of a cluster of children who laughed and tried to grab it as he encouraged them to leap up higher and higher. He went away with it: according to Muhammad’s instructions the thief was to wear it around his neck for the next few days. (243)

Similarly, when Qatrina is stoned for the boldness of having had a female imam solemnise her marriage with Marcus,

She had to wear the burka while they were killing her. Afterwards, as she lay on the ground, a man had gathered the hem of the burka and tied it into a knot and dragged her away as he would a bundle, and he grinned at his own ingenuity the

---

evoke a beauty that has been described as “the spell of the poetic ideal”, which emerges in contrast to “the reality of a harsh, arid land” (Lukens 321). The beauty in these paintings is thus not merely an aesthetic quality; as it stimulates perception of the splendour of a commune with the divine, in juxtaposition to the dreariness of reality, this beauty enlivens the perceiver to the spiritual pleasures afforded by Islam.

while, as did the spectators. Blood was draining steadily through the holes of the embroidered eye-grille. (135)

The sheer horror implicit in the images of children excitedly grabbing at an amputated hand and a man sneeringly dragging off a dying woman in a bundle, as if a sack of potatoes, is further met by the description of how, in the days after the stoning, Qatrina “sat there [and] sometimes raised her burka and pursed her swollen lips and spat out something white into a corner. Maggots had developed in her nasal cavity and were dropping into her mouth” (267).

These spectacles of deprivation and brutality, whether inflicted upon people or plaster, are juxtaposed with the stirring image that Lara evokes when she muses about the djinn that is rumoured to haunt the land around Marcus’s house:

Here could be another explanation for the painted rooms of Marcus’s house: it could have been built to provide an education to the djinn about what it means to be human. Each interior a classroom, the djinn moving upwards within the building as their knowledge increased sense by sense, arriving finally at the topmost golden space. (419)

Immediately, the stunning visual imagery of the djinn’s aesthetic education – itself a scene of beauty – enacts a rebuke against the Taliban’s denial of such art; for, if even a fearsome djinn can be moved by these aesthetic images to an appreciation of life and the Islamic principles that they embody, what could be said about the Taliban’s destruction of such art in Islam’s name? Furthermore, if the non-human djinn can be humanised “as their knowledge increased sense by sense” through a contemplation of Islamic art, and finally arrive at an apprehension of the “topmost golden space” of love (419), what, then, about the Taliban’s denial of love and compassion under a purported vision of Islam? This way, in addition to registering the novelist’s

critique of Islamist principles, the series of contrasts through which the novel portrays Islam widens the reader's awareness of the nuances within Islam that resist simple classification. After all, as the narrative shows, Islam sensitises its adherents to love and life, even as it is used by Islamists to justify terror and brutality.

In a symbolic move that hints of the novelist's attempt at "re-culturing Islam" (Clements 90), the narrator has Lara, incidentally an art historian, re-composing pieces of the Bihzadian frescoes reduced to rubble by the Taliban's "strafing of guns":

Beside her is a cardboard box and she dips her hand into it without looking. She brings out a piece of plaster on which a set of lips is painted. Taking five steps, she lowers herself into a crouching position and places the smile on the floor.

The hand entering the box again, she brings out this time a painted sprig of foliage. She looks around and decides where this fragment should be. A distance of two feet from the dark red mouth.

There is coloured dust on her fingers as though pollen.

Next comes a section from a woman's ribboned hair. She consults her imagination – the outline of the picture she is trying to construct – and then positions the piece on the floor accordingly. ... The image on the floor develops section by section. It is a kind of afterlife she is constructing for all those who have been obliterated from the walls. A young man and a woman made out of the ruins of the dozens in this interior. (29-30)

As she re-assembles the pieces before her, Lara is transported – as are we, reading her movements – from the *site* of the house's spatio-temporal location in contemporary war-torn

Afghanistan, to the *sight* of the artistic splendour extolled within the very same confines in a past century. The divergence between site and sight enacts an uncanny contrast between the austere, derelict space of the present house, and the suggestiveness of the “dark red mouth” amidst the “sprig of foliage” (29) that suddenly appears, as though out of the dereliction of the room. This historical and temporal disjuncture produces a rupture wherein the celebration of beauty and life from a past era enters the “expanse of empty floor” (29) that marks Marcus’s house in the present. Dust from rubble, too, takes on the form of “pollen” (30), as even, it is suggested, destruction’s traces are given to hold promise of life. As Lara draws herself further into the re-making of the painting – “He should have brown eyes, she tells herself, and she exchanges them, moving the green irises to the girl’s face. Now suddenly he seems disbelieving. A lover is always amazed” (30) – so our eyes, following Lara’s gaze, shift from the “smile on the floor” to “half a face”, and then on to the man’s “disbelieving” eyes and “amaze[ment]” (29-30) at beholding his lover. This moment, resonant with Walcott’s idea of the hand that lovingly pieces together the shattered heirlooms, gives us a glimpse into the resurrection of the couple’s love as they are transformed from brokenness to an animated “afterlife” (30).<sup>77</sup>

The (re)animation of these Islamicate artistic emblems constitute an integral aspect of Aslam’s postcolonial aesthetic vision. It can be argued that Aslam, similarly invested in the history and historicity of art as is Lara, is seeking to enact an “afterlife” (30) for the aesthetic tradition(s) of the Islamicate world as a means to seek resources within Islam itself for the re-presentation of the faith. In *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective*, Madeline Clements speaks of Aslam’s interest in furnishing “contemporary imaginations with unorthodox stories of Islam for the sake of rehabilitating and restoring its ordinary ... Muslim adherents’

---

<sup>77</sup> This scene similarly echoes Scarry’s postulation that “[b]eauty brings copies of itself into being” (3), as a beautiful object compels the perceiver to recreate and replicate it in various ways.

own (self-)image” – an endeavour that “seems particularly important at a time when that faith has been steadily ‘un-cultured’ both by the barbarising discourses of the West ... and by the brutal actions of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban” (90). However, Clements goes on to remark that the novelist’s works “preserve and conserve within their pages both ‘muse’-inspired and secular arts”, yet fall short of postulating avenues for the distribution of this “cultural knowledge more widely among the [Muslim] communities which Aslam depicts” (91). As a result, the aesthetic traditions that he depicts become “moribund symbols of an earlier time of tolerance for whose resurrection Aslam keeps ‘vigil’, yet retains little hope” (91).<sup>78</sup> While I agree with Clements’ observation of Aslam’s intent to ‘re-culture’ Islam, I depart from her view that the elements of Islam that he invokes in this endeavour are rendered “moribund symbols” with “little hope of resurrection” (91). Rather, I suggest that the novel’s claims upon the reader’s imagination enact a moment where art extracts from history: through the effect of form on the reader’s perception, these “moribund symbols” (91) are transformed into an interstitial space where the past is made to actively reveal itself in, and renew, the present.

In *From the Ruins of Colonialism*, inquiring into how relics of the past – whether in the form of archaeological artefacts, photographs, or even written accounts of history – shape social memory, Chris Healy posits that the presence of ruins create “in-between moments when we cease to live in time and space in order to reflect on, or be trained in, or entertained by something of our historicity, our being-in-history” (5). Importantly, Healy speaks of how ruins allow viewers to “inhabit landscapes of memory ... not as homeless place for lost souls but a ground

---

<sup>78</sup> Clements posits that Aslam’s novels “seem to aspire to museum status” in the way that they “preserve and conserve within their pages both ‘muse’-inspired and secular arts, and also present spaces of scientific, historic, and cultural interest” (90). However, she argues that “they may better be characterised as ‘mausoleum’ fictions: stately literary edifices in which the artefacts treasured by (largely European or Western-educated) curators of heterodox Islamic tradition are carefully interred” (91). In her view, the cultural and aesthetic traditions excavated in the novel appeal to a European sensibility and appreciation for ‘exotic’ cultures, but fall short of enlivening the lived experiences of Muslims such as Casa.

from which new flights of historical imagination might depart and to which they might return, differently” (2). Ruins, in his view, are therefore “never simply gone or in the past”, but function instead as an “enduring space ... where social memory imagines the persistence of time in records of destruction” (1). Healy’s use of the term ‘imagine’ in describing the social function of ruins is particularly insightful as it draws attention to the sentiment that ruins communicate their relevance in the present, *particularly* as they engage with the viewer’s imagination, in a manner that disallows the conceptualisation of the past to return to a status quo. History, in turn, becomes an “in-between” (5) space that ceases to be inaccessible or cut off from the present; it becomes, indeed, written into the modes of perception through which the present is experienced.

This sense of the in-betweenness of history shows itself as an integral aspect of the novel’s re-presentation of the Islamicate world. To begin with, in alignment with the trope of simultaneity that shapes its narrative form, *The Wasted Vigil* demonstrates an interest in excavating, showcasing, and preserving the various strata of historical and cultural crossings that have occurred on what we come to see as present-day Afghanistan – crossings and exchanges of the past that reveal themselves in the present in the form of relics and ruins.<sup>79</sup> Significantly, Lara describes the house as “the ruin of golden Islam, a destroyed *markaz* perhaps and a ‘Zone of Peace’ with [Marcus] as the Sufi” (*Vigil* 415). In this line, the omniscient narrator communicates that the house, in Lara’s art historian’s eye, acts as a repository of the cultural and spiritual legacies that have left traces upon the Afghan present. In the basement, site of the perfume factory that Marcus had previously run, lies a partially unearthed Gandhara Buddha head, a

---

<sup>79</sup> In using the word ‘showcase’, I draw from Clements’s description of Aslam’s art as ‘museum’-inspired. Even as he imbues the cultural and aesthetic traditions and artefacts that he depicts with significance beyond mere decoration, the textual space that they occupy enables the novelist to put them on display, as it were, in a manner that compels its own attention.



remnant of Afghanistan's Buddhist past that had flourished before the rise of Islam. The narrator makes it a point to tell us that

It was here in Afghanistan that the Buddha had received a human face, the earlier representations of him having been symbols – a parasol, a throne, a footprint. A begging bowl. The Greeks in Afghanistan gave him the features of Apollo, the god of knowledge, the god who repented. The only Asian addition to Apollo was a dot on the forehead and the topknotted locks. (226)

The form of the sculpture, as the narrator describes it, posits a record of the “meeting of continents” (226) that took place in historical time. Yet, it is also crucial to note that some editions of *The Wasted Vigil* feature a photographic image of the Gandhara Buddha on the book jacket, in a move that positions the Buddha, as well as the historical traces that it embodies, as one of the lenses through which the reader is encouraged to interpret the narrative. Other editions of the novel position this photograph within the novel, focusing the reader's eye upon the Buddha right before the narrative begins. The prominence that Aslam ascribes to this sculpture is heightened only by the narrator's revelation that the sculpture bled gold at the Taliban's assault, where “each of these [bullet] spots grew in brilliance”, such that the Buddha “now seemed to be opening fully his almost shut eyes, the lids chiselled in the stone beginning to rise without sound in what felt like an endless moment” (43). Through this intellectual and visual engagement with the reader's consciousness, then, the novel brings the Hellenic and Buddhist past to confront the Taliban's violent suppression of this history.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> In an interview with Claire Chambers, Aslam addresses the Taliban, asserting that “although I may not have been able to stop you in real life, in my mind and my book you won't succeed in destroying this Buddha” (Chambers and Aslam 139).

Just as Aslam preserves the images and sculptures that the Taliban seeks to destroy, he reserves similar treatment for the books in Marcus's house threatened by the Taliban's regime.<sup>81</sup> The narrator reveals that "[s]ome years ago, at a point when the Taliban could have raided the house any day, Marcus's wife had nailed the books overhead in these rooms and corridors ... to save them, to put them out of harm's reach" (11). The books, "each held in place by an iron nail hammered through it", are preserved, but with "a spike driven through the pages of history, a spike through the pages of love, a spike through the sacred" (5). Later in the narrative, Lara leafs through a volume of poetry, and chances upon these lines:

I think that all people – those living,  
those who have lived  
And those who are still to live – are alive now.  
I should like to take that subject to pieces,  
Like a soldier dismantling his rifle. (304)

The omniscient narrator quips that "[i]t is the translation of a Russian poem she knows. The letter "a" in the word 'alive' is missing – taken away by the iron nail – but the eye supplies it from memory" (304). The novelist gestures towards the way Lara intuitively supplies the "a" in "alive" to underscore that individuals themselves constitute a part of the repository of historical and cultural legacies that defies the suppressive acts of the Taliban. Memory, in registering the affective impact of beauty, smoothes over the gaping holes created by the "iron nail" and "spikes" (5). Like Lara, then, the reader of the novel is called upon to partake in this collective act of guarding and preserving the artefacts and legacies that *The Wasted Vigil* excavates. In this

---

<sup>81</sup> In an interview with Sunil Sethi, Aslam relates the following: "[i]t is Afghanistan's past, yet the Taliban said only one book was allowed to exist: the Quran. So the *Ramayana* was not allowed, the *Nizami Shahnama* was not allowed, Homer's *Odyssey* was not allowed. I don't want to live in a world where there is only one book" (351-352). Aslam's depiction of Qatrina's desperate preservation of the books is a symbolic act of refuting the Taliban's dictates.

instance, Lara's memory becomes one with the punctured books, redeeming the subjects of "history" and "love" and the "sacred" (5) from the wounds that mar the pages. This is not only an act that preserves the beauty of these works, but also a matter that creates a moment of narrative delight as the reader grasps the way that Lara, however fleetingly, lends a sense of wholeness to the impaled books.

The significance of Lara's act of memory gains deeper meaning from the lines of poetry that occur before the segment cited in the novel, which, as the narrator leaves the reader to discover, come from the work of the Russian post-war poet, Evgeny Vinokurov:

Sometimes, I'd like to write a book  
A book all about time  
About how it doesn't exist,  
How the past and the future  
Are one continuous present. (*The War is Over* 38)

Where time exists in a "continuous present" (38), without the depth or layers of linearity, past and future cease to be out of reach or even out of touch, and instead reveal themselves as the very essence of the present. As the Russian poet muses about the continuity of time, Aslam brings the poet's words to bear upon his suggestion that memory, accompanied by the imaginative faculty that enables the beholder to furnish the material with the immaterial, reinstates aspects of the past even within the present, even as the past lays in states of ruins and ruination.

As a way of framing the act of excavation and preservation that the novel performs, Aslam, near the start of the narrative, has Marcus "digging in the garden one afternoon" (*Vigil* 22). As "his implement struck something hard",

He pulled out the cassette player wrapped in canvas, interred there during the time of the Taliban. He tried to remember where he had buried the cassettes. Sound fossils! There is hunger that declares itself only while it is being satisfied, and so for the next dozen hours he listened to music without pause, cassettes on every surface around him. (22)

In this scene, where the reader is drawn, through language, into a shared experience of Marcus's delight – "Sound fossils!" (22) – the novelist underscores the notion that an object that brings pleasure commands its own compelling power, drawing people to itself as moths to a flame. The aesthetic pleasure that Marcus experiences while listening to the cassettes registers itself in the paradox of a "hunger that declares itself only while it is being satisfied" (22), suggesting that pleasure itself articulates its own resistance against attempts at its suppression.

Casa, too, experiences something of this pleasure. Elsewhere in the novel, the narrator draws attention to the scene where Casa

had opened the book entitled *Bihzad*, he had found it to be full of coloured pictures. It was like Marcus's house. He had spent almost two hours looking at them and reading the accompanying texts until the battery in the flashlight had gone out like someone blinded. They seemed to be some of the most beautiful things he had ever seen, despite the fact that, against Allah's wishes, they depicted animals and humans. (341)

Here, the tension that Casa grapples with, between his neo-fundamentalist interpretation of "Allah's wishes" (341) and the allure of the *Bihzadian* volume of pictures, is only met by his discovery of their beauty. The reader is made aware that the beauty of these images registers itself in Casa as a (renewed) form of sight, for when the flashlight wears out, the young man

feels “like someone blinded” (341). Casa’s transformed sight at his encounter with Bihzadian beauty resonates with Gilson's pronouncement that beauty registers a “power to attract and hold our attention, as under a spell” (*The Arts of the Beautiful* 31). The French philosopher Simone Weil similarly speaks of a “transformation [that] takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions” (*Waiting for God* 100) when we encounter the beautiful. Even as the narrator shies away from spelling it out in explicit terms, the reader is led to apprehend the shift – the re-visioning of the world – that takes place within Casa as he immerses himself in the beautiful images in the book.

The omniscient narrator relates that Casa goes on to recount how “Rustam, the grandson of the king of Kabul, avenged his own impending death in one picture: dressed in his tiger skin, and gored by the lances that had been planted upright at the bottom of a deep pit, he called out to his brother who had set this trap for him” (*Vigil* 341). These lines, while supplied by the narrator, are not simply the narrator’s translation of Rustam’s story from picture to words. More significantly, they come across as Casa’s retelling of the story that he perceives as he contemplates the pictures. The narrator’s depiction of Casa’s aesthetic perception draws attention to the young man’s pleasure as he dwells upon the Bihzadian images. This is an occurrence that reveals Casa’s quiet shift away from the strict Islamist dictates calling for a rejection of pictorial representations, and towards the sensitising effect of beauty that both arises from, and facilitates, its appreciation.

The narrator’s disclosure of the aesthetic pleasure that Casa experiences is a crucial element in both the affective scheme and politics of the novel. In illuminating Casa’s enjoyment of Bihzad’s art in spite of his Islamist convictions, the narrator gives the reader a glimpse into Casa’s awakening affective response towards art and life – an incident that later finds an echo

when Casa anxiously searches for Dunia after her disappearance. Crucially, in that later episode, Casa's anxiety for Dunia's safety is, in his view, a "distract[ion] by earthly principles" (404), and is a response that is antithetical to what he understands as Islam. Nevertheless, he makes the decision to venture out in search for her, even while repeating to himself:

He shouldn't have come here.

He is not a good Muslim.

He is not a good Muslim. (404)

Before he is set upon by the CIA agents operating in that area, he even wonders,

Have they infected him permanently? When yesterday he said he didn't know what to do with the sounds issuing from the radio, Marcus had told him, 'You listen to music with your memories, Casa, not your ears.' Perhaps it is the same with other senses also. You smell, see, touch, and taste with your memory. ... Now he wonders if the girl's voice will be a component he'll look for in any piece of music in the future. Many years from now will he be reminded of his experiences in the Englishman's house – the six rooms, the perfume factory? (404)

Even while the narrator doesn't delineate the changes within Casa in explicit terms, the reader is made to apprehend the unspoken, but significant, changes in Casa. Just as Healy speaks of the ability of ruins to inspire "flights of ... imagination" which "might depart and ... return, differently" (2), the Bihzadian house and its collection of ruins, with Marcus "as the Sufi" (415), leads the young Islamist to the apprehension of a different form of Islam, even as this realisation eludes Casa himself. The house, as the narrator has already impressed upon us, offers an aesthetic education in the principles of Islam, "each interior a classroom" (419) that is "dedicated to one of the five senses" (14). The reader is given to see that the aesthetic education which the

house provides is not *simply* an education in the history of Islamic or Persian art. More crucially, the house offers an education in sensory perception informed by the principles of Islam. The beholder learns “*sense by sense*” (14, emphasis mine) – indeed, as Casa muses, “[y]ou *smell, see, touch, and taste* with your memory” (404, emphasis mine) – what “love, the ultimate human wonder” (14) is, and, essentially, how to love. In *Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide*, William Chittick writes that “few themes play as important a role in Sufi teachings as love” (74). Love, “so often the central concern of [Sufi] texts” (75), is posited as a way through which adherents approach an understanding of God. Chittick reminds us that two of the most prominent Sufi poets, Ibn Arabi and Rumi, “constantly remind their readers that love for any creature can only be love for God. Only ignorance veils people from perceiving what they love” (81). In this way, as he discovers his unspoken love for Dunia – the impetus for his search for her – Casa uncovers what this “central concern” (75) of Islam entails. In doing so, Casa demonstrates a movement away from the doctrines of Islamism, and reclaims for himself an aspect of Islam that had been previously veiled to him.

The reader is made to see that even as Casa perishes at the end of the novel in the *jihad* mission where, disheartened by Dunia’s disappearance and thus led to the conviction that God didn’t mean for him to pursue an “earthly” (*Vigil* 404) life after all, his death occurs at the cusp of his awakening to love and life. Here, the poignancy of Casa’s untimely demise in the name of Islam is held in tension with the beauty conveyed by his enlivened sensibility towards life, as well as his eventual apprehension of the love that Islam embraces. This tension enacts, for the reader, a profound moment of catharsis. This cathartic response is not only integral in the reader’s dawning realisation that men like Casa are not irremediably and irrevocably steeped in

“fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred” (McEwan), but is also crucial in calling for the reader’s extension of empathy towards them.

In her reading of *The Wasted Vigil*, Clements posits that since Aslam

stresses in framing interviews and epigraphs the importance of turning imaginatively and discursively towards Taliban and warlord ... one might have expected him to have afforded militant Islamists greater scope for development as *humans* in the sensitive, perceptive *Vigil*. (119, emphasis in original)

Contrary to Clements’s view, I argue that Aslam *does* actually illuminate possibilities for Islamists like Casa to not only be sensitised towards life, and also towards a non-militant, non-violent form of Islam that encourages love for other fellow humans. Just as Casa finally grasps the two opposing facets of Islam at the end of the novel, the reader is persuaded to hold a more nuanced view of what Islamists like Casa might be, and more importantly, of what they might *become*.

### *Miniature Worlds*

For a literary text, *The Wasted Vigil* displays a marked interest in the visual rendering of images. Besides the photographic image of the Buddha reprinted at the front of the novel, the narrator traces the Bihzadian frescoes in Marcus’s house in rich and intricate detail, taking pains to emphasise even an “ant on a pebble” (*Vigil* 14) and a “chameleon ... sitting perfectly camouflaged on a leaf” (15). The narrator additionally grants textual space to the ninety-nine calligraphic paintings that Qatrina creates, taking care to convey the way that these paintings, celebrating the names of Allah, are inspired by the colours and imagery that she sees in the



Afghan countryside – colours that, in turn, add to the richness of the novel's imaginative landscape:

They move towards the tree through the sunlight. Easy to imagine, at such an hour, how Qatrina could have filled notebooks with the colours she found in a square foot of nature. An olive grove outside Jalalabad – grey, white, green. A mallow blossom – red orange, sulphur, yellow bone, red-wine shadow. The mountains above the house – silver, evasive grey, blue, sapphire water. She'd use these notes as reference when painting. (96)

Indeed, the title of the novel, too, is drawn from a similarly-titled painting by the twentieth-century Pakistani miniature artist, Abdur Rahman Chughtai, which depicts a seated woman longing for her lover's return. These various images furnish both textual and intertextual visual references to the narrative, reflecting the novel's attempt to preserve the trails and traces of these cultural and historical works, while at the same time orientating the reader's gaze to the beauty in Islamicate art. Yet, more importantly, these images constitute an integral part of the novel's form.

With his transposition of Bihzadian art from image to words, as well as his extrapolation of the novel's title from Chughtai's *Muraqqa-i-Chughtai*, a collection of miniature paintings in which Chughtai himself traces "the path of imaginative depiction that he ascribed to the legendary Bihzad" (Dadi 76), Aslam situates *The Wasted Vigil* in the Islamic aesthetic tradition of miniature painting, drawing elements from this visual art form to shape the novel's literary structure. In a discussion of Chughtai's art, Iftikhar Dadi writes that the painter was concerned with "connecting tradition with the present" (82), and that his art was "predicated upon the exploration and renewal of his own heritage, rather than any borrowing from Western

modernism” (89). More crucially, Chughtai’s renewal of tradition is realised “in a fashion that recalls pre-modern Muslim intellectual history and strives to participate as an equal in the globalised world of contemporary art” (89). Indeed, elsewhere, Aslam has intimated that Chughtai is an important influence in his writing, for the painter “showed me that art can be composed by people like me” (Chambers and Aslam 146). In situating *The Wasted Vigil* in Chughtai’s lineage, Aslam does not only retrieve the stylistics and symbols from an earlier time, but also renews the idea of what postcolonial Anglophone literary form might entail by presenting the images, motifs, moods, and philosophies from the Islamic tradition within the literary form of the Anglophone novel. This act of renewal is not merely stylistic; it also demands a renewed perception of – that is, a fresh way of thinking about – how the novel itself works.

Speaking of his 2004 novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Aslam describes his intention to “create the literary equivalent of a Persian miniature, in which there is a remarkable density of detail” (Chambers and Aslam 147). This inclination towards the rendition of miniature painting in literary form can also be perceived in *The Wasted Vigil*, particularly in the way that Aslam devotes attention to carving out intricate details in architecture and landscape, as well as populating the world of the narrative with rich imagery of nature, trees, flowers, and animals – structural motifs integral to the formal stylistics of Persian miniature painting.<sup>82</sup>

The Persian miniature art of focusing on the presentation of detail gains an added dimension in the way Aslam tethers these motifs and images to various strands of history that contribute to the present socio-political landscape in Afghanistan – the oak leaf that Lara and her brother carry, which foregrounds the lingering impact of the Soviet occupation on present-day

---

<sup>82</sup> Richard Ettinghausen discusses these aspects of miniature painting in greater detail in his article “Islamic Art”.

Afghanistan; the Afghan spinel in the watch that belonged to David's deceased brother, which traces the routes of US military campaigns, from the Vietnam War where David's brother died, to the proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan where David met Zameen, and finally to the CIA's covert operations in the present day that inadvertently lead David to his death; the peacocks with "eyes like pearls", which testify to the cruelty of the Afghan warlord(s) who would pay "a high price to the owner if a bird is particularly beautiful", so as to watch his falcons "tear into and scatter the brilliant feathers" (*Vigil* 405).

In fact, approximating the visual axonometry characteristic of Persian miniatures, Aslam devotes textual space to various other *seemingly* tangential strands of history as a means to provide a wider perspective on the contemporary conflict in Afghanistan. His manipulation of narrative viewpoint recalls the way miniature painting reshapes perspective by having "the picture plane ... tilted up so that *all elements can be viewed with equal clarity*, and each object is shown from whatever viewpoint makes its essential characteristics most easily perceived" (Ettinghausen 25, emphasis mine). Casa recalls that "the missiles that landed in [his] jihad training camp were named after an American Indian weapon – Tomahawk. [He] knows other words too like Comanche and Apache and Chinook", leaving him to muse that "first the Americans exterminate the Indians, then name their weapons and warplanes after them. What did those Indians do to make the white Americans respect them?" (*Vigil* 215). Elsewhere, the narrator recounts that "one of Marcus' uncles [who served] ... in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry" during the American War of Independence "had taken part in the successful night attack on the Americans at Paoli in September 1777, the sleeping Americans massacred with swords and bayonets, the place set alight around the screaming wounded" (399).

Additionally, through David, the narrator delves into the vigilante murders in Montana, recollecting that

In 1917, one of David's great-uncles, a copper miner sympathetic to the far-left Industrial Workers of the World, had made known to everyone his opinions about America's recent entry into the war. He'd call President Woodrow Wilson 'a lying tyrant' and denounce US soldiers as 'scabs in uniform', unmindful of the fact that the state of Montana, in the grip of patriotic fever, was increasingly intolerant of dissent. During the course of one September night, a small group of masked men grabbed him from his house and left him hanging for all to see at daybreak. A piece of paper with the number of the Montana Vigilantes of the nineteenth century, 3-7-77, was pinned to his body, with the initials of four other men threatened with the same fate. (170)

Later, in a meeting with the CIA agent, James Palantine, when the latter was a child,

David gave him the shoulder patch from the uniform of a Montana Highway Patrol officer, the embroidery including the number 3-7-77, the digits that were once a Vigilante ultimatum for the banishing of malefactors, but are now used as an emblem of state-sanctioned law and order in Montana, appearing on the uniforms and car-door insignia of the officers. (326)

Here, Casa's reflections on the way that the names of US weaponry memorialise the massacres of the Native American peoples through the *perpetrator's* point of view find an echo with how the number 3-7-77, once used as a codeword for the unlawful vigilante murders in early twentieth-century Montana, is now used as an emblem of law enforcement in that state. In exposing the arbitrariness and irony implicit in discourses surrounding the legitimacy of

violence, Aslam enacts a critique of violence itself, alerting the reader to the cruciality of *framing* that underlies discourses about violence, and which accordingly determines whether such violence is to be seen as morally legitimate or sinister.

I argue that what Margaret Scanlan sees as the novel's lack of "discernible chronology or narrative logic", brought about by Aslam's rendering of "historical insight [through] a *fait divers*, introduced without transition and bearing at most an ironic relation to the immediate context" (106), is in fact Aslam's manipulation of perspective in alignment with the axonometric tendencies of the Persian miniature form. As opposed to leaving the reader "lost in a maze of history and folklore, confusing one love story, one atrocity or one desert journey with another" (113), the rendering of an axonometric perspective enables the violent attacks of 9/11 to be (re)focalised through other events in history. Indeed, as he further expounds on the arbitrariness through which violence is legitimised and sanctioned, the narrator draws attention to the US's covert involvement with Afghan warlords over the past decades, highlighting that "as in Vietnam, as in the Afghanistan of the 1980s, where the CIA ignored the drug trafficking of the anti-Communist guerrillas it was financing, the activities of Gul Rasool have to be tolerated because he is needed" (*Vigil* 166). Gul Rasool, the US-backed Afghan warlord, in fact played a significant role in the proliferation of violence in Afghanistan, "reducing two-thirds of Usha to rubble in the early 1990s, killing a third of its population as they fought for supremacy, five hundred rockets fired into various parts of Usha in a single day" (225). In rendering these various historical trails "with equal clarity" (Ettinghausen 25) – whether it might be the massacres of Native Americans from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, the armed rebellion during the American revolution in the eighteenth century, the Montana vigilante murders in the nineteenth century, or even the American strategic operations within Afghanistan that finance and facilitate

acts of civil warfare in the country – the novelist situates contemporary Afghan history against the *longue durée* of global history. Aslam refuses to allow 9/11 to be seen as an event that is singular and unprecedented in its violence and brutality, even as he denounces the jihadis' barbaric attacks. In this way, as Aslam adopts structural elements from Persian miniature painting, he imbues these motifs with the force and urgency of history and politics in a manner that doesn't only allow him to redeem this aesthetic tradition from being silenced by Islamic neo-fundamentalism and Western Islamophobia alike, but also enables him to insist upon the relevance of this art form in approaching and documenting the issues that beset both Afghanistan and the wider global landscape.

Aslam's prominent rendering of images in *The Wasted Vigil* gains further significance when considered in light of the formal stylistics of Persian miniature painting. To begin with, in a study of the miniature form in medieval Afghanistan, Chad Kia articulates that

In the last decades of the fifteenth-century, illustrations for manuscripts produced in Afghanistan began to include figure-types that seem to have little or no connection to the narrative subject they illustrate, so that within the narrative structure of the paintings an enigmatic relationship emerges between picture and that which is pictured. (Kia 2)

In his discussion, Kia cites the example of the fifteenth-century miniature painting 'Majnun on Layla's Tomb'. Drawing from the famed Arab legend of the love between Majnun and Layla, the miniature consists of the pictorial rendition of Majnun fallen over Layla's gravestone, as well as four accompanying verses, where "[t]he narrating agent has interrupted the tale [represented in the painting] and is addressing the reader/listener and reminding the mere mortal that he or she is, or will become, old and lame like an old mule that turns the wheel of a mill" (3). Kia notes

that the “enigmatic relationship” (2) between illustration and text exhibits itself in the way that “the painting itself has little to do with the verses just described, at least in a literal sense” (3). Often, “the verses that do appear on the page with the painting itself relay narrative interjections, reflecting on the preceding events just related, but it is difficult to understand any part of the painting as a depiction of the narrator’s commentary on the illustrated story” (3). This way, “it is not difficult to miss the scene that illustrates the narrative subject” (3). Nevertheless, as Kia points out, the accompanying illustration remains “central to the moral and spiritual substance of the story” (3).

Likewise, in a discussion of the artist Bihzad’s influence on Persianate painting, David Roxburgh posits that the fifteenth-century painter situated pictorial elaboration “beyond the text’s strict narrative requirements almost to challenge and subvert the story’s central subject”, in a manner that “produced lively compositions and enabled an unprecedented layering of meaning” (“Kamal al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting” 121). Here, Kia and Roxburgh’s words open up a possible way for readers of Aslam’s text to conceptualise and contextualise the images that the novelist renders in his text. In the paragraphs to follow, I explore Aslam’s strategic use of images in light of the observations that they furnish, paying attention to two particular visual renderings: the Bihzadian room dedicated to the sense of touch, and Qatrina’s collection of calligraphic paintings celebrating the names of God. I proceed from the assumption, as Kia and Roxburgh have illuminated, that these images are not descriptive in function, and their relation to the primary concerns of the text is not immediately obvious. Nevertheless, as I shall demonstrate, they add an important dimension to Aslam’s interrogation of Islam in the novel.

A particular thematic concern that Aslam explores through his use of images is the treatment of women in Islam. In her reading of *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Claire Chambers observes that Aslam is “preoccupied by gender and by women’s (mis)treatment in Muslim communities” (*Making Sense* 107). This preoccupation with the (mis)treatment of women is palpable in *The Wasted Vigil* as well, particularly in the novelist’s dedication to giving textual representation and voice to the women who have been brutally silenced by the Islamic (and Islamist) male figures in the novel. Aslam first sets the stage in his portrayal of the Bihzadian room dedicated to the sense of touch in Marcus’s house, which depicts “a likeness of Muhammad with his hand plunged in a jar” (13). The accompanying narratorial description highlights that the Prophet “was someone who would not shake hands with women, so in order to make a pact he would put his hand in a vessel containing water and withdraw it, and then the woman would put her hand into the water” (13). The reader will discover that the imagery in this room is an illustration of the women’s oath of allegiance, derived from verse 60:12 of the Quran, and relates to the historic “admission to citizenship status in Medina for believing female migrants” (Moghissi 186), where “women from Mecca sought protection from the Prophet” (Mehta 344). The Islamic sociologist, Haideh Moghissi, elucidates that this Quranic verse functioned as “an important political document”, particularly as it “acknowledges women as political actors” and “enshrines the legal conditions of female membership in the *umma* [Muslim community] in terms of sins/crimes foresworn that are applicable to all believers regardless of gender and punishment for which, if committed, is the same for men and women” (186).<sup>83</sup> Offering an added perspective through her analysis of

---

<sup>83</sup> In a study of contemporary Muslim writings engaged with the issue of women in Islam, Terence Lovat highlights that “[t]here is considerable evidence as well that women were active participants and leaders in the earliest communities, with two of Muhammad’s own wives being prominent in advocacy and juridical advisory roles, both within and shortly after the lifetime of the Prophet himself” (“The ‘Women’s Movement’ in Modern Islam” 1). More significantly, Lovat posits that “the current struggle to recover the voice of women is crucial to no less than a recovery of Islam itself” (1).



Sufism in *The Wasted Vigil*, Suhaan Mehta notes that the manner in which this oath was originally performed remains a matter of debate for Islamic scholars, particularly since several sources that narrate the oath highlight its verbal nature, emphasising that “the Prophet avoided physical contact” (345). Further, “the report of the Prophet dipping his hand in the vase is delegitimised on account of the unreliability of one of the *hadith* transmitters” (346). Mehta thus asserts that in Aslam’s authorial choice to transpose this verse through the image of the Prophet’s hand plunged in a jar, the novelist “goes against the scholarly consensus about the event by highlighting a discredited version” (346).

Aslam’s purpose behind his opting for a “discredited” (346) account of the event gains greater clarity when considered in light of the novel’s focalisation on the ameliorative function of touch. In the narrative, just as Dunia’s touch enlivens Casa to the possibility of seeking meaningful connections with others, Marcus’s final touch of Qatrina’s palm at the moment of his amputation reiterates their togetherness just as their shared lives begin to unravel, enacting a private moment of tenderness when the validity of their love and marriage is mocked by the Taliban. Elsewhere in the novel, Lara traces Marcus’s effort at “cupp[ing] her face in both his hands” (*Vigil* 417) to a line that she quotes from the Soviet poet Anna Akhmatova, “[a]s if I was drinking my own tears from a stranger’s cupped hands” (108). In doing so, Lara draws attention to the significance of touch in fostering a kinship between individuals, salving wounds that the individual cannot overcome on his or her own. Against this thematic backdrop, Aslam’s choice to render the Quranic oath of allegiance via the imagery of touch attests to his insistence that Islam, in its essence, uplifts and heartens the lives of women. With this underlying symbolism, this Bihzadian image enacts both visual and scriptural reference against which the lives of Muslim women and acts of Muslim men in the novel are critiqued.

As critics interrogate the relation between women and Islam in *The Wasted Vigil*, focus has tended to fall upon Dunia. Mehta, for instance, speaks of “Dunia’s ... resistance to patriarchy using a religious idiom” and that “Dunia’s rebuke of Casa opens the space for a rejection of neo-fundamentalism by a practicing Muslim” (341-342). Clements meanwhile describes Dunia as “the kind of practising Muslim to whom both ‘the West’ and its Islamist ‘other’ should give ground”, and views Dunia’s encounter with Casa as a “potential opportunity for the two differently devout Afghans to assert and counter radically opposed Islamic views” (117-118). However, in departure from these critics, it is to the figures of Malalai and Qatrina that I wish to turn.

The nineteenth-century ancestor of the warlord Gul Rasool, the character Malalai enters the narrative in the chapter “The Silent Flutes”. Her name is derived from the historical Malalai of Maiwand (1861-1880), a figure popularly described as the “pride and national heroine of the entire Pukhtun belt of Afghanistan and Pakistan” (Khattak and Akhtar 230). The historical Malalai participated in the Battle of Maiwand alongside the famed Afghan military hero, Ayub Khan, and her “impressive action and martyrdom in the Anglo-Afghan war led to the greatest defeat in British imperial history” (231). This historical account demonstrated that “Afghan women were not always oppressed by fundamentalism, such as they were under the Mujahideen and the Taliban”, that “they lived a liberated life in the past” (230). In the present day, the historical Malalai is celebrated as a “legendary Afghan figure and role model”, with her courage “shown as an inspirational quality for women to emulate” (234). In addition, she functions as “a symbol of women empowerment in history textbooks of Afghanistan” (231), and represents “one

example of a step forward towards the emancipation and empowerment of women in the Afghan society” (241).<sup>84</sup>

Even while Aslam’s Malalai enacts an eponymous and historical reference to the Afghan folk heroine – both lived in the nineteenth century, and perished in British military raids – the life of the fictional Malalai could not be more different from the historical figure whose life trajectory serves as an intertext to her own. Aslam’s Malalai had, at the age of sixteen, “temporarily found herself as the head of the tribe ... the men around her having perished in an epidemic” (*Vigil* 297). One afternoon, a traveller presented himself at Malalai’s residence, seeking a place of respite to say his prayers. The narrator relates that “with two servants holding up a curtain between them, she accompanied the traveller into the bamboo grove within the walled enclosure of the large house” while he “regaled her with stories of his travels” (299). However, when the men of the tribe returned a few hours later, they found her “overpowered by the man” (300). When questioned by the cleric of the local mosque, Malalai spoke of rape. Her servants, stabbed by the man but who nevertheless survived to bear witness to the rape, “corroborated that they had been attacked, but one of [the servants] was female and the other, though male, was a Turkoman unbeliever so his testimony was void” (300). The narrator intimates that in the minds of the community’s Muslim leaders, “women and infidels were forever plotting against the Muslim manhood” (300), and thus Malalai and the servants’ testimonies were rejected. Gripped in the fury and agony of their false accusations, Malalai cut down the bamboo trees and constructed flutes out of the felled bamboo; for, “the grove had witnessed her assault; *it* knew she was innocent, and sooner or later there would be found a flute that would speak with a human voice – announcing the truth of that afternoon to the world

---

<sup>84</sup> The authors further highlight that “to honor Malalai, the Afghan government named an official medal of bravery after her”, and “many schools, hospitals, and magazines have been given her name too” (230).

around her” (300, emphasis in original). Sadly, the flutes, as we are told, “remained silent about what they had seen” (301). Malalai was sent away and “spent most of her life as little more than a servant, someone abused and worthy of contempt because of that event in her distant past” (302). When she was eighty, her masters dressed her in men’s clothing and tied her in a field in a bid to lure British bombers to that area, so as “to be able to say in the morning that the British were flying around in aeroplanes murdering innocents” (302).

The triangulation of the Bihzadian image of touch, the historical account of Malalai of Maiwand, and the story of Aslam’s fictional Malalai enacts a powerful commentary on the disenfranchisement of women under the neo-fundamentalist leadership that dominates the landscape of the narrative, and exposes the perversion of Islamic principles that underlie their (mis)treatment of women. Significantly, in a desperate appeal for her testimony to be heard, Malalai sought recourse to the music of the flutes, in search of one that “would speak with a human voice” (300). Her turn to the musical testimony of the flutes finds an echo in the imagery of instruments and musical gatherings portrayed in the Bihzadian room devoted to the sense of hearing, underscoring that her act of making these flutes – what her interlocutors saw as Malalai “los[ing] her mind” (300) – is in fact an iteration of her faith and piety at the apex of despair.

In *Music in the World of Islam*, Amnon Shiloah notes that in Sufi thought, music brings the worshipper closer to God, just as God reveals himself in music:

The divine emanates from everything, is in everything and is conveyed by everything; those who attain this degree speak to God even when they converse with creatures: they listen to God because He is active in everything they hear. Spiritual audition consists of hearing with a spiritual ear how all things sing the Glory of God, seize and enjoy the significance of this cosmic song. (40-41)

Malalai's desperate quest to construct the flutes, then, alludes to her desire to seek spiritual refuge in God; the music produced by her flutes, in turn, serves as an avenue for God's voice to be heard (and hence the creation of music pertains to the sense of hearing in the Bihzadian room). Crucially, what the narrator terms as the "silen[ce]" (*Vigil* 301) of Malalai's flutes does not suggest the inability of the instruments to produce music. Rather, as the narrator leads us to understand, this silence relates to the lack of "a human voice" (301) that is audible to the local cleric and clansmen. In their unresponsiveness to the pious music that testifies to Malalai's innocence, the actions of these men expose the disjuncture between their outward proclamations of religiosity and their spiritual desensitisation within.

In addition to Malalai, Qatrina is another female character through whom Aslam interrogates neo-fundamentalist Islam. On the surface, Qatrina invites interpretation of her character as one who "haunts the edges of the narrative, staunchly, if privately, atheist and a feisty critic not only of the Taliban but Islam itself" (Gopal 24). In the novel, the narrator does indeed repeatedly draw attention to Qatrina's disillusionment with the socio-political reality of Islam. "Indifferent to the idea of supreme beings and their holy messengers" (*Vigil* 39), Qatrina "had to struggle with the mosques because they said birth control was the West's attempt at reducing the number of Muslims in the world", all the while furious that "women were always dying in repeated childbirth because the husbands didn't listen" (95). Elsewhere, as Marcus recollects, "one can only wonder, Qatrina would say, at what these lands could have been had they not been set back by the arrival of Islam" (259-260). David similarly recalls that "the cause of the destruction of Afghanistan, she said to me towards the end of her life, is the character and society of the Afghans, of Islam" (90).

However, I argue that even while Qatrina is *publicly* critical of Islam, her private actions reveal an added dimension to her relation with the faith.<sup>85</sup> As the narrative shows us, the candour with which Qatrina criticises Islam is met with the intensity of fervour that she devotes to her calligraphic art. Her paintings, first of all, resonate with the scriptural exhortation for adherents of Islam to recount and celebrate the ninety-nine names of God:

Muhammad had said, ‘Verily there are one hundred minus one names of Allah. He who enumerates them would get into Paradise,’ causing Muslims to search them out in the Koran so that a list was compiled. And Qatrina’s *life’s work* was a series of ninety-nine paintings concerning these names – ‘the Artist’ among them. (96, emphasis mine)

The narrator further takes pains to describe the way Qatrina lovingly and assiduously imbues each of her paintings with an opulence of colour and richness of detail:

She would paint a picture, allow the paper to dry, and then dip it into a tray of water to dissolve away some or all the colour. After it had dried she would paint for a second time and again take away part or the whole of the pigment in the water bath. ... On occasion she added an amount of colour to the trayful of water before lowering the picture into it, so that the entire composition was suffused by a very pale redness or by a reticent haze of saffron. A sustained shimmer of blue. Layer by layer she would build a complex painting over many weeks. (241)

Crucially, the creation of such Islamic calligraphy is an act steeped in ritualistic significance, and is inextricable from the spiritual faith that is both its inspiration and referent.

According to the Islamic philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Quranic calligraphy issues at once

---

<sup>85</sup> In fact, Qatrina’s denouncement of Islam can be understood as a criticism of *political* Islam, particularly in the way that women bear the brunt, as Qatrina herself eventually does, of stringent neo-fundamentalist laws.

from the Islamic revelation and represents the response of the soul of the Islamic peoples to the Divine Message” (*Islamic Art and Spirituality* 18). Quranic calligraphy enacts the “visible embodiment of the Divine Word”, and “aids the Muslim in penetrating and being penetrated by that Presence”, in a manner that enables the adherent to “‘taste’ the reality of the spiritual world” (19). Importantly, Nasr highlights that “the art of Islam is Islamic art not only because it was created by Muslims but because it issues forth from the Islamic revelation as do the Divine Law and the Way” (7). Such art “crystallizes in the world of forms the inner realities of the Islamic revelation and, because it issues from the inner dimension of Islam, leads man to the inner chamber of the Divine Revelation” (7). While it has been observed that in *The Wasted Vigil*, such “religious art appears in a predominantly secular setting” (Mehta 350), Nasr’s words make it clear that these works of art ultimately refer back to, and reify, the spiritual realities of Muslims illuminated by the Divine presence. This art is thus never “secular” (Mehta 350) or “atheist” (Gopal 24), but inexorably affirms the spiritual faith and devotion of the artist. Yet, anaesthetised to these profound expressions of religious faith and fervour,

The Taliban did not know how to deal with the pictures – each bore one of Allah’s names in Arabic calligraphy, the Compassionate One, the Immortal One – but the words were surrounded by images not only of flowers and vines but of other living things. Animals, insects and humans. They wanted to tear out these details but couldn’t because the various strokes and curves of the name took up the entire rectangle, reaching into every corner, every angle. (*Vigil* 242)

Like Malalai’s expression of religious piety through her creation of the flutes, Qatrina’s reiteration of faith through her art offers an alternative vision of Islamic religious affiliation that doesn’t only contest the legitimacy of the neo-fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, but

additionally acts as a rebuke towards the coercive and violent ways through which neo-fundamentalists present the idea of Islam. In his novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Aslam posits that

always it was the vulnerability of women that was used by the poet-saints to portray the intolerance and oppression of their times: in their verses the women rebel and try bravely to face all opposition. They – more than the men – attempt to make a new world. And, in every poem and every story, they fail. But by striving they become part of the universal story of human hope. (191-192)

Like the poet-saints, Aslam draws upon the quiet fervour and piety of his female Muslim characters as a means to counter the public stonings, suicide bombings, and acts of vandalism that mark the Taliban's rendition of Islamic religiosity. In *The Wasted Vigil*, then, the Bihzadian images of musical instruments and musical gatherings that illuminate Malalai's piety, as well as the calligraphic paintings that testify to Qatrina's faith, constitute an integral part of the novelist's excavation of symbols from within Islamic tradition in his attempt to envision a way for his Anglophone Muslim readers to "[re]new" (192) their relation to Islam, as well as to articulate a way for Islam itself to reassert continuing relevance in the lived reality of its believers in the global political landscape of today.

### *Wasted vigils*

Before I proceed with an examination of the narrative in light of its title in this lattermost section of my chapter, I return to Chughtai's painting, *The Wasted Vigil*, which I argue plays an integral role in illuminating aspects of Aslam's novel. To begin with, exemplifying Chughtai's characteristically "romantic ... subject, mood and treatment" (Aryan 30), the painting dramatises



a young woman's yearning as she awaits the arrival of her lover through a series of contrasts: the darkened night sky against the chamber that is illuminated by the soft glow of a single lamp; the woman's carefully poised body betrayed by the eagerness of her craned neck; her luxurious adornment in relation to the vacuity of her tired eyes. These contrasts don't only highlight the sensual beauty of the woman, but also render her yearning itself as an object of beauty thematized in a "misty oriental dream" (30). In an interview with Anita Sethi, however, Aslam comments on this painting, "[t]he artist and God knows that it ain't gonna happen. So once you look at the title, it's quite a chilling picture" ("Nadeem Aslam: 'I put my grief in my books'"). As his words above suggest, Aslam refuses to romanticise the young woman's yearning and loss. This refusal carries over into the novel even as he borrows from Chughtai's work. In a move that reflects his inheritance from both Islamic aesthetic and Western literary traditions – what Claire Chambers describes as Aslam's "in-between position, complicating conceptual boundaries between East and West" (*British Muslim Fictions* 134) – Aslam dramatises the notion of yearning and vigils against the formal structure of tragedy in a bid to expose the anguish that underlies the facade of beauty in the act of yearning, and to anchor what is otherwise an isolated "misty" (Aryan 30) moment to the repercussions of history.

As a formal strategy, Aslam is quick to set the novel in intertextual relation to classical Greek tragedy – a move that doesn't only recall the literary indebtedness of the postcolonial Anglophone novel to Western canonical works, but also introduces the generic and affective structures of tragedy as a formal element within his text. Providing a glimpse into Marcus's thoughts, the omniscient narrator reveals that,

Qatrina and he had built up this collection [in their house] over the decades and it contained the known and unknown masterpieces in several languages. Up there

Priam begged Achilles for the mutilated body of his son Hector. And Antigone wished to give her brother the correct burial, finding unbearable the thought of him being *left unwept, unsepulchred*. (*Vigil* 20, emphasis original)

Even as the narrator shies away from articulating the import of these Greek references in explicit terms, the reader shall discover that these characters – Priam and Achilles from Homer’s *The Iliad*, and Antigone (and Creon) from Sophocles’ eponymous play – exemplify the notion of tragic resolution, where the characters who drive the main conflicts of the drama awaken to the consequences of their deeds only after the occurrence of irremediable loss.

In *The Iliad*, seeking to reclaim the slain body of his son, the elderly Priam journeys to his enemy, Achilles, to “put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son” (Homer 605). Gently reminding the young warrior that his decision to serve in the Trojan wars meant that he would never see his aged father again, Priam pleads with the former to “[r]emember your own father, great godlike Achilles -- as old as I am, past the threshold of deadly old age!” and to “[p]ity me in my own right, remember your own father” (604). Priam’s appeal to Achilles’s personal memory of loss elicits in the latter an outpour of empathy that doesn’t only enable the two men on opposing sides to partake in a singular understanding of shared grief – “overpowered by memory both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely ... crouching before Achilles' feet as Achilles wept himself, ... and their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house” (605) – but also enacts a cessation (albeit temporary) of hostilities, as Achilles declares to the elderly man that he “will hold our attack as long as you require” (610). In their shared mourning, the two men arrive at a moment of reconciliation that is at once invaluable and yet too late.

The events of *Antigone* pick up where Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* leaves off. In Aeschylus’s play, Polyneices and Eteocles, sons of Oedipus, are successors to the Theban throne.

Unable to agree on who should rule, the brothers make a plan to rule in alternate years. At the end of Eteocles's year, however, he refuses to cede the throne to his brother. Polyneices's father-in-law, Adrastus, raises an army led by the eponymous seven, of which Polyneices is one, to grab the throne by force. In the melee, Polyneices and Eteocles wind up killing each other. In *Antigone*, the play's present, Creon, the king of Thebes, declaring that "[n]ever shall I, myself/honor the wicked and reject the just" (Sophocles 28), proclaims Antigone's brother, Polyneices, a traitor and orders the latter's body to be left on the streets, unburied. Aeschylus's play throws the legitimacy of Creon's notion of justice into question, not only because of the ambiguity of Polyneices's actual guilt, but also because of the deaths that Creon's arbitrary act of justice brings about. When banished by Creon for her secret burial of her dead brother, Antigone kills herself; Creon's son, pledged to be married to Antigone, follows suit. Stricken by grief, Creon's wife, too, ends her own life. At the end of the play, Creon cries out for death, lamenting that "[m]y life is warped past cure. Fate unbearable has leapt down on my head" (69). The chorus, in turn, muses that the king has "learned justice, though it comes too late" (66).

The questions that these tragic plays raise – what is lost when empathy and reconciliation come too late? When is justice truly, *surely*, legitimate? – are crucial to Aslam's textual politics, and frame his attempt to compel the Western Anglophone reader to interrogate his or her preconceived notions of Islam and Muslim peoples alike. Yet, even as these classical Greek tragedies act as intertexts, the cathartic dimension peculiar to tragedy is integral to the novelist's re-presentation of his characters and Afghanistan.<sup>86</sup> In explicating the significance of catharsis in tragedy, Eva Schaper emphasises that "we do not simply take over or copy the emotions which are fictionally presented to us; we respond to the total structure of fictional events with emotions of our own, not with emotions caught by infection" ("Aristotle's Catharsis and Aesthetic

---

<sup>86</sup> See Eva Schaper's "Aristotle's Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure".

Pleasure” 142). I take this to mean that our responses to works of tragedy are not a *reflection* of what the characters are feeling; they are, rather, brought about by the work’s effect on our emotions as we contemplate the events that have led to the tragic outcome, and the possibilities of what could have been had the events proceeded differently. These emotions that the reader or viewer experiences, Schaper remarks, “bring about the cathartic transformation of felt involvement into aesthetic joy” in a manner that interweaves “both passion and intelligence” (142).

Schaper’s words underscore that the cathartic dimension of tragedy draws from the reader feelings that he or she did not originally have, through sequences of events that he or she would not otherwise have recognised. This evocation of emotions that are non-native to the reader’s own is, in fact, an integral aspect of the novel’s strategy of using the affective capacity of art to bear upon politics. In fact, discussing the relation between sensory perception and support for war, Butler makes it clear that

War sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others. ... To encounter the precariousness of another life, the senses have to be operative, which means that a struggle must be waged against those forces that seek to regulate affect in differential ways. (51-52)

If the impetus for war depends upon a numbing of emotions and a forestalling of empathy towards particular groups of people, the resistance against war accordingly necessitates a reinvigoration of the capacity to feel and empathise. The narrative and affective schemes of tragedy thus lend themselves to both the aesthetics and politics of Aslam’s anti-war vision.

The tragic form at the heart of the novel is revealed to the reader through two particular motifs that, in reflection of Aslam's reworking of Chughtai's romanticised mood and sentiment, expose the twin aspects of beauty and poignancy underpinning the events in the narrative. The first such motif is the red thread that weaves the characters together. In what could be perceived as an explicit formal manoeuvre, the narrator pronounces, "[p]ull a thread here and you'll find it's attached to the rest of the world" (*Vigil* 432). On an immediate level, this description reflects "the burden upon the author in the global Anglophone marketplace – the task of overcoming the metropolitan audience's investment in forgetting its own collusion in this history" (Abbas 347) as it underscores Afghanistan's entanglement in the trajectories of global imperial ambitions, and that it had been "[t]orn to pieces by the many hands of war, by the various hatreds and failings of the world" (*Vigil* 14). Yet, just as the thread – itself a thin, delicate fibre – links disparate objects through a connection that is as binding as it is brittle, the motif of the red thread acts as a structural element that exposes the intricacy and fragility of the web of relations among the characters, and which gives shape to both the beauty and tragedy at the heart of the narrative plot.

This motif first appears in the sub-chapter that recounts a jihadi mission involving two young men – the first of whom is a youth named Bihzad who is pretending to be Marcus's lost grandson, and the other, perhaps ironically, is Casa himself who, unbeknownst to all, is Marcus's actual grandson. The scene begins with Casa leading the youth to the school that the latter has been tasked to blow up. There, as the imposter is led to the truck that would deliver him to his mission, he recalls a conversation that he had with Casa the day before, when the latter was showing him how to detonate the bomb:

Pointing to the lengths of blue, green, red and yellow wires that lay around them, Casa said:

‘When I was a child I had knocked over a basket of silk embroidery threads, probably belonging to my mother. That’s the only thing I remember of her. The threads suddenly unspooled along the floor in many brilliant lines and then went out of the open door and down a staircase.’ He fell silent and then said through a sigh, ‘Yes, that’s the only thing I remember.’

Now Casa comes forward and shuts the truck door, sealing Bihzad in.  
(68)

The motif of the thread appears again ten pages later, this time through David’s recollection:

It was in the Pakistani city of Peshawar that he had met Zameen, when he was twenty-seven years old, a dealer in gems. [...]

In Peshawar a ruby had suddenly materialised at his feet one day at dusk. He leaned closer because of the lack of light and saw that it was a sphere of embroidery silk. There were others around him. Emeralds. Sapphires. Opals. They had leapt out of the door at the top of a staircase a few yards from him, unravelling as they came in a waterfall and then a river of loveliness. A young woman stood there holding the other end of the red filament that was in his hand, and for a few seconds they had remained linked by it, looking at each other.

Pure distilled life, a beautiful child behind her was stretching his body in a high-armed yawn, his shirt rising up to reveal his navel. (78)

Proceeding from the assumption that *The Wasted Vigil* stands as an aesthetic work with authorial intent of formal unity, the resonance between Casa’s memory of his mother and David’s fond

memory of Zameen and her child, encapsulated in their overlapping memory of the unravelling silk threads, gestures towards the revelation of Casa as Bihzad, Zameen's abducted son and Marcus's missing grandson. It is no coincidence that Casa/Bihzad had been renamed as a child, ostensibly after the forcible separation from his mother: "[o]ne day in 1988, the six-year-old Casa, known then only by the generic 'little boy', had exhibited similar valour and obedience, and one of the adults around him had laughed and called him Casabianca" (210). The novel relates that the name is drawn from Felicia Hemans's eponymous poem published in 1826, which dramatizes the battle fought between the French and British imperial navies for control over Egypt. While Aslam does not cite from Hemans's poem at length, readers will discover that the latter's work enacts a singular moment where the boy, Casabianca, caught up in the European powers' battle for global dominance, is annihilated by a sinking warship while awaiting his (dead) father's permission to flee. As communicated by the melancholic final lines of the poem, "But the noblest thing which perished there/ Was that young faithful heart" (Hemans, "Casabianca" 24), the Casabianca of the poem embodies the tragic figure of an individual engulfed by the violence of global history; his sheer obedience – what one might term his tragic flaw – dooms him to the deadly forces of history within which he is situated, even as it is ironically the very quality that preserves his memory thereafter on the page and retrieves him from oblivion.

In the novel, the act of renaming marks a symbolic moment where Zameen's son passes from the familial and cultural inheritance attached to the name Bihzad, and, pressed by the circumstances of abduction and orphanhood, is made into a jihadi whose tragic outcome is foreshadowed by the intertextual significance attached to his new name. Crucially, the name Bihzad draws upon the fifteenth-century painter's legacy – a strategic move on Aslam's part that

recalls the Sufi poetics and flourishing Islamic civilisation reflected in the painter's name. On an immediate level, in parallel to Afghanistan's history, the boy's renaming alludes to the Taliban's forcible severance of the country from this cultural heritage. We are given to understand that as the child Bihzad, who represents the vibrancy of the Islamic golden age, is remade into Casa(bianca), a child-soldier who finds himself at the crossroads of global warfare, Casa/Bihzad is, in fact, disinherited from the spiritual and cultural aspects of Islam, and is, instead, entrapped within the deadly politics and warfare of radical Islam.

Aslam further dramatises this severance by having Casa literally forcing the other youth into his suicide mission: "Now Casa comes forward and shuts the truck door, sealing Bihzad in" (*Vigil* 68). The narrator's focalisation on this moment strikes an affective chord with readers, particularly as just two pages before, we are given insight into the imposter's dreams of a better future – one that he seeks to obtain, ironically enough, by claiming the identity of the man who is presently forcing him to his death:

He'd heard about the Englishman a while ago, and sent a message out to him saying he was his grandson Bihzad. [...]

Maybe he'll get to go to England. A chance at last to make something of his life. Even find love: become someone's, have someone become his. There was once a girl he had loved, a girl he still thinks about, but because he had no means and no prospects, her family had humiliated him when he brought them his proposal. (66)

Here, the imposter's vision of the "chance to make something of his life" and of "find[ing] love" (66) does not merely reflect his attempt at an opportunistic deceit, but comes across as the alternative prospects in life that are, rightfully, the inheritance that awaits Marcus's grandson.



Aslam's depiction of the cruel irony in the two men unwittingly intertwined by name and fate produces a singular moment where readers are given to see the men's entrapment within a violent history that overdetermines the trajectories of their lives. The vision of a life marked by transformation and hope, as the imposter Bihzad imagines, is shown to be a promise that is *seemingly* within reach of these characters, whether as birthright or through deceit. This alternative life, however, eludes them as they are swept up in the momentum of the violent clash between the West and Islam.

For readers of the novel, the realisation of the above catalyses an instance of tragic pleasure. This catharsis demonstrates an instance of the novel's politics at work through the affective structures of narrative; for, in exposing the characters' ultimate inability to resist the external tide of events and actualise the potential for transformation within the trajectories of their lives, the novel foregrounds the vulnerability of these Afghan characters as a means to reframe the interpretative schemes through which these characters are visualised.

The narrator's implicit revelation that Casa is, in fact, David's (step)son and Marcus's grandson enjoins the reader to reconsider the implications of the plot. To begin with, the act of renaming, reflective of the familial and cultural severances that facilitated it, adds to the fragmentation and disjuncture within the narrative, and points to the trauma enveloping the characters that is a consequence of the decades-long war in the country. Mirroring the unassimilated and elusory nature of traumatic experience in his rendering of the novel's form, Aslam traces Casa's backstory through slivers and wisps of memory recounted by the other characters. Incidentally, the first time Casa's character is figured within the novel is when Marcus tells Lara about his dead daughter at the opening of the narrative: "She died in 1986, I believe. She had become a mother by then – a little boy who disappeared around the time she

died. She and an American man were in love, and I know all this from him” (8). Marcus’s revelation above highlights that his memory of Zameen and his grandson is fundamentally punctured by gaps in knowledge that David, the unnamed American, has had to fill.

The novelist takes pains to highlight the gaps and slippages that occur between the characters when they attempt to recount the memories and details that are central to the uncovering of – what remains unknown to them – Casa’s story. When Marcus first tells David of Lara’s arrival in Afghanistan, the following exchange takes place:

‘Larissa Petrovna. She says her brother was a soldier who knew Zameen.’

David nods. The older man does not say the Soviet soldier’s name but David hears it in his head anyway. Benedikt Petrovich. The man who fathered Zameen’s child through repeated assault ... At the military base Benedikt Petrovich guarded the room where Zameen was kept, and he unbolted the door night after night and went in to her.

‘David, did Zameen ever talk about a Soviet soldier, about twenty-four years old?’

‘No. Never. ...’ (51)

While the exchange above intimates that David’s reticence arises from his desire to spare Marcus the pain of finding out about Zameen’s sexual assault, it also draws attention to the slippages made by the memories and facts that are withheld from the various characters. Here, Marcus is not told that Lara’s brother is, in fact, the man who fathered his grandson. Elsewhere in the narrative, having heard of the manner by which her brother had died, Lara asks David:

‘What did they do with ... the remains?’

‘I asked but James says they don’t seem to remember.’

She nods. 'It was more than two decades ago. I must go.' (368)

The fate of Benedikt's remains, however, is revealed forty pages later, when Casa, in search of Dunia in Gul Rasool's compound, stumbles upon the following:

It's something spherical wrapped in a dark torn shirt, and when he sees that it is a man's head he lets it drop in shock, the desiccated skin, the empty eye sockets, the dried-up nerves and blood vessels issuing from the torn neck, falling towards the floor out of the light beam ... The shirt is a Soviet soldier's. (408)

Casa is, however, unable to recognise that the ashen remains belonged to his biological father and Lara's brother, the vigil for whom drives her presence in the narrative.

What makes this discovery especially poignant for the reader is the narrator's earlier revelation that Casa, in fact, deeply yearns for "[p]arental figures", which he associates particularly with "[w]omen of Lara's age" (235). Experiencing, even "by looking at Lara's face", a "tenderness .... in his breast" that he relates to the feeling of kinship with "[a] mother. An aunt or older sister or cousin", Casa "wonders about the magnitude of the sin he is committing by looking at Lara's face, even though his thoughts are pure" (235). He would never find out that Lara is, in fact, his aunt. While the reader might be able to fill in the narrative gaps, these gaps in knowledge obstruct the characters from recognising and (re)claiming these threads of kinship, and propel the narrative towards the realisation of the tragedy at the heart of its plot: that the person(s) for whom the three main characters are maintaining a vigil is, actually, in their midst, but they are unable to retrieve the missing pieces of information that would enable them to recognise their lost kin.

The simultaneity of absence and presence that renders these vigils 'wasted' in spite of the arrival of the object of the wait is shown through the motif of the demoiselle cranes that cross the

Afghan landscape, which, together with the motif of the thread, brings the reader to the tragedy at the heart of the novel. The offspring of these cranes, the narrator tells us, “lost their high-pitched calls in the first twelve months of life so the parents simply did not respond to them”, so that the young are “unseen though still beside them” (184-185). The idea of the offspring “unseen though still beside them” (184-185) alerts the reader to the simultaneity of absence and presence, disjuncture and togetherness, as well as loss and comfort – tropes that are central to the reader’s grasp of the unravelling web of relations between the characters, and which imparts the sense of tragic beauty to the novel.

The motif of the demoiselle cranes emerges as a crucial element in the novel’s depiction of the father-son relationship between David and Casa. This relationship begins, as the narrator discloses, “when David met Zameen, in the Pakistani city of Peshawar, Bihzad was four and was taught to think of David as his father” (50). Even as “it was a matter of months after that that Zameen died and the boy disappeared”, David “has managed to carry with him even his name. Holding onto that one possession over the violent chaotic years” (51). David’s fondness for the child, which persists in spite of the chaos of the intervening years, represents a form of love that lends to the novel a layer of tender beauty – a beauty that is all the more radiant and precious in the landscape of violence built upon a blatant disregard for lives. This sense of beauty is again evoked in the scene where David enlists Casa’s help in building a canoe: “he and Casa get to work – silently on the whole, except for a grunt now and then, and with the million-year-old gaze of the demoiselles watching them from far away” (253).<sup>87</sup> While the gaps in knowledge ensure that the two characters fail to recognise each other as kin, this joint endeavour at canoe-making nevertheless imparts a sense of edification, for the reader sees that David’s son, the object of

---

<sup>87</sup> Alla Ivanchikova draws attention to the demoiselle cranes as a “nonhuman witness whose gaze is contrasted with and frames the agency of human protagonists” (Ivanchikova 306).

David's vigil is, literally, ironically, *with* him. Yet, any edification that the reader feels is ultimately tinged with sorrow, for David and Casa remain unable to reclaim kinship. In this way, the novelist adds greater significance to Lara's pronouncement of a "kinship of wounds" (430). The idea of "a kinship of wounds" (430) does not merely pertain to the fostering of relationships bound by shared wounds and trauma; more crucially, it highlights the *wounded* nature of relationships that are irremediably torn apart as a result of the war.

Whether or not we are to interpret David's vigil as an event of (poignant) beauty is a question that Aslam leaves open. So is the question of whether or not David's vigil should, ultimately, be perceived as fulfilled. At the end of the narrative, we also see Marcus "ask[ing] if someone would be kind enough to take him to the city centre" to meet "someone there who could be Zameen's son" (434), even as the reader knows that his actual grandson is now dead. In Aslam's refusal to afford these vigils a proper sense of resolution or closure, he crucially departs from furnishing the catharsis that accompanies tragedies in the Greek tradition, even as catharsis is an important aspect of the generic conventions of tragedy. In *The Wasted Vigil*, the notions of a tragic awakening and tragic resolution indeed remain out of reach for the characters, even as these elements are often a "necessity" (Gasché 46) in works of classical tragedy. Aslam's complex reconfiguration of the tragic form against the politics of the Afghan war illuminates the idea that the characters themselves cannot grasp the tragedy that is unfolding in their lives. David perishes with his son, not knowing that he has actually reclaimed some time with the son he has been desperately searching for. Marcus continues his interminable vigil for his grandson, giving new and poignant significance to the simultaneous moment of anticipation, hope, and disillusionment that Chughtai's *The Wasted Vigil* illuminates.

As Aslam probes the assumptions of Greek tragic form against the devastation wrought by the decades-long war in Afghanistan, he suggests that the scope of contemporary violence and suffering exceeds the capacity of this dramatic form to narrate and contain. Indeed, it can be argued that the narrative puts forward an added contemporary dimension to the tragic, where the certainty of knowing remains ever elusive. For, just as the characters themselves are refused the certainty of knowledge in a way that renders their vigils interminable, the reader, too, is denied closure to the questions that remain at the novel's culmination: at the end of the day, are these vigils 'wasted' because the real Bihzad never turns up? Or are they 'wasted' because Bihzad's father and grandfather are not able to recognise him? Nevertheless, in leaving the reader the sole person to be given insight into the tragic events of the narrative, Aslam shifts the ethical imperative to resist war onto the reader of the text, and situates the reader as the locus of his textual politics.

### III. An "Infinity of Traces"

In portraying Afghanistan's ongoing disaster of war – particularly in the wake of the Taliban's regime and the events of 9/11 – through revisiting and reworking the forms and legacies of an earlier Islamic golden age, Aslam's writing exposes the actions of fundamentalist Islam as an assault upon Islam and Islamic culture. Significantly, Aslam's retrieval and excavation of these forms and legacies don't necessarily constitute an act of curating "moribund symbols of an earlier time" (Clements 91); instead, they are canvassed in the novelist's attempt to reveal the spaces within Islamic culture itself that critique the neo-fundamentalists' misappropriation of the faith, and which enable the formation of strategies of resistance and refutation against the violent image of Islam represented by fundamentalist thought.

History, as Healy tells us in his book, renders itself in the present through an “infinity of traces” (5). In *The Wasted Vigil*, Aslam attempts to gather some of these traces, and invites the reader to inhabit the spaces that these traces open up as a means to conceptualise Islam and the Islamicate landscape anew. His narrator tells us that

The men and women of Afghanistan share between them a store of tales so extensive, so rich and ancient, that it has been said it is unrivalled by any other land. Alexander passed through here in 329 BC with thirty thousand troops, and so now a man selling what look like centuries-old Greek coins approaches David. The years of war and civil war have emptied this country’s museums. One 190-carat diamond in the sceptre of Russia’s Catherine, bought by her from an Armenian gem merchant, was first the eye of a god in a temple in India, and so it is that no one can be certain where most of Afghanistan’s looted treasures have ended up. (72)

Coins and gems, paintings and sculptures, djinns and ruins – these comprise the “store of tales” so “extensive” and “ancient” (72) that bear witness not only to the persistence of history, but also to the fact that history reveals itself in a myriad, living ways that continue to provide a (re)new(ed) sense of affiliation for Anglophone Muslims to relate to their cultural heritage, and also for the Western reader to apprehend the cultural phenomenon of Islam. Even while the museums in Afghanistan are empty, as the narrator suggests, the novel enacts a symbolic space where these artefacts and legacies can be reclaimed and find an audience. Ultimately, the novelist invites the reader to reimagine Islam and the Islamicate world as he unearths and unravels new threads of connection and modes of affiliation from the legacies of Islam. In this endeavour, he insists upon the significance of Islam in forging connections and affinities across cultures and

borders, and emphasises the continuing relevance of Islam itself as a means to counter the violence performed in its name.



## Conclusion

### Beauty and the Contours of Postcolonial Politics

In my attempt to conceptualise the postcolonial aesthetic in this thesis, I began by considering postcolonial literature's fraught relation between the artistic impulse to create beauty and the pressing demands made upon postcolonial writers to bear witness to the traumas and injustices of history. I put forward the thought that the primary issues that lend themselves to the seeming disjuncture between aesthetics and politics in postcolonial literature largely fall within two camps. The first, revolving around the aesthetics and ethics of literary production, concerns the questions of how postcolonial writers might create beauty out of a past and present permeated with suffering and pain, and, in turn, how beauty might enable the writers to more acutely portray the traumatic chapters of history. The second, focusing on the various ways that aesthetic theory might reveal implicit biases towards its originary Western culture, brings to the fore the questions of how a formalist aesthetic judgment in Kant's lineage might entail a homogenising or colonising of the perceiver's sensibility, and how aesthetic theories might have contributed to the exclusion of postcolonial literature from proper recognition as art.

I argued that as we press on in our search for ways to read beauty in postcolonial writing, the equations upon which beauty is apprehended need rethinking. In particular, drawing upon Walcott's metaphor of the cracked vase, I suggested that it is perhaps not necessarily the wholeness of the object portrayed that is at the centre of our consideration of beauty; that it is, instead, the painstaking labour undertaken by the artist to *recreate* a measure of wholeness out of the shattered fragments, to search within these traumatic chapters of history remnant emblems of beauty, that one might consider a form of the beautiful. I also suggested that as the postcolonial

artist negotiates and invents upon the various aesthetic symbols and traditions that have come to be a part of his or her inheritance, the making of beauty itself serves as a means to speak to our condition in history.

In Chapter 1, I examined the ways that Tan borrows from Japanese aesthetic forms to shift the discursive and conceptual frames through which the Japanese Occupation in Malaya is remembered. I posited that Japanese aesthetics allow Tan to impart an added dimension to our conceptions of time, memory, and justice in his articulation of a singular vision of reconciliation that departs from the victim-aggressor dynamic inscribed by the traumatic past. Although *The Garden of Evening Mists* has been critiqued for its inadequate treatment of justice and apolitical rendering of memory in its representation of the Occupation, I demonstrated that the narrative elements that seem to lend themselves to an ineffectual postcolonial historiography are, in fact, aspects of Japanese aesthetics interwoven into the novel's Anglophone literary form. This aesthetic borrowing, as I argued, serves to challenge narrower concepts of what the notions of justice and memory should entail in a truly *post-war* transcultural environment.

As I have made clear, Tan's novel is distinctive in its evocation of beauty in landscape and nature, which he conveys to the reader through structural principles such as *shakkei*, *mono no aware* and *yūgen*. These motifs of beauty undeniably add to the richness of the reader's experience of the text. More importantly, they focus attention on, and shape the reader's perception of, the beauty emergent in Yun Ling's interactions with the various other characters. This emergent beauty lends itself to the politics of reconciliation that Tan espouses as it provides an affective lens through which Yun Ling – and the reader, through her – can look *differently* upon the events of the Japanese Occupation, and relate to the Japanese through the losses that they have experienced in common, rather than the political equations that set them apart. It is in

this way that beauty lends force to Tan's reconciliatory politics and renders his political vision all the more compelling.

In Chapter 2, I explored the manner in which Ondaatje draws from the literary postmodernism of the West and the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka to narrativise the Sri Lankan civil war. Like Tan's novel, *Anil's Ghost* has been taken to task for what has been perceived as Ondaatje's meagre attempt at a proper historicising of the war and his problematic vision of justice. However, I argued that, as Ondaatje blends his postmodern sensibility with the Buddhist philosophy central to Sri Lanka's cultural imaginary, he departs from conventional discourses of justice and reconciliation commonly posited as political 'solutions' for post-conflict societies, and instead puts forward the notion that genuine peace for the splintered nation requires a reconceptualisation of the idea of politics itself. Paying attention to the particular ways in which Ondaatje uses postmodernist narrative strategies and Buddhist concepts to reframe the lenses through which the reader perceives the war, I demonstrated that *Anil's Ghost* shifts the focus of politics from ideas of power struggle and control to an ethical responsibility towards the other, and from transnational discourses of justice and reconciliation to private acts of compassion between individuals. Like Tan, Ondaatje locates beauty in the interactions and relations between individuals. In particular, against the rampant violence of war, Ondaatje makes the case for daily, private acts of compassion to be seen as a received form of the beautiful. I suggested that by aestheticising these instances of compassion, Ondaatje adds a shimmering radiance to these quotidian acts, revealing them as so much more precious and thus so much more worthy to be striven for against the backdrop of war. The affective impact of beauty thus adds to the urgency of the political vision that Ondaatje advances in *Anil's Ghost*.

In Chapter 3, I looked at the way Aslam narrativises the war in Afghanistan by setting Bihzadian and Sufi aesthetics into relation with Western tragedy. In *The Wasted Vigil*, beauty takes two distinct forms. The first follows the shape of the Islamicate aesthetic traditions that Aslam retrieves, which enable him to interrogate the deprivation that followed the rise of Islamic neo-fundamentalism and the post-9/11 US attacks on Afghanistan against the resplendence of the Islamicate world in an earlier age. The second, which focalises on the fragmented relationships amongst the various characters in the narrative, locates beauty in the interminable human striving for kinship – a striving that gains political significance in light of the blatant disregard for lives in both militant Islamism and the continuing military assaults on Afghanistan. These forms of beauty become the motifs through which Aslam articulates his politics of resistance and confronts the legitimacy that both Islamic neo-fundamentalism and the US War on Terror lay claim to.

The three novels that I have examined lend force to two particular claims that I put forward about the postcolonial aesthetic at the start of the thesis: that the aesthetic qualities of the works augment our understanding of their politics, and that the compelling power of postcolonial aesthetics stems especially from the blending and interweaving of the various aesthetic and cultural legacies that have come to be the writers' inheritance. I read the significance of this aesthetic admixture in light of Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Author as Producer", where he advances a means of evaluating the criticality of art as well as art's effectiveness in responding to the social and cultural forces that govern its production:

Instead of asking, 'What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time? Does it accept them, is it reactionary – or does it aim at overthrowing them, is it revolutionary?' – instead of this question, or at any rate before it, I

should like to propose another. Rather than ask, ‘What is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time’ I should like to ask, ‘What is its *position* in them?’ This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary *technique* of works. (214, emphasis in original)

The lines above highlight that even from the materialist view of literature that Benjamin writes from, it is not necessarily or even primarily the reactionary or revolutionary content of the work that commands foremost attention; it is, rather, the ways and means that the form of the work negotiates with its historical precedents that confers upon the work its social or political impactfulness.<sup>88</sup> Reading Benjamin’s observations in light of the postcolonial novels that I have examined, I advance the thought that the political thrust of the postcolonial aesthetic is derived particularly, *precisely* from its syncretism, its various cultural and significant cross-cultural borrowings, its inventiveness that amalgamates the artistic symbols and forms of two or more cultural lineages in the creation of a singular aesthetic vision. These various borrowings are not merely adaptations, but, in Benjamin’s terms, a declaration of a position against the discourses of thought that undermine or are hostile to the lived reality of the postcolonial subject. Accordingly, these syncretic forms also set the distinctive, liminal perspectives that the writers inhabit into negotiation with the dominant constructs that govern historical and cultural consciousness at large, thus adding to and reshaping the images and symbols through which the present is conceptualised.

I hope to have shown through the course of this thesis that beauty and aesthetics in postcolonial writing don’t only present themselves as relevant elements for postcolonial literary criticism, but are also crucial in cultivating a consciousness of the lingering injustices that govern

---

<sup>88</sup> See pp. 25 of the thesis, where Adorno makes a similar argument.

the present, and imparting to readers the will to forge a better tomorrow. I want to suggest that it is also in this way that postcolonial literature itself brings about a form of beauty into the world – a beauty that emerges in the collective effort of individuals across societies and cultures to (re)make a better world from the histories of suffering, pain, and trauma that we have inherited.

As the thesis approaches its close, I return to yet another work of Ondaatje's, this time the poem, "Spider Blues":

I admire the spider, his control classic,  
his eight legs finicky,  
making lines out of the juice in his abdomen.  
  
A kind of writer I suppose.  
  
He thinks a path and travels  
the emptiness that was there  
leaves his bridge behind  
looking back saying Jeez  
did I do that? (*Rat Jelly* 62)

In the lines above, Ondaatje likens the creative writer to a spider that traverses "emptiness" and the unknown, leaving a mark – a "bridge" (62) – where none had existed before. While Ondaatje is referring to artistic creation in general, I argue that the metaphor of a spider weaving its web across an expanse of uncharted territory is particularly apt to describe the work performed by the postcolonial novelists that I have discussed in the preceding chapters. In the way that these writers draw from various and often widely different cultural and aesthetic traditions to invent upon the form of the Anglophone novel, they rupture the boundaries of perception and introduce newness into the possibilities of what could be said and thought about our postcolonial world.

## Works Cited

- Art for Art's Sake: Its Fallacy and Viciousness.” *The Art World*, vol. 2, no. 2 (May 1917), pp. 98-102.
- Abbas, Sadia. *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2014.
- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 6th. Edition. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London, Heinemann, 1987.
- . *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. London, Heinemann, 1975.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, and Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. London, Bloomsbury, 1997.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London, Verso, 1992.
- Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Allen, Brooke. “Meditations, Good & Bad.” *New Criterion*, vol. 18, no. 19 (May 2000), pp. 63.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *The Essential Aquinas: Writings on Philosophy, Religion, and Society*. Edited by John Y. B. Hood. Westport, CT, Praeger, 2002.
- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*. Edited by Stefan Collini. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Aryan, K. C. *Punjab Painting*. Patiala, Punjabi University Press, 1977.

- Ashcroft, Bill. "Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2015), pp. 410-421.
- Aslam, Nadeem, and Sethi, Sunil. "A Conversation with Nadeem Aslam." *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol 35, no. ¾, the Great Divide (Winter 2008, Spring 2009), pp. 348-361.
- Aslam, Nadeem. "Where to Begin." *Granta*, 29 Sept. 2010, <https://granta.com/where-to-begin/>. Accessed 13 Oct. 2020.
- . *Maps for Lost Lovers*. London, Faber and Faber, 2004.
- . *The Wasted Vigil*. London, Faber and Faber, 2008.
- Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. London, Routledge, 2004.
- Ayto, John. *Word Origins: The Secret Histories of English Words from A to Z*. 2nd edition. London, A&C Black Publishers, 2005.
- Bahri, Deepika. *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Barry, Michael. "Archaeology and Teleology in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *Critique*, vol. 56, pp. 138-154.
- Bartholomeusz, Tessa. *In Defence of Dharma: Just-war Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*. London, RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb. *Reflections on Poetry. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis Ad Poema Pertinentibus*. Translated by Karl Aschenbrenner and Williams B. Holther. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1954



- Beiser, Frederick. *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Bell, Clive. *Art*. New York, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1914.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer." *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison. London, SAGE, 1982.
- . "The Art of Storytelling." *The Storyteller Essays*. Edited by Samuel Titan, and translated by Tess Lewis. New York, New York Review Books, 2019.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London, Routledge, 1994.
- Boehmer, Elleke. "Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Spring 1993), pp. 268-277.
- . "A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating upon the Present." *Re-routing the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millenium*. Edited by Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh. London & NY, Routledge, 2010, pp. 170-181.
- Bolland, John. "Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*: Civil Wars, Mystics, and Rationalists." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 102-121.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1860.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London, Verso, 2009.
- Carroll, Noël. *Beyond Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- . "Formalism." *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. Third Edition. Edited by Berys Gaut and Dominic Lopes. New York, Routledge, 2013, pp. 87-95.
- . *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*. London, Routledge, 2004.

- Castellano, Isaac. *Civil War Interventions and Their Benefits: Unequal Return*. Lanham, Lexington Books, 2015.
- Chakravorty, Mrinalini. *In Stereotype: South Asia in the Global Literary Imaginary*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Chambers, Claire. *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- . *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Childs, Peter, and Green, James. "Terror: *The Wasted Vigil*." *Aesthetics and Ethics in Twenty-First Century British Novels: Zadie Smith, Nadeem Aslam, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell*. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Chittick, William. *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2000.
- Chughtai, Abdur Rahman. *The Wasted Vigil*. 1928. *Muraqqa-i-Chughtai*.
- Clements, Madeline. *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective: Rushdie, Hamid, Aslam, Shamsie*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Connor, Steven. "Postmodernism and Literature." *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Steven Connor. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 62-81.
- Conze, Edward. *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*. New York, Dover, 1959.
- . *Buddhist Scriptures*. London, Penguin, 1959
- Dadi, Iftikhar. *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

- Davis, Emily. "Investigating Truth, History, and Human Rights in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*. Edited by Nels Pearson and Marc Singer. New York, Routledge, 2009.
- De Mul, Jos. *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art and Philosophy*. New York, SUNY Press, 1999.
- Deegalle, Mahinda. "Introduction: Buddhism, Conflict, and Violence." *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. Ed. Mahinda Deegalle. London & New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 1-21.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- . *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York, Routledge, 1994.
- Diez, Ernst. "Simultaneity in Islamic Art." *Ars Islamica*, vol 4 (1937), pp. 185-189.
- Donoghue, Denis. *On Eloquence*. New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2010.
- . "On Eloquence." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 18 Jan. 2008, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/on-eloquence/> . Accessed 15 Jun. 2021.
- . *Speaking of Beauty*. New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2003.
- . "Song without Words." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 115, no. 2, spring 2007, pp. 190-210.
- Douglas, Lawrence. "History and Memory in the Courtroom: Reflections on Perpetrator Trials." *The Nuremberg Trials: International Criminal Law Since 1945*. Edited by Herbert Reginbogin and Christoph Safferling. Munich, K. G. Saur München, 2006, pp. 95-105.

- Drucker, Peter. "A View of Japan through Japanese Art." *Toward the Next Economics and Other Essays*. Harvard Business Press, 2010, pp. 183-204.
- Dube, S. N. "Arhat Ideal in Early Buddhism." *Buddhism and Peace: Theory and Practice*. Edited by Chanju Mun. Honolulu, Blue Pine, 2006, pp. 49-60.
- During, Simon. "Postcolonialism and Globalisation: a Dialectical Relation after All?" *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 31-47.
- Eaglestone, Robert. "Postmodernism and Ethics against the Metaphysics of Comprehension." *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Edited by Steven Connor. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 182-195.
- Eagleton, Terry. "The Ideology of the Aesthetic." *Poetics Today*, vol. 9, no. 2 *The Rhetoric of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Rhetoric* (1988), pp. 327-338.
- Edkins, Jenny. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- El-Zein, Amira. *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*. Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2009.
- Emadi, Hafizullah. *Culture and Customs of Afghanistan*. Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Ettinghausen, Richard. "Islamic Art." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series*, vol 33, no. 1, *Islamic Art* (Spring 1975), pp. 2-52.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London, Pluto Press, 1986.
- Fincham, Gail. "Ecology, Ethics, and the Future: Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*." *English Academic Review*, vol 31, no. 2, pp. 125-137.

- Flannery, Eóin. “Internationalizing 9/11: Hope and Redemption in Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009).” *Journal of the English Association*, vol 62, no. 238, Autumn 2013, pp. 294–315.
- Fleming, Stuart. “Ukiyo-e Painting: An Art Tradition under Stress.” *Archaeology*, vol. 38, no. 6 (November/December 1985), pp. 60-61, 75.
- Foley, Barbara. *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*. Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Secular Scripture and Other Writings on Critical Theory 1976-1991*, The Collected Works of Northrop Frye. Vol. 18. Edited by Joseph Adamson and Jean Wilson. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- Gasché, Rodolphe. “Self-dissolving Seriousness: On the Comic in the Hegelian Conception of Tragedy.” *Philosophy and Tragedy*. Eds. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks. New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 37-56.
- Geoffroy, Éric. *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*. Bloomington, IN, World Wisdom, Inc., 2010.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Gilson, Etienne. *The Arts of the Beautiful*. Chicago, Dalkey Archive Press, 1965.
- Goonewardena, Kanishka. “*Anil’s Ghost*: History/Politics/Ideology.” Paper presentation, Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Université Laval, Québec, Canada, 24–26 May 2001.
- Gopal, Priyamvada. “Of Capitalism and Critique: ‘Af-Pak’ Fiction in the Wake of 9/11.” *South-Asian Fiction in English: Contemporary Transformations*. Ed. Alex Tickell. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 21-36.

- Gowdy, John. "Avoiding Self-organized Extinction: Toward a Co-evolutionary Economics of Sustainability." *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 27-36.
- Gracyk, Theodore. "Adorno." *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. Third Edition. Edited by Berys Gaut and Dominic Lopes. New York, Routledge, 2013, pp. 137-147.
- Gray, Richard. *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*. Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Gregory, Derek. *The Colonial Present*. Malden, MA & Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Gui, Weihsin. *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics*. Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2013.
- Gunawardana, R. A. L. H. "Roots of the Conflict and the Peace Process." *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. Ed. Mahinda Deegalle. London & New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 177-201.
- Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *By the Sea*. London, Bloomsbury, 2002.
- Harris, Elizabeth. "Buddhism in War: a Study of Cause and Effect from Sri Lanka." *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 197-222.
- Harrison, John. "The Colonial Legacy and Social Policy in the British Caribbean." *Colonialism and Welfare: Social Policy and the British Imperial Legacy*. Edited by James Midgley and David Piachaud. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2011, pp. 55-70.
- Healy, Chris. *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

- Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.
- Hedberg, William. *The Japanese Discovery of Chinese Fiction: The Water Margin and the Making of a National Canon*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Helff, Sissy. "Imagining Flight in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, vol. 56, no.4 (2008), pp. 391-401.
- Hemans, Felicia Dorothea. "Casabianca." *Poems*. Edinburgh & London, William Blackwood and Son, 1868, pp. 23-24.
- Hendry, Joy. "Nature Tamed." *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives*. Edited by Pamela Asquith and Arne Kalland. Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1997, pp. 83-105.
- Hickman, Money. "Views of the Floating World." *MFA Bulletin*, vol. 76 (1978), pp. 4-33.
- Ho, Hannah. "Negotiating a Personal Experience: Identity Affirmation of the *Horimono* Artist." *Transcultural Perspectives on the Narratives, Practices, and Representations of Tattooing*. EPUB edition. Edited By Sinah Theres Kloß. New York, Routledge, 2019.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York, Penguin Books, 1990.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Edited by Humphry House, completed by Graham Storey. London, Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Huggan, Graham. "The Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism: A Cautionary Note." *Links & Letters*, vol. 4 (1997), pp. 19-24.
- . "The Postcolonial Exotic." *Transition*, no. 64 (1994), pp. 22-29.

- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London, Routledge, 1988.
- . *The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History*. London, Routledge, 1989.
- Ismail, Qadri. "A Flippant Gesture Towards Sri Lanka: A Review of Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost." *Pravada* vol. 6, no. 9 (2000), pp. 24–29.
- Itoh, Teiji. *Space and Illusion in the Japanese Garden*. New York & Tokyo, Weatherhill, 1973.
- Ivanchikova, Alla. "Imagining Afghanistan in Deep Time: Nadeem Aslam and the Aesthetics of the Geologic Turn." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol 63, no. 2 (Summer 2017), pp. 288-311.
- Izutsu, Toshihiko, and Toyo. *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*. Dordrecht, Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht, 1981.
- Jaggi, Maya, and Ondaatje, Michael. "Michael Ondaatje in Conversation with Maya Jaggi." *Wasafiri*, vol. 16, no. 32, pp. 5-11.
- James, C. L. R. "The Artist in the Caribbean." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. ½, The 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition: Literature and Ideas (March - June, 2008), pp. 177-180.
- Janson, Horst Woldemar, and Janson, Anthony F. *History of Art: The Western Tradition*. Revised 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson Education, 2004.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987.
- . *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by J. M. D. Micklejohn. London, George Bell and Sons, 1890.



- Kanwal, Aroosa. *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction: Beyond 9/11*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Kapferer, Bruce. *Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance, and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia*. Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2012.
- Katrak, Ketu. "Decolonising Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women's Texts." *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. Edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. New York, Routledge, 1995, pp. 255-258.
- Keane, Marc. *Japanese Garden Design*. EPUB ed, Boston, Tuttle Publishing, 2012.
- . "Listening to Stones." *Sitelines*, vol iv, no 1 (Fall 2008), [https://www.foundationforlandscapestudies.org/pdf/sitelines\\_fall08.pdf](https://www.foundationforlandscapestudies.org/pdf/sitelines_fall08.pdf). Accessed 21 Dec. 2020.
- Kearns, James. *Theophile Gautier, Orator to the Artists: Art Journalism of the Second Republic*. London, Legenda, 2007.
- Keen, Suzanne. *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Keene, Donald. "Japanese Aesthetics." *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 19, no. 3 (July 1969), pp. 293-306.
- Kertzer, Jon. "Justice and the Pathos of Understanding in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *ESC*, vol 29, no. 3-4 (September/December 2003), pp. 116-138.
- Khattak, Shabana, and Akhtar, Hussain. "Gender Mainstreaming in Textbooks Discourse via the Metaphorical Account of Malalai of Maiwand, Afghanistan." *Globalisation and Historiography of National Leaders: Symbolic Representations in School Textbooks*.

- Eds. Joseph Zajda, Tatyana Tsyrlina-Spady, and Michael Lovorn. Dordrecht, Springer, 2017, pp. 229-244.
- Kia, Chad. "Sufi Orthopraxis: Visual Language and Verbal Imagery in Medieval Afghanistan." *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, vol 28, no. 1 January-March 2012, pp. 1-18.
- Kokkola, Lydia. "Truthful (hi)stories in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *Humane Readings: Essays on Literary Mediation and Communication in Honour of Roger D. Sell*. Edited by Jason Finch, Martin Gill, Anthony Johnson, Iris Lindahl-Raittila, Inna Lindgren, Tuija Virtanen and Brita Warvik. Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009.
- Kramnick, Jonathan. *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Kratoska, Paul. *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History*. London, Hurst & Company, 1998.
- Krüger, Anne. "From Truth to Reconciliation: The Global Diffusion of Truth Commissions." *Reconciliation, Civil Society, and the Politics of Memory: Transnational Initiatives in the 20th and 21st Century*. Edited by Birgit Schwelling. Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2012, pp. 339–368.
- Lamarque, Peter. "Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?" special edition of *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 135, no. 2, Aug. 2007, pp. 27-40.
- . "The Uselessness of Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 68, no. 3, summer 2010, pp. 205-214.

- Lampert, Jo. *Children's Fiction about 9/11: Ethnic, National and Heroic Identities*. New York, Routledge, 2010.
- Lane, Richard. "The Beginnings of The Modern Japanese Novel: Kana-zōshi, 1600-1682." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 20, no. ¾ (Dec. 1957), pp. 644-701.
- Layton, Robert. *The Anthropology of Art*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Lazarus, Neil. *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- . "Postcolonial Studies after the Invasion of Iraq." *New Formations*, vol. 59: After Iraq: Reframing Postcolonial Studies, Autumn 2006, pp. 10-22.
- Leckie, Barbara. "Michael Ondaatje." *Profiles in Canadian Literature*, vol. 8, pp. 27-34.
- Lee, Jian Xuan. "Malaysian Writer Tan Twan Eng Finds the Human in the Monster." *The Straits Times*, 18 Sept. 2016,  
<https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/finding-the-human-in-the-monster>.  
 Accessed 21 Dec. 2020.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Selections*. Translated and edited by Philip P. Wiener. New York, Scribner's Sons, 1951.
- Levine, Alan. *The Pacific War: Japan Versus the Allies*. Westport, Praeger, 1995.
- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Lim, David, and Tan, Twan Eng. "On Art and Artifice: A Conversation with Tan Twan Eng." *SARE*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2017), pp. 13-22.

- Lim, David. "The Zen of Japanese Imperialism in Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol 56, no.4, pp. 435-448.
- Lovat, Terence. "The 'Women's Movement' in Modern Islam: Reflections on the Revival of Islam's Oldest Issue." *Women in Islam: Reflections on Historical and Contemporary Research*. Edited by Terence Lovat. New York, Springer, 2012, pp. 1-10.
- Lukens, Marie. "The Fifteenth-Century Miniatures." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 25, no. 9 (May 1967), pp. 317-338.
- Lundy, Patricia, and McGovern, Mark. "Whose Justice? Transitional Justice from the Bottom Up." *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 35, no. 2 (June 2008), pp. 265-292.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Main, Alison, and Platten, Newell. *The Lure of the Japanese Garden*. Kent Town, Wakefield Press, 2002.
- Malmgren, Carl. *Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction*. Bowling Green, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001.
- Marais, Mike. "Violence, Postcolonial Fiction, and the Limits of Sympathy." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 94-114.
- Marinkova, Milena. *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing*. New York, Continuum, 2011.
- Marx John. "Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon." *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Edited by Neil Lazarus. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 83-96.

- Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. London, SAGE Publications, 2005.
- McAfee, Noëlle. *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2008.
- McClure, John. *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 2007.
- McEwan, Ian. "Only Love and then Oblivion." *The Guardian*, 15 Sept 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>. Accessed 13 Oct 2020.
- McGonegal, Julie. *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation*. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.
- Mehta, Geeta, and Tada, Kimie. *Japanese Gardens: Tranquility, Simplicity, Harmony*. Tokyo, Tuttle Publishing, 2008.
- Mehta, Suhaa. "Tradition and Tolerance: Reconfiguring Bihzad in Nadeem Aslam's The Wasted Vigil." *Religion and the Arts*, vol 20 (2016), pp. 336-354.
- Mendis, Ranjini. "Anil's Ghost." *CHIMO: The Newsjournal of the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, no. 14 (Fall 2000), pp. 7-12.
- Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.
- Mishra, Pankaj. *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.
- Mishra, Vijay and Hodge, Bob. "What is Post(-)colonialism?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 276-290.

- Moghissi, Haideh. *Women and Islam: Images and Realities*. Oxon, Taylor and Francis, 2005.
- Mohr, Dunja M., and Däwes, Birgit. “Transnational Dimensions of 9/11: An Introduction.” *Radical Planes? 9/11 and Patterns of Continuity*. Leiden & Boston, Brill Rodopi: 2016.
- Morley, Catherine. “The End of Innocence – Tales of Terror After 9/11.” *Review of International American Studies*, vol 3, no. 3-4 (2008/2009), pp. 82-93.
- Nagao, Gadjin M. “The Bodhisattva Returns to This World.” *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhism*. Edited by Leslie Kawamura. Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981, pp. 61-80.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Nayar, Pramod. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Dorling Kindersley, 2008.
- Norris, Andrew. “‘Us’ and ‘Them’: The Politics of American Self-Assertion After 9/11.” special issue of *Metaphilosophy* vol 35, no. 3, (April 2004), pp. 249-272.
- Nute, Kevin. *Place, Time, and Being in Japanese Architecture*. New York, Routledge, 2004.
- O’Brien, Sarah. “Shared Graves: Empire and Trauma in Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil*.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol 55, no.2, pp. 240-252.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil’s Ghost*. New York, Vintage, 2000.
- . *In the Skin of a Lion*. New York, Vintage International, 1997.
- . “Spider Blues.” *Rat Jelly and Other Poems, 1963-78*. London, M. Boyars, 1980, pp. 62-63.

- Ōnishi, Yoshinori. "Ōnishi Yoshinori and the Category of the Aesthetic." *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*. Edited and Translated by Michele Marra. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1999, pp. 115-140.
- Orbay Grignon, Iffet. "Remarks on the Concept of Pictorial Space in Islamic Painting." *Metu Journal of the Faculty of Architecture*, vol 16, no. 1-2 (1996), pp. 45-57.
- Parry, Benita. *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*. London, Routledge, 2004.
- Pater, Walter. *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. London, Macmillan and Co., 1873.
- Poon, Angelia. "Transcultural Aesthetics and Postcolonial Memory: The Practices and Politics of Remembering in Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 2 (April 2016), pp. 185-201.
- Premasiri, P. D. "A 'Righteous War' in Buddhism?" *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. Ed. Mahinda Deegalle. London & New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 78-85.
- Quayum, Mohammad A. "Malaysian Literature in English: An Evolving Tradition." *Kunapipi*, vol 25, no. 2 (2003), pp. 178-195.
- Rahman, Smita. *Time, Memory, and the Politics of Contingency*. New York, Routledge, 2015.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009.
- . *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*. Translated by John Drury. London, Verso, 2012.
- . *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. New York, Continuum

- International Publishing Group, 2004.
- Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka*. UN, 2011.
- Richter, Gerhard. "Acts of Memory and Mourning: Derrida and the Fictions of Anteriority." *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. Edited by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz. New York, Fordham University Press, 2010, pp. 150-160.
- Rothberg, Michael. "Seeing Terror, Feeling Art: Public and Private in Post-9.11 Literature." *Literature after 9/11*. Eds. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn. London & New York, Routledge, 2008.
- Roxburgh, David. "Kamal al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting." *Muqarnas*, vol 17 (2000), pp. 119-146.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London, Vintage Books, 2010.
- Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine how We See the Rest of the World*. New York, Vintage Books, 1997.
- . *Orientalism*. New York, Vintage Books, 1978.
- Salgado, Minoli. *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. New York, Routledge, 2007.
- Saluti, Andrew. "Defenders of the Floating World." *Art in Print*, vol. 4, no. 4 (November – December 2014), pp. 30-32.
- Satō, Kemmyō Taira, and Kirchner, Thomas. "D. T. Suzuki and the Question of War." *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2008), pp. 61-120.



- Scanlan, Margaret. "Anil's Ghost and Terrorism's Time." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 36, no. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 302-317.
- . "Transparency into Opacity: Nadeem Aslam's Alternative to the 9/11 Novel." *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 103-114.
- Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Schaper, Eva. "Aristotle's Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol 18, no. 71 (Apr. 1968), pp. 131-143.
- Schoneveld, Erin, and Laursen, Sarah. "Representation, Adaptation, and Preservation at the Frontiers in East Asian Art." *Studies in Global Asias*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018), pp. 44-48.
- Scott, Bede. *Affective Disorders: Emotion in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2019.
- Senaratne, Jagath. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1977-1990: Riots, Insurrections, Counterinsurgencies, Foreign Intervention*. Amsterdam, VU University Press, 1997.
- Senior, Olive. "Cane Gang." *Wasafiri*, vol. 19, no. 42 (2004), pp. 96.
- Seoighe, Rachel. *War, Denial and Nation-building in Sri Lanka: After the End*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Sethi, Anita, and Aslam, Nadeem. "Nadeem Aslam: 'I put my grief in my books'." *Independent*, 31 Aug 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/nadeem-aslam-i-put-my-grief-in-my-books-910441.html>. Accessed 14 Oct 2020.
- Sheppard, Anne. *Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987.

- Shibata, Ria. "Apology and Forgiveness in East Asia." *Identity, Trust, and Reconciliation in East Asia: Dealing with Painful History to Create a Peaceful Present*. Edited by Kevin Clements. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 271-298.
- Shiloah, Amnon. *Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-cultural Study*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1995.
- Shohat, Ella. "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'." *Social Text* vol. 31, no. 21, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues (1992), pp. 99-113.
- Simpson, Kirk. *Truth Recovery in Northern Ireland : Critically Interpreting the Past*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013.
- Soeiro, Diana. "«Know Thyself»: Mind, Body and Ethics. Japanese Archery (Kyudo) and the Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze." *Enrahonar* 47 (2011), pp. 199-210.
- Sophocles. *Sophocles I: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Spencer, Jonathan. "Introduction: The Power of the Past." *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*. Edited by Jonathan Spencer. London, Routledge, 1990.
- . Foreword. *Violence, Torture and Memory in Sri Lanka: Life after Terror*, by Dhana Hughes, London, Routledge, 2013.
- Sriram, Chandra Lekha. *Confronting Past Human Rights Violations: Justice vs Peace in Times of Transition*. London, Frank Cass, 2004.
- Stevenson, Deborah. *Cities of Culture: A Global Perspective*. London, Routledge, 2014.
- Tan, Twan Eng. *The Garden of Evening Mists*. Edinburgh, Canongate, 2012.
- . *The Gift of Rain*. Newcastle, Myrmidon Books, 2008.

- Tanizaki, Junichiro. *In Praise of Shadows*. Translated by Thomas Harper and Edward Seidensticker. New Haven, Leete's Island Books, 1977.
- Tay, Frances. "Remembering the Japanese Occupation Massacres: Mass Graves in Post-war Malaysia.: *Human Remains and Identification: Mass Violence, Genocide, and the 'Forensic Turn'*". Edited by Elisabeth Anstett and Jean-Marc Dreyfus. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015, pp. 221-238.
- Tickell, Alex. "Introduction." *South-Asian Fiction in English: Contemporary Transformations*. Ed. Alex Tickell. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 1-18.
- Todorov, Tsvetan. "The Typology of Detective Fiction." *The Narrative Reader*. Edited by Martin McQuillan. London, Routledge, 2000.
- Tse, Kelly. "Queering Imperial History: The Ethics of Reconciliation in Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (June 2018), pp. 1-15.
- Vinokurov, Evgeny. *The War is Over*. Eds. and Trans. Anthony Rudolf and Daniel Weissbort. Cheadle, Carcanet New Press, 1976.
- Wachtel, Eleanor. "Michael Ondaatje." *Writers and Company*. San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1994, pp. 49-63.
- Walcott, Derek. "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory." *The Nobel Prize Nobel Lecture*, 7 Dec. 1992,  
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/walcott/lecture/>. Accessed 21 Dec. 2020.
- Waley, Arthur. *The Nō Plays of Japan*. New York, A. A. Knopf, 1922.
- Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God*. Trans. Emma Craufurd. New York, HarperCollins, 2001.

- Wessell, Leonard. "Alexander Baumgarten's Contribution to the Development of Aesthetics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Spring, 1972), pp. 333-342.
- White, Hayden. *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Wickremeratne, Ananda. "Historiography in Conflict and Violence." *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. Ed. Mahinda Deegalle. London & New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 114-133.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Critic as Artist." *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde: The Plays, the Poems, the Stories and the Essays including De Profundis*. Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2007, pp. 963-1016.
- . "The Decay of Lying." *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde: The Plays, the Poems, the Stories and the Essays including De Profundis*. Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2007, pp. 919-944.
- Wildfeuer, Armin. "Justice and Reconciliation." *Participation and Reconciliation: Preconditions of Justice*. Edited by Armin G. Wildfeuer and Sami Adwan. Opladen and Farmington Hills, Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2011.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. New York, Anchor Books, 1958.
- Wood, Michael. "The Contemporary Novel." *The Columbia History of the British Novel*. Edited by John Richetti, John Bender, Deirdre David, and Michael Seidel. New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.
- . *Children of Silence: On Contemporary Fiction*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

Yarshater, E. "Some Common Characteristics of Persian Poetry and Art." *Studia Islamica*,  
no. 16 (1962), pp. 61-71.

Yeats, W. B. "Among School Children." *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Edited by  
Richard Finneran. New York, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1996, pp. 222.

---. "Byzantium." *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Edited by Richard Finneran. New  
York, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1996, pp. 260

---. "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." *"Easter 1916" and Other Poems*. Mineola, NY,  
Dover Publications, 1997, pp. 5-6.