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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 This special issue of Gender Forum is dedicated to various discussions of the construction of gender in the context of Imperialism and colonial power structures. Acknowledging the profound impact of colonialism on representations and self-understandings of concepts of masculinity and femininity, our contributors examine the role that gender plays in the works of authors writing in a colonial context, past and present.

2 In the first article, "Gender/Mutiny in Edwardian Fiction: Charles Pearce's Fiction of 1857", contributors Ralph Crane and Radhika Mohanram examine how political events in the far-flung spaces of the British Empire affected gender relations in Britain in the Edwardian period. Their focus here lies on the development and expression of masculine anxieties over changing gender relations that led to suffrage for women and shows the closely knit relationship between gender and race in early twentieth century in Britain.

3 The second contribution comes from Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky and focuses on the work of contemporary playwright Tanika Gupta. In her article "Home and Away: Notions of In-Betweenness in Tanika Gupta's *The Waiting Room*", von Czarnowsky argues that Gupta's play presents a mode of cultural in-betweenness, offering alternatives to dichotomous pairs such as biography/fiction, East/West, life/death and tradition/modernity.

4 In the third article, "Masculinity under Imperial Stress: Mr Biswas and V S Naipaul", contributor Parminder Bakshi-Hamm takes on the novel *A House for Mr Biswas* by V S Naipaul and examines the impact of colonisation in the construction of masculinity in Mr Biswas, and insofar there are biographical parallels, and in Naipaul himself. Mr. Biswas' efforts to break out of this world to which he is politically and socially confined eventually crystallise into the one desire – to have a house of his own. The ownership of a house for Biswas is fundamental to establishing his identity as a man within the colonial context.

Gender/Mutiny in Edwardian Fiction: Charles Pearce's Fiction of 1857

By Ralph Crane, University of Tasmania, Australia and Radhika Mohanram,
Cardiff University, UK

Abstract:

This article examines how political events in the far-flung spaces of the British Empire affected gender relations in Britain in the Edwardian period. It offers a reading of an alternate corpus of works which tracks masculine anxieties over changing gender relations that led to suffrage for women and shows the closely knit relationship between gender and race in early twentieth century in Britain.

1 Analysis of fin-de-siècle or early 20th century gender representations in Britain is often done with reference to first-wave feminism and the suffrage movement that culminated in the achievement of the vote for women in 1928. This history shows the fraught and prolonged struggle to transform gender relations and gain personal and group rights and universal suffrage, which was marked not just by gender prejudices but also those of class. But what if we explore this topic of the representation of Edwardian women and their gender relations through an alternative lens? What if we explore it through the theme of Empire to see the connections between the representation of women in Britain and political events that took place in distant climes and far-off places? What sort of new meanings would emerge in this alternative view? Such an analysis would be valid because Britain's empire had caused a skew in gender demographics since the Victorian period as its men left in large numbers to govern the ever-expanding British Empire. Indeed, in the decades leading to the Edwardian period, a shift in gender relations had become imminent. Joanna Trollope points out that by the mid-1800s over 35% of women of reproductive age—those between 20 and 44 years of age—were single (23). The 1871 census showed that there was a surplus of 718,566 women in Britain. This surplus of women was matched by the large numbers of British men stationed all over the colonies, in the army, civil service and civilian life. Furthermore, Britain needed more and more young men to fuel its armies in its dizzying acquisition of empire, especially in the period of high imperialism. Imperial rule internationally had profound influence on domestic matters, especially within the context of gender.

2 In this paper, we will focus on one such iconic moment that shook Britain's imperial rule in mid-nineteenth century – the Sepoy mutiny of 1857 – that changed the course of imperialism, redefined masculinity and affected Anglo-Indian women's lives and that reverberates to the present. Indeed, no fewer than five academic books were written about this event between 2002 and 2007, the 150th anniversary of the mutiny. We will specifically

discuss the relationship between the Sepoy mutiny and gender relations in Britain by examining three novels written by Charles Pearce in the Edwardian period. We want to focus on Pearce's mutiny triptych published between 1909 and 1912 because his status as a British writer (who had never been to India) rather than an Anglo-Indian one, raises interesting issues about the *metaphoric* function played by the Indian Mutiny in the British imaginary¹ at the end of the period of high imperialism. Pearce's triptych also provides an opportunity to comment on the significance of aspects of memory and nostalgia in the construction of gender, as each of his novels deals differently with the recuperation of the past. The origin for this paper lay in the question: Why would a powerful and dominant Britain, seemingly in firm control of a vast Empire, continue to look back to the Mutiny which was perhaps the single-most destabilising moment in its imperial history especially during a period of relative political stability in the Edwardian period? In addition to empire reshaping gender relations, it also reshaped fiction. Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall in *Studies in Literature and History*, published in 1915, points out that the presence of empire had a deep influence in the shaping of fiction from the 1880s through the first decade of the twentieth century in that there was a convergence of the novel of manners with the adventure novel to produce a new form of action novel that did not dwell on the fantastic but rather "on genuine materials ... and a stricter canon of probabilities" (7). Thus the Mutiny, Edwardian gender relations and Edwardian fiction are in a relationship with each other, which we wish to unpack and reveal through our analysis of Charles Pearce's triptych.

3 The Mutiny began on 10 May 1857 in the garrison town of Meerut. It was a violent, and in some ways, inevitable response to divisions between the colonizing British and colonized Indians that dated back years, and included the effects of evangelical Protestantism, and Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse, which in 1856 led to the annexation of Oudh (Awadh). When the uprising was finally put down in 1858, three sites had been permanently engraved on the British imagination: Lucknow, Cawnpore (Kanpur), and Delhi.

4 In Lucknow the besieged Residency held out for five months before it was liberated by troops under the command of Sir Colin Campbell on 17 November 1857. This epic tale of survival amidst crumbling buildings, of men, women, and children suffering the ravages of starvation and disease as well as regular onslaughts from the sepoys who vastly outnumbered them, was considered a high-point of British heroism during the Mutiny. Lucknow also re-encoded masculinity within a militaristic framework – to be physical, athletic, enduring,

¹ We use the term in a psychoanalytic sense, referring to an internalized, idealized image of oneself.

reliant and homosocial was now important to running an empire. The terrible events that unfolded in Cawnpore are the most extreme example of Indian violence during the course of the Mutiny (extremes of British violence within (British) Mutiny history are frequently elided) and, alongside the heroism of Lucknow, stand out above all others in the British imagination of the Mutiny. After surrendering to Nana Sahib in return for safe passage to Allahabad, the remnants of the European garrison were attacked and over 210 women and children were imprisoned and later hacked to death, their bodies being thrown down a nearby well. In both iconic sites, the cultural and racial memory is that of the white woman under threat of rape and murder. This image of Cawnpore became the enduring symbol of the fragility and vulnerability of the British woman in the empire, an image that was in continuum with the 19th century British image of the woman as the Angel in the House². The third iconic site of the Mutiny in the British imagination is Delhi, where its storming and recapture in September 1857, after a long siege, was a major victory for the British, and the turning point of the Mutiny, although its memory has not been engraved as deeply on the British imagination as have Lucknow and Cawnpore: Lucknow was the symbol of British fortitude and a re-imagination of its masculinity that stood against the horror of Cawnpore that soon began to emblemize vulnerable Anglo-Indian³ femininity. The Mutiny—and Mutiny fiction, too—is implicated in the reconfiguring of the masculine militaristic hero and the concomitant reconfiguring of white femininity. Within the gender relations of mid-Victorian Britain and its empire, particularly India, the white woman functioned to give the masculine hero his identity. If he was the militaristic hero, she was the domestic goddess who had to be protected. The white woman came to represent not only womanhood, but the family and home, the white, domestic, threatened spaces that had to be protected at all costs from contamination by, in the case of Mutiny fiction, India. Consequently, the construction of the racial other (Indian mutineers in the case of Mutiny fiction) is inextricably linked to the construction of the white male hero and white womanhood.

² Coventry Patmore's long poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-1862) made this figure popular. Here Patmore referred to the woman of the house who was self-sacrificing and angelic – the perfect woman.

³ We distinguish between British and Anglo-Indian identities as the latter were a hybridized group. Though of British origin, many Anglo-Indians had lived and worked in India for several generations. In *Sahibs, Nabobs and Boxwallahs: A Dictionary of the Words of Anglo-India* Ivor Lewis outlines the shifting meaning of the term Anglo-Indian: 'It first denoted a person of "pure" British descent resident or born in India, but in 1911 the Government of India decided to substitute this term for "Eurasian" as the official one for persons of mixed descent.' He adds that: 'It also refers to anything composed of English and Indian elements, to terms adopted by English from Indian languages, and to literature about India written by British authors in English.' His definition is entirely in accord with the entry in the OED: **A.** *adj.* Of, pertaining to, or characteristic of India under British rule, or the English in India. **B.** *n.* **a.** A person of British birth resident, or once resident, in India. **b.** A Eurasian of India.

5 The 1857 Mutiny can usefully be described as a “critical event” in British imperial history, to borrow Veena Das’s term, that transformed definitions of space and people’s lives in completely new and unexpected ways; it instituted “a new modality of historical action” and new forms of categorization of race, of markets, and of imperial advances which were not “inscribed in the inventory of that situation” (5). For instance, the Mutiny transferred the governance of India from the hands of the East India Company to the Crown, consequently re-inscribing Indians who had been citizens of specific regions of the subcontinent as British subjects; the Anglo-Indians in their turn were transformed from being members of the East India Company army, the civil service, and the like, to becoming part of the machinery of the British Empire, their white bodies markers of their physical might and power over native lives. The Mutiny in Cawnpore, in particular, also resituated British women and children as being completely vulnerable to and threatened by Indian men. As Jenny Sharpe states in her classic work, *Allegories of Empire*, “A representation of [Anglo-Indian] women as the innocent victims of colonial rebellion was instrumental in reestablishing existing structures of colonial authority and in preparing the grounds for new ones” (65). In this critical event, these women were transformed from being wives and mothers to becoming the object of the particular concern of the Empire and the Army. Their sexuality and their vulnerability were articulated not within the private sphere but were rather legislated from within public discourse. For instance, this resituation of Anglo-Indian women is evidenced in the Ilbert Bill controversy of 1883, which gave native officials in the colonial administrative service the authority to try Anglo-Indian subjects living in country towns. The agitation against the Bill reinforced two opposing representations of Indian men: as effeminate and as cruel and therefore inappropriate to try Anglo-Indian women in Court. This Bill was later amended in 1884 so that the separate status and nature of the Anglo-Indians was preserved. Further, and more importantly, the rationality of the judicial system and that of the family, within which the woman was traditionally located, intersected to reveal how the Anglo-Indian woman was reconfigured: she had become the responsibility of the judiciary which defined her legal status and protected her modesty from the reaches of native men.

6 Such was the impact of the Mutiny on the British imaginary that it became the subject of numerous works of fiction, drama, and memoir, and depicted in countless paintings, cartoons, and popular posters where it was often represented through images of the British lion subduing the Indian tiger. Indeed, as Hilda Gregg observes in a survey of Indian Mutiny fiction published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1897, “[o]f all the great events of this century, as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on

the popular imagination” (218). The genre reached its apogee—in terms of both popularity and output—in the late-Victorian period. Nineteen Mutiny novels were published in the 1890s, while only eight were published in the first decade of the new century and only six in the decade that followed. The majority of these heady—and frequently formulaic—adventure fictions feature the white male soldier hero defending threatened white British womanhood as their central narrative trope.

7 A decade after this zenith for the Mutiny novel, Charles E. Pearce, a newspaper editor and prolific author of popular biographies, published a triptych of novels set in each of the three iconic sites in the British memory of the Mutiny: *Love Besieged: A Romance of Lucknow* (1909); *Red Revenge: A Romance of Cawnpore* (1911); and *Star of the East: A Romance of Delhi* (1912). But why, at the end of the Edwardian period (1901-1910), towards the end of the age of high imperialism (1875-1914) did Pearce choose to revive a genre so emphatically associated with the late Victorian period? What events in Edwardian Britain are reflected in his fictions? Are his novels valuable as indices of Edwardian popular consciousness?

8 In his Preface to *Love Besieged* Pearce highlights the continued lack of understanding between the British and Indian communities in India more than half a century after the Mutiny and implies that contemporary events in Anglo-India – the 1905 Bengal partition and 1907 unrest in the Punjab – were making India into a flash point again. Within the context of imperial memory and imperial history, the Punjabi unrest of 1907 represented a citation of the 1857 Mutiny, and prompted Charles Pearce to exhort his readers “never [to] forget the fixed, immutable characteristics of the Indian race. It is well, therefore, that the memory of the past should not be allowed to die out” (*Love Besieged*, 3). It was for this didactic purpose that he penned *Love Besieged* and the succeeding two panels of his Mutiny triptych.

9 Contemporary reviewers praised both *Love Besieged* and *Red Revenge* for their historical veracity. The reviewer for the *Scotsman*, for example, claims “It is clear that [Pearce] has studied the period with more than ordinary industry,” and praises Pearce’s “lifelike” hero and heroine (3). But what does lifelike mean in the context of a Mutiny novel set in the late Edwardian period? Both *Love Besieged* and *Red Revenge* are marked by idealised, white Anglo-Indian masculinity typical of the majority of Mutiny novels, and passive white women lacking agency. By focusing on gender relations, initially in the first two panels of Pearce’s Mutiny set, we will show how they operate as a metaphor for the roles of men and women in the larger political and social arenas of the Edwardian period, in Anglo-India, and in Britain itself.

10 In this next section, we will give brief descriptions of each one of the three novels before we discuss the function of history, memory, and nostalgia and their implications for gender constructions in the triptych.

11 *Love Besieged* is the story of Jean Atherton who joins her magistrate father in Lucknow just as the Mutiny flares. She is evacuated to the Residency where she is thrown into the company of two very different men, Dr Lennard and Jack Hawke, as well as the Eurasian woman, Mrs Ross. Lennard and Hawke function as binary opposites; both are romantically interested in Jean, but while one is open and uncomplicated, the other is moody, socially ostracized, and with a less than honourable past. Dr Lennard is an old-fashioned, gentlemanly hero. Jack Hawke, on the other hand is a manly hero, the officer who bravely leads the military action in the novel, whose shortcomings (his drinking and womanising) highlight the danger of degeneration in Anglo-India. Jean Atherton clearly functions as the white virginal heroine, fresh from home, who gives the soldiers a reason to fight, and who must be protected at all costs. Edith Ross, a Eurasian woman, is represented as racially degenerate and thus always a threat to the purity and safety of the domestic hearth and Victorian gender constructions that valorized the figure of the Angel in the House. Lennard dies, hit by a bullet meant for Jean, and Jack Hawke, whose bravery is instrumental in saving the besieged Anglo-Indians, wins her. Mrs Ross is exposed as a treacherous villain, which is conveniently explained away by her mixed blood.

12 The second panel of Pearce's triptych set in Cawnpore, focuses on Dick Heron, a fresh young soldier, who believes himself in love with Ruth Armitage, but is also in danger of falling into bad ways through his contact with the natives. The Mutiny comes just soon enough to prevent his fall. As in *Love Besieged* there are two principal rivals for the heroine's affections, in this case both uncomplicated masculine heroes: Dick Heron and his brother Phil. The latter is a Crimean war veteran who has been recovering from the injuries he sustained at Balaclava who comes out to India to join the relieving forces, principally to rescue Dick as well as Ruth in whom he is romantically interested. Dick dies heroically, while Phil Heron arrives in Cawnpore in time to save Ruth from being murdered by the evil Hoosainee Khanum, the servant of Nana Sahib's favourite dancing girl. The narrative toys with the constructions of white masculinity and femininity, but the disruption to established gender roles—like the disruption to the empire—is only temporary, and with the relief of Cawnpore and the arrival of Philip Heron, who rescues Ruth, order is restored to the narrative, gender, and the empire.

13 Pearce's final novel in his triptych, *A Star of the East*, focuses on Delhi, which was by far the least traumatic of all the three sites of Mutiny in the British imaginary. This slim novel, which at first appears to repeat the familiar formula of the earlier two – a masculine protagonist who puts duty before romance and loyalty to comrades above the unreasonable demands of a woman, a youthful heroine, an evil Indian woman, and inept Indian men – is intriguing for its brief narrative development. Guy Horsford, a soldier, is romantically interested in Clare Stanford. Whilst watching a nautch (a dance performed by women), he discovers that the young nautch dancer is his dear friend Jack Folliot's Eurasian pre-teenage daughter, Nara. As Jack died saving his life, Guy feels compelled to save Nara, despite Clare's opposition. After rescuing Nara, he arranges for her to be placed in the care of her aunts in England, who send her to boarding school. Meanwhile, Clare marries Andrew Meldrum, one of the richest men in India, and Guy is ordered to Burma. Five years later Nara, now an attractive young woman, leaves school and, wishing to return to India, takes a post with Clare Meldrum who, estranged from her husband, is about to embark for the subcontinent after an extended stay in Europe. Clare and Nara, who meet Guy in Calcutta, both desire him. In the final scenes, as Delhi is set on fire by the mutineers, Guy and Nara die while trying to escape together and Clare becomes the mistress of a Frenchman. The focus of this narrative is not the Mutiny but rather Guy's relationship with the two women, and, indeed, the novel concludes as the Mutiny in Delhi commences.

14 The uneasy fit of *A Star of the East* within Mutiny fiction is evident in its brevity, its foreclosed romance, its ambivalent representations of race, its representation of something approaching paedophilia or incestuous desire, and its conclusion, where the male protagonist, far from surviving the Mutiny, perishes at its outset. All of these factors signal a different positioning of the reader. Mutiny fiction inaugurated the Anglo-Indian Station romance and both share the same premise – that romance can develop only in the face of extreme adversity. Indrani Sen points out that the notion of extreme adversity is not limited to Mutiny fiction, but extends to all Anglo-Indian or Station romance in which India is presented as a "danger-ridden" zone for British women who venture there (75). For Sen, the basic ingredients of Anglo-Indian Station romances consist of "the arrival of the fresh-faced heroine from England, her temporary 'disorderly' behaviour, resulting from the friendship of the local married flirt, and finally coming to her senses and marrying the manly hero" (75). Whilst Pearce partakes of the basic structure of these romances, he changes reader expectations of the figure of the heroine in *A Star of the East*.

15 The narrative signals its ambivalence towards Anglo-Indian society in two different ways. First, the text signals its ambivalence by positing Clare and Nara as binary opposites. For instance, the differences between Clare and Nara are drawn in the ways they address Guy. Clare demands in a note, “I want you. Come”; Nara, in turn, pleads, “I only want you, Sahib” (64). This is echoed later when Clare is presented as defiant where Nara is gentle (124). Notwithstanding the fact that Clare is Guy’s social equal as well as, initially, the object of his desire, and Nara is very young and effectively his ward early in the novel, it is through these insistent comparisons that the reader begins to perceive Nara as a rival for Guy’s affections. Thus the narrative seems to be unable to identify a singular heroine. Despite the structure of triangulated desire, there is no happy ending. And though the novel emulates the injunctions of a Mutiny romance—the virginal woman who marries the manly hero-- it also violates them by having Guy and Nara killed quite unexpectedly in the conclusion.

16 Secondly, the ambivalence is signaled by the final coupling of Guy and Nara that proves to be problematic for the reader as Nara “could hardly have been more than eleven” (10) at the outset of the narrative in 1852. At the conclusion of the narrative she is sixteen, still in her mid-teens. Nevertheless, the narrative sexualizes her throughout: “Her childish beauty was strangely fascinating” (10). Nara’s training as a nautch dancer and the early descriptions of her can be explained within the context of the early sexual maturing of Indians that was often perceived as a sign of their degeneration. Yet the narrative clearly also seems to suggest that the Anglo-Indian men enjoying the nautch at which Nara first makes an appearance are equally sexually depraved. The alignment of the fascinated reader with the men witnessing the nautch not only makes both experience Nara’s body voyeuristically, but also seems to normalize the conclusion where the narrative voice describes Nara and Guy’s love for each other as being something other than how “love is understood in this world. It was something purer—something higher” (151). In fact, it is the excessive sexualizing of Nara throughout the narrative that makes the reader unsurprised that she could be a potential mate for Guy Horsford, even though he is also a parental figure to her. The trajectory of sexual desire is intensely problematic in this text as desire is represented as perverse – Indian women as nautch dancers and temptresses, all men as being sexually deviant with paedophilic or incestuous desires, and Anglo-Indian women as differently perverse, loving one person but marrying another, having affairs, and living apart from their husbands. Indeed, all is not well in Anglo-India in this novel, and consequently intimacy and desire take perverse turns. The only happy relationship in the novel appears to be that of Nara’s dead parents – Jack Folliott and the unnamed “Mohammedan girl.” But this happy relationship is

limited by the facts that Folliott neither marries her nor tells his family in Britain about her or their daughter, leaving Guy, his best friend, to inform them when he rescues Nara.

17 While Station romances and Mutiny fiction normally frown on cross-racial relationships, this narrative's ambivalent stance normalizes Jack Folliott's and Guy Horsford's relationships, and leads us to the surprising conclusion that happy relationships ought to be cross-racial. Similarly, the novel's treatment of Anglo-Indian women—Clare as capricious, marrying not for love but for money, separating from her husband and wanting to have an affair with Guy – turns the traditional expectations of the Mutiny novel – that all natives are bad, all Anglo-Indian men sexually beyond reproach, and all Anglo-Indian women long-suffering – on their head.

18 In the classic work *Nationalism and Sexuality*, George Mosse shows the close connection between the ideas of nationalism and respectability and suggests that both these terms “assigned everyone his [sic] place in life, man and woman, normal and abnormal, native and foreigner; any confusion between these categories, threatened chaos and loss of control” (16). In Mosse's work, for nationalism to function, it is manliness that becomes the lynchpin, that maintains order over the chaos that would otherwise ensue within the nation because it symbolised “the nation's spirit and material vitality” (23). Mosse suggests that the roles of the sexes had to be clearly differentiated and any form of sexual perversion could be eschewed only through the strict maintenance of manliness.

19 While Mosse's work is specific to German nationalism, it is also pertinent to Pearce's work which was a product of high imperialism. *A Star of the East* radically rewrites masculinity and femininity in that it represents Clare as a reproachful character who does not subscribe to any of the ideals of Anglo-Indian femininity, and Guy as a hero who is not particularly successful in his heroism. His problematic “heroism” can be seen in his unsuccessful attempts to spy on the Indians: on the two occasions he disguises himself, he also betrays himself by speaking in English. Ironically, it is Nara who gives him the information on the impending Mutiny that she overhears when she is “disguised” in European clothing. Again, late in the novel, when he is imprisoned in Delhi, it is Nara who manages to rescue him. Ideal Anglo-Indian masculinity and femininity as commonly drawn in Anglo-Indian fiction (in both the Mutiny romance and the Station romance) are attenuated and called into question in this text.

20 It is this subversion of the Mutiny novel – a purportedly historical novel that contains hardly any historical details of the events of the Mutiny in Delhi, and that re-genders the protagonists from idealized types to ones that are ordinary – that lends complexity to *A Star*

of the East and raises questions about the representations of women that are also asked in *Love Besieged* and *Red Revenge*. Reading the triptych together provides an alternative narrative of Pearce's novels to the one in which they are generally perceived as an anachronistic evocation of the Mutiny. One could say that Pearce's triptych contains the strains and stresses of shifting gender roles that became prevalent from the 1880s onwards in Britain. This shift is most obvious in *A Star of the East* where Guy's "masculinity" is questioned and is depleted in its power. In contrast, Clare's sexually transgressive femininity goes against the grain of the Angel in the House companionable love that the heroines in *Love Besieged* and *Red Revenge* offer to their suitors. Such a reading is particularly valid, especially in the representation of the Eurasian Nara who, notwithstanding her racial contamination, is the only virtuous person left in the text. Such a depiction of the Eurasian is in stark contrast to that of Mrs Ross in *Love Besieged*, who is perceived as sexually transgressive because she is Eurasian (which also explains her murderous tendencies). In contrast, *A Star of the East* critiques Anglo-Indian women as well as upper-class women in Britain who are unable to love or be kind to family members.

21 The question remains as to why, in this triptych of historical novels on the 1857 Indian Mutiny, Pearce chooses to introduce Anglo-India's triumphant site only in order to foreclose the battles that led to triumph? If the final novel in the triptych is linked to a site of British victory, why does it also have an ambivalent message about its protagonists – a hero who has an unhealthy desire, an Anglo-Indian heroine who is an adulterer, and a biracial child-woman who exhibits the desirable qualities that the purely white Anglo-Indian protagonists lack? To address those questions we want to shift direction to explore the meanings and relationships of memory and history and the part that they play in readings of the Mutiny. Such an approach is apposite considering that Pearce's triptych consists of three historical panels. We will begin by unpicking briefly the tight relationship between memory and nostalgia, as together they function to remember the past in various ways, not unlike Pearce's attempts to memorialize the 1857 Mutiny. It is this unpicking of this relationship between memory and nostalgia that will lead us to the triptych's commentary on Edwardian gender relations.

22 As a discipline, the writing of history in the early period was perceived as a nationalist project which led to a specific codification of historical knowledge in the nineteenth century. With the establishment of history as a bounded discipline, it became the institutional guarantee of all collective memory. Within this context, the role of memory, once perceived as the very source of history, diminished as historiography as a body of knowledge grew. But

the practice of *cultural* history and the recuperation of *cultural* memory in the 1960s, the importance of social memory (as different from nationalist history) came to the fore. This new methodology led to a more fluid understanding of the past, as memories recuperated in the present tended to be fluid. Furthermore, cultural history and memory also came to be perceived as radical in its recuperation of lost, “unimportant,” or underprivileged voices that challenged dominant understandings of nationalist history. Thus, cultural history and memory narratives revealed the structures of forgetting within dominant history.

23 If history as perceived in the early phase of its nationalist project was purportedly based on “verifiable” facts that can be found in the archives, nostalgia, in contrast, is based on a particular rendition of loss which is more in alignment with the writer’s present than with the historical past. Thus nostalgia has an inbuilt amnesia as it forecloses the dull, the grey, and the mundane in order to create the past as a retroactive construct from the present. In its turn, notwithstanding its supposed veracity, there is an implicit selective amnesia imputed to history as well in that it is constituted by what Shoshana Felman suggests is “a double silence” of both the oppressed who are traditionally voiceless, and that of official history which is silent to the tradition of the oppressed (213). Thus both history and nostalgia work through silences and omissions. Yet while history strives to represent and critique the past, nostalgia evokes a certain version of it to relive that past. Susan Stewart argues in *On Longing* that: “The past is constructed from a set of presently existing pieces. There is no continuous identity between these objects and their referents. Only the act of memory constitutes their resemblance” (145).

24 In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym suggests that nostalgia is “a symptom of our age, a historical emotion” and that outbreaks of it often followed revolutions. The outbreaks also point to the “unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that become obsolete” (xvi). Boym categorises two forms of nostalgia, restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia is often at the core of religious and national revivals and focuses on a return to national symbols and myths. It emphasized a return to origins and a conspiracy theory which is a reflection of what Boym calls a “pre-modern conception of good and evil” (43). Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, often negotiated between the unitary national history and collective memory. Notwithstanding its expression of a longing for home, the emphasis on collective memory caused the narrative of reflective nostalgia to be “ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary” (50).

25 We suggest that anxieties in fin-de-siècle Britain, the anxieties over shifting social relations, such as the refusal of women to be properly feminine, are displaced on to

sexualized, racialized, and mutinous Indian bodies in order to evoke a past which was less ambiguous and more orderly. The gender relations at the end of *Love Besieged* and *Red Revenge* show the restoration of an imperial patriarchal order out of step with the Edwardian period in which Pearce wrote. The unsafe home Pearce depicts in his Mutiny triptych is also metonymically linked to the unfamiliar home that Britain had become by the time he came to write his novels.

26 In the corpus of Mutiny novels, it is Flora Annie Steele's *On the Face of the Waters* that comes closest to a representation of a reflective nostalgia. Its interrogation of masculinity, representations of racial divide, and its irony make it a complex novel. Pearce's triptych, on the other hand, contains a restorative nostalgia that becomes visible in the final novel, *A Star of the East*, which is replete with foreclosures. Nostalgia, or the longing for home, is also premised upon a great sense of insecurity. Notwithstanding the rumbles for independence in India, Britain in the early years of the twentieth century had undergone huge social changes and the Mutiny functions as a palimpsest for those changes. Our analysis of the focus on the woman's body in Pearce's triptych emphasises the feminist understanding that the body is the site of taxonomical reflection, suggesting hierarchies, anxieties, fantasies, and categories. 1857 functions as a marker of the threat to (white) male patriarchal authority domestically as well as in the colonies. This year not only saw British masculinity threatened by the Mutiny, but also the passage of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act that for the first time gave women a limited right to divorce their husbands (if they could prove adultery plus violence, incest, or bigamy). The decades that followed the Mutiny saw further erosions to patriarchal authority in the home: in 1873, the Custody of Infants Act gave women the right of access to their children after a separation or divorce; the 1884 Married Women's Property Act gave women the right to retain property bought with her money or brought into the marriage; and the 1890 Matrimonial Causes Act gave her further rights to divorce her husband. It is a commonplace to cite that it is imperial rule in general that influenced discourses around gender and sexuality in late Victorian Britain. As Antoinette Burton suggests, "[T]he beginnings of the organized British women's movement at mid-century coincided with the apogee of British imperial preeminence" (2). British women's rights kept apace with the expansion of the empire, and the women's movement in Britain achieved many concessions: higher education, marriage law reform, and municipal suffrage. Indeed, it was the presence of empire and its productions of racial hierarchies that led to women's rights because, as the argument went, British women were hierarchically superior to colonised men. The British woman's body became "a dense transfer point for relationships of

power,”⁴ and a number of feminists have gestured at the close intertwining of the discourses of women in Britain and the racial Other under imperialism⁵. Indeed, the value of British women became visible only when they were at their most vulnerable as in the Mutiny at Cawnpore. In short, white femininity could come into visibility only in its relationship to its racial Other.

27 The British woman’s body as somatic territory that reveals distinctions between normal and deviant became evident in the post-Mutiny period through the emergence of the figure of the New Woman. This figure was celebrated in the closing years of the nineteenth century, particularly the 1880s and 1890s, and became metonymically linked with the very notion of modernity at the turn of the century. Angelique Richardson points out that over a hundred novels and even more short stories were written by or contained the figure of the New Woman in the final years of the nineteenth century (1-32). Additionally, Ann Ardis argues that the New Woman replaced the figure of the Angel in the House that became popular in the mid-nineteenth century (qtd in Richardson 7). Thus the figure of the New Woman is associated with modernism, with the challenge to traditional comprehensions of patriarchal authority, masculinity and femininity, and with disruption and subversion. The New Woman interrogated marriage and heterosexuality, supported socialism, and was perceived as being simultaneously asexual and mannish as well as hypersexual and emphasising the importance of physical passion. Ultimately, the figure of the New Woman constituted a heterogenous group, espousing new attitudes to femininity, marriage, and sexuality while also simultaneously endorsing the attitudes of the eugenicists for whom the maternal figure was central to the production of healthy citizens (and, consequently, for the very maintenance of empire).

28 So how does the role of the New Woman influence the representation of women (and men) in Pearce’s Edwardian Mutiny triptych? Of what relevance would this modern figure be in novels that represent an event that took place over fifty years earlier? Novelists who used the figure of the New Woman frequently did so to interrogate the conventions of marriage, as in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and in Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895). Novels that incorporated the New Woman focused on marital breakdown, adultery, sexuality before marriage, and single-motherhood, destroying the foundations of idealized Victorian womanhood (see Cunningham 16-18). We

⁴ We are, of course, misusing Foucault here, for whom it is sexuality that is the dense transfer point for relationships of power. See *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*.

⁵ See Burton, *Burdens of History*, Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects*, and Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire*.

suggest that this triptych engaged with this figure by intertwining racialized representations that bespeak an anxiety over the threats to conventional and patriarchal masculinity that *both* the Mutiny and the New Woman signified.

29 It is undoubtedly the case that the expanding role of women in the public arena in the 1890s and beyond was reflected in imperial fiction, notably in the work of Bessie Marchant in a general colonial sense, and more particularly, in an Indian sense, in the work of Anglo-Indian women writers such as Flora Annie Steel, Maud Diver, and others whose heroines were brave and adventurous beyond the fortitude and pluck that had always been expected of white women in colonial settings. Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*, for example, features a strong, even masculinized heroine in Kate Erlton, who on several occasions saves, rather than is saved by, the hero Jim Douglas. In *New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain*, LeeAnne M. Richardson attempts to show the links between masculine adventure fiction and New Woman fiction as both became popular at the same moment in English literary tradition. She suggests that juxtaposing the two subgenres "illuminates the development and interdependence of gender politics and imperialism in late-Victorian Britain" (2). She also examines the appropriation of the New Woman figure by male writers who wrote colonial adventure fiction and suggests that such strategies had a double function, as a response to market considerations as well as to neutralize the threat of the New Woman writer. New Woman fiction, in which the heroines usurped masculine spaces, was political in that it questioned patriarchal ideology. When writers of colonial adventure fiction represented such women, Richardson claims it was "to conquer her savage nature ... [to make her] consent to domesticity and bear a child" (76).

30 While both *Love Besieged* and *Red Revenge* can be read in this light, *A Star of the East* seems to have no such subversive move. It is a novel that simultaneously encapsulates the masculine anxieties of the erosion of privileges while also accepting it. Charles Pearce's three Mutiny novels provide ideal examples for exploring the way the expanding role of women, both in the Anglo-Indian context and at home in Britain, is reflected in Mutiny fiction, which, as Christopher Herbert explains, had by the end of the nineteenth century "proliferated to the point of becoming a major subcategory of the British novel" (273).

31 In short, 1857 confirmed the triumph of imperialism in the British imaginary. The Mutiny in Pearce's triptych functions as a metaphor that expressed early-twentieth-century gender relations by evoking the outrages committed by Indians on British women's bodies. The focus on the Anglo-Indian women's vulnerabilities functions as a contrast to Pearce's present where women not only did not need the same protection from men, but rather where

social relations between men and women had resulted in the attenuation of British masculinity. The references in the triptych to the dead white male body fallen in the Mutiny, are relevant to Pearce's Edwardian present. The evoking of the mutinous racial other has to be read in its metonymic relationship to the sexual other of the masculine national imaginary in Britain. The new beginning promised at the end of each of Pearce's novels is also a desire to wipe out the troubled present. Pearce's citing of the Mutiny is a nostalgic longing for a lost place at a lost time; it is a nostalgia that has its origin in millenarianism as well as an Anglo-Indian desire for a home that is not desirable any more. The nostalgia to restore the lost origins of post-mutiny patriarchal order goes hand-in-hand with the realization that the past is indeed a distant country.

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Home and Away: Notions of In-betweenness in Tanika Gupta's *The Waiting Room*

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Abstract:

When faced with feisty Priya, heroine of Tanika Gupta's *The Waiting Room*, one cannot help but feel that ghosts on the stage have come a long way since Hamlet's gloomy father. Gupta's unlikely ghostly heroine dominates the play and all the characters in it, breaking a great many traditions as the plot develops. This article argues that Gupta's play presents a mode of cultural in-betweenness, offering alternatives to dichotomous pairs such as biography/fiction, East/West, life/death and tradition/modernity. In-betweenness as used and presented by Gupta serves as a means to criticise and reduce the ethnically limited reception and perception of British-Asian women's writers today.

Well, I've been ranting and raving about this for years: (...) they put you in a box. You don't call Tom Stoppard a Czech writer or Harold Pinter a white Jewish writer, so why do we have to be called either women writers or Asian writers? For years I had been resisting writing plays that are only about Asian people, and writing plays about arranged marriages and all the rest of the clichés. I think that if you are a writer you should be allowed to write whatever you want. (Gupta in Sierz 266)

1 Tanika Gupta's *The Waiting Room* (2000), staged at the Royal National Theatre in London, winner of the prestigious John Whiting Award, traces the story of Priya Bannerjee, a 53 year-old female Indian immigrant to Britain, and a ghost to boot. Chronicling the period around Priya's death, the two-act play follows its heroine as she lingers in the world of the living, rights her wrongs and makes her peace before she finally transcends into the titular waiting room, a non-denominational version of heaven.

2 With a female Asian character at its centre, and a female British-Asian woman playwright behind the scenes, the labels of "woman writer" or "Asian writer" Gupta so resents seem hard to shake and to thus once more confirm the binary oppositions that inform colonial discourse (cf. Childs et al. 217). One is either a woman writer or a writer, an Asian writer or a British writer. But this article argues that *The Waiting Room* offers much more than a reading limited to the writer's and the protagonist's gender and ethnic identity. While there was "no place for inbetweens" (ibid) in colonial discourse, *The Waiting Room* is deliberately postcolonial in its approach. As Chris Weedon points out in *Identity and Culture*,

Recent fiction by British women of South Asian descent suggests that Britain is not only multi-cultural but is reshaping notions of culture and identity, producing hybrid forms that draw on both so-called 'ethnic' and white British identities, cultural forms and practices. (114)

The Waiting Room continuously produces and reiterates hybrid forms out of dichotomies such as (auto)biography/fiction, India/England (as representations of East and West), life/afterlife and tradition/modernity. Elements and characters can be moved from one category to the next, and their identity is formed with and by this fluidity.

In-between: (Auto)biography and Fiction

3 Tanika Gupta's first play, *Voices on the Wind*, is a dramatic retelling of a part of her family history. It focuses on her grandfather's brother, Dinesh Gupta, who was a member of the Bengal Volunteers, a group striving for Indian independence. Hanged at the age of nineteen for shooting a high level government official, Dinesh Gupta was seen as a martyr by his Indian and as a terrorist by his English contemporaries (cf. Sierz 261). It was his story Tanika Gupta sought to explore decades later. *The Waiting Room* too draws on Gupta's family history, but moves from the genre of biography into that of autobiography.

4 The obvious similarity lies in the ethnic background of both the writer Gupta and the characters she created for the play. Both have a Bengali Indian background, both live in England. Like Priya's children, Tara and Akash, Tanika Gupta was born in England as the daughter of immigrants. "I'm quite interested in that middle-class, Indian generation of people who, like my parents, came over in the early sixties," Gupta shares (Stephenson and Langridge 117), and makes Priya, Firoz and Pradip members of this particular age group and social class.

5 But the key parallel between the play and Gupta's life lies elsewhere. "I fictionalized my father, making him a woman," Gupta to Sierz (263). Like Priya, Gupta's father died from a sudden stroke at the age of 53, and his death and the ensuing funeral rites find representation in the play. "It was quite weird because suddenly all these Hindu relatives appeared, with ritualized weeping and wailing, and leaving out glasses of water for the soul on its journey," Gupta reminisces (ibid). Before the play's three male characters enter the stage, it is only inhabited by the props and an unmoving Priya in her casket, but the grieving acquaintances set the scene, as "we hear the wailing and crying of several Indian women – high pitched and feverish" (TWR 11). Once the men enter, Pradip, Priya's widower, begins to put glasses of water on surfaces all over the room. The perception of these events as "weird" was passed on from playwright to character as Akash, Priya's son, is positively irate with the wailing acquaintances and shows scepticism when his father carries out the water ritual. The implementation of Indian funeral rites presents a stark contrast to the middle-class English setting that is established and is a first instance of cultural hybridity in practice.

6 Other than using her father's death as the blueprint for Priya's character, the main element of fictionalisation lies in giving Priya's ethereal guardian the shape of Dilip Kumar, who is a famous Indian actor. It is swiftly made clear that all the immortal soul and the 'real' person have in common is their looks: the real Dilip Kumar is still very much alive and plays no part in Priya's journey.

Priya: So who in buggery are you? Dilip Kumar's not dead. I saw a film with him in it last week and come to think of it – he was fat and bloody old.
(TWR 23)

The immortal soul has a personality that is completely separate from the real Kumar and only wears his skin, so to speak. At the end of the play, the immortal soul moves on to take the shape of another iconic figure for the next person he will guide into the afterlife. This time, he is set to become Elvis Presley. By using Presley as the next shape of the guardian and therefore as a means of comparison, Gupta cleverly explains Kumar's importance in Indian popular culture to those in the audience who may not be aware of his cultural relevance.

7 Even without any knowledge of Gupta's personal background, the play offers a direct connection to 'the real life' by turning a real person into a character of the play, mixing the real and the fictional and creating one of the many instances of in-betweenness.

In-between: India and England

8 As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, India and England are here not only understood as countries themselves, but as representations of East and West. Given the play's multi-ethnic background, notions of immigration, home, and identity, and thus, overarchingly, postcolonialism invariably form an important part of the play. As David Punter points out in *Postcolonial Imaginings*, "the issue of what is and what is not postcolonial is a complex and open one" (11). *The Waiting Room* features aspects of the postcolonial in the diasporic nature of the Priya's and Pradip's settlement in England (all acquaintances of theirs that are mentioned throughout the play seem to be of Indian heritage, there is no-one with an English name, which creates the impression that they move largely in an Indian environment in England) and, in a subtler manner, in Priya's teasing that Firoz, as a man of the East, is now going to conquer the West "with his prehistoric camera" (TWR 65). This reversal of conquest, however ironically meant by Priya, is something that is only possible once postcolonialism has been established as a critical mode of thinking.

9 The Bannerjee family's identity is tied to both Britain and India: while Priya and Pradip live and work in the UK, and seem to own no real estate in India, their mother country

still plays an important part in their lives. Priya especially had made plans to show Tara her home country.

Tara: She was going to take me back to her birthplace in Benares and then we were planning a tour of South India and all the temples. (TWR 28)

Priya: As we agreed, we'll start off in Delhi. Shop 'til we drop. And then head off to Benares... I'll show you the little house where I was born. [...] Just us girls, eh? No men. Get away from this ghastly winter and enjoy the sun on our skin. (TWR 30)

Showing Tara, whom Priya feels especially close to, her birthplace and the country where she spent her formative years was important to her. While Priya had other plans that she could not bring to fruition (such as continuing her academic career), the journey back to her roots was only rendered impossible by her untimely death. In *Away – The Indian Writer as an Expatriate*, Amitava Kumar proposes that “Indian writers, through their writing, repeatedly make their way back to the Indian subcontinent” (xiv), and this certainly applies to Gupta with regards to *The Waiting Room*.

10 While the parent generation is tied to the geographical and metaphorical spaces of India and England, the child generation is furthermore connected to continental Europe. Priya's daughter Tara is a 21st century embodiment of in-betweenness and hybridity: a Briton of Indian descent, now living in Paris, she returns from a business in Cairo to attend her mother's funeral. She is a fictional representative of a British-Asian generation that has “swiftly acquired a high level of bi- and indeed multi-cultural competence, such that they [...] are able to act and react appropriately in a wide range of differently ordered arenas” (Ballard 203). This wide geographical distribution creates a setting that is not only diasporic with regards to the parent generation, but also transnational with regards to the children's generation, thus effectively taking the growing trend of international mobility into account. It further shows that families with a history of emigration/immigration are not only tied to two places, namely those of origin and destination, but that the origin/destination dichotomy is refuted as an absolute. Instead, through the character of Tara, a globalised and nomadic lifestyle finds representation on the stage.

11 This is in keeping with Kumar arguing that “the writers in the diaspora are a product of movement,” and as such, “they embody travel” (xvii). This statement can be applied not only to the writers themselves, but also to the characters they create. Tara, about whom her father complains that she is always “off in some country with an unpronounceable name” (TWR 43) and – in a more mythical way – Priya are characters who are moving from one

place to another, showing that the journey of life (and afterlife) is never truly over.

12 It is interesting to see how the practicalities of travelling have changed for the generations: where Priya's first journey from India to the UK required spending weeks on a ship, Tara is able to make the journey from Cairo to England within two days. The advent of airplanes has made travelling faster and easier, thus supporting the international lifestyle of Tara and Firoz while at the same time giving Priya the possibility to visit her expat daughter with relative ease. Pradip on the other hand seems more rooted in England, and wary of another big journey. He has fully arrived at his destination and unlike his late wife, is more reluctant to accept his daughter's move abroad. Priya's appreciation of Tara's lifestyle contrasts sharply with Pradip's inability to understand why Tara wants to leave the country he himself immigrated to decades earlier.

13 This ties in with another key question raised by Amitava Kumar, namely "how (...) the writer of Indian origin living abroad, which in the most cases means living in the West, negotiate[s] longing and belonging?" (xvi). On the level of the writer, longing and belonging is negotiated by establishing an Indian-British ethnicity for the characters in *The Waiting Room* and by having them negotiate longing and belonging for India. Pradip is initially not portrayed as seeking to return to India, but does carry out Indian and Hindi rituals after his wife's death. He has brought his Indian heritage with him to the UK, alleviating the need to physically revisit his mother country. Towards the end of the play, he resolves to return Priya's ashes to India and to scatter them in the Ganges, thereby creating the feeling that he wants his wife to come full circle geographically and culturally. Priya on the other hand longed to visit India with her daughter before her death, thus passing the connection to the country on to the next generation. Overall, the longing for the country of origin is present, both in Priya and (through her death) in Pradip, but the sense of belonging to England is stronger. Both Pradip and Priya have made the UK their home, and are unwilling to leave it permanently. Ironically, this is precisely what Priya has to do in death. The physical spaces of first India and later England have therefore been turned into temporal spaces, which must be travelled through and left behind to make room for the next destination.

14 The play also negotiates the spaces of India and England linguistically. According to Weedon, "language is central to racism, colonialism and notions of identity and hybridity" (106). Even though all characters in *The Waiting Room* are of Indian descent, be it in the first or in the second generation, the main language that they converse in is English, occasionally enriched with Bengali terms of endearment and address. Staging the play in English is of course also a question of practicality that is linked to the target audience. While Gupta is

bilingual and fluent in both Bengali and English, the same cannot be presupposed for her audience and it would be a daring move (both critically and financially) to stage a play in another language than English at the National Theatre. Still, the use of English as the predominant language in a play centred around an Asian-British family already develops a mode of cultural hybridity.

15 Returning once again to Gupta's concern about being critically limited as a writer because of her ethnic identity and her reluctance to write "plays that are only about Asian people" (Gupta in Sierz 264 ff.), the character composition in *The Waiting Room* must be re-examined. All characters are located in the in-between, drawing on both cultural circles simultaneously, and thus afford casting opportunities to actors with precisely this background. All roles are deliberately designed for Asian-British, rather than 'only' British actors. This is in keeping with Gabriele Griffin's assessment (outlined in *Theatres of Difference*) that Asian and Black women writers' works often tend

to have significant numbers of roles for Black and Asian female characters, sometimes all-female casts, which gives women from those communities – frequently socially and culturally marginalized, especially in theatre – significant cultural space, in terms of performance opportunities. (11)

In-between: Life and Afterlife

16 Leaving the geographical spheres of England and India behind, Priya embarks on her life's very last grand journey, but moving on life to afterlife is a difficult process with many rules. As Dilip explains to Priya,

it is *I* who have come to – shall we say instruct *you*. We have certain formalities we have to go through. Certain procedures that we must follow.
Dilip produces a piece of paper from his pocket and runs through it with his finger.
(TWR 21)

So while there are no papers that need to be signed, no passports that need to be shown, the entry into the afterlife has requirements so complex and specific that even an immortal soul has to write them down. The humour of the situation is lost on Priya, who, at this point, is still more concerned with ferociously denying her death.

18 She is caught between life and afterlife, between her old self and the new self she can be reborn as (TWR 22). Entering the afterlife figures as a second – and in this case – permanent immigration. Where, during her first immigration as a young girl, she was accompanied to England by Firoz, it is now Dilip who acts as her guide. From a feminist point of view, it seems questionable that Priya is portrayed as needing male assistance on

both of her two decisive journeys, but the reasons necessitating said assistance differ significantly. Firoz accompanied Priya on her way to England because Pradip believed she needed a chaperone, whereas Dilip has to provide actual guidance because the journey cannot possibly be made without his instructions. So assistance is really only needed in one case, namely the latter one. Once her body is burned, Priya can embark on a number of smaller journeys into the dreams and memories of her loved ones, thus slipping in and out of past and present at her will. She is no longer bound by temporal linearity, so when she slips into Firoz's dream, she *is* back on the boat taking her to England, no guides necessary, instead of simply remembering being there. Death therefore frees her from both social conventions and geographical and physical restrictions.

18 But Priya's new-found freedom is not without limits: in order to enter the titular waiting room, she has to revisit the darker moments of her life as well. Her eternal guide Dilip is needed to make sure that she does so and thus helps her attain spiritual and mental equilibrium. Dilip's importance for the play cannot be stressed enough, as he is not only needed to propel the plot forward, but also carries a heightened metaphorical importance. It has already been stated that the immortal soul in the shape of a real person is a representation of the reality/fiction dichotomy. But the character is not only a representation of in-betweenness, but rather its embodiment. Lacking a name or body of his own, he always resorts to borrowing that of another. He is constantly in flux, a shape determined by those he is sent to guide. Dilip, who could be anyone the deceased wishes him to be, mentions "Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus Christ, Lord Krishna" (TWR 24) and "Elvis Presley" (TWR 103) as other people whose shape he might take, and explains that he comes "dressed as" a person the deceased will look up to and admire. For Priya, this means the actor Dilip Kumar, but not in his contemporary, real life version, but rather as the man in younger years, attractive and at the height of his fame. The immortal soul in the guise of Kumar makes his first appearance clad "in a western suit in the style and cut of the 1940s", illuminated by "a halo of light" (TWR 20). He is thereby not only connected to past times, but also to religion. The halo is a common motif in both Hinduism and Christianity, and it soon becomes clear that in the great beyond, no specific religion comes to play. This is directly dealt with in the text, when Dilip takes on angel-esque characteristics:

Dilip glides down from above, sporting a huge pair of black wings on his back.

Priya: What's with the wings?

Dilip: (*proud*) I saw them in a film once.

Priya: A bit too symbolically Christian wouldn't you say?

Dilip: Up there in the waiting room we simply exist. It's a great relief to free oneself

from the shackles of the gods and prophets. (TWR 60)

The afterlife is therefore at the same time a multi-religious place that utilises religious symbols as stylistic devices as well as a place without religion and belief at all, since it is more centred on therapeutically making peace with oneself rather than being forgiven by a deity. Immortal souls can take any shape or form, and religious concepts of hell are, according to Dilip, who is the play's voice of spiritual authority, "rubbish" (TWR 80). Instead, hell is a psychological space, but one that can be avoided if the deceased have learned from their mistakes (cf. *ibid*).

19 Dealing with grief is another issue that is used to present a mode of in-betweenness and hybridity. While it is usually understood as a sentiment attributed to the living, *The Waiting Room* also negotiates it on the level of the deceased and thus breaks not only with death/life, but with the aligned active/passive dichotomy as well. Priya, surprised by her demise, is unable to cope with it, thus mirroring the desperation and pain of those she leaves behind. As mentioned previously, Gupta drew on her own experiences to create the emotional landscape of *The Waiting Room*:

So this [The Waiting Room] was based on my own father's death, and it's a typical thing where you have something quite traumatic happen to you and as a writer you find a way of dealing with it. (Gupta in Sierz 262)

The way of dealing with it on the level of the main character seems like a blueprint of Kübler-Ross' famous five stages of grief. Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist, wrote *On Death and Dying* after starting a then revolutionary programme of psychological assistance and interviews of patients with terminal diseases in the 1970s, chronicling the stages they went through while they came to terms with their impending death. The five stages are denial & isolation (Kübler-Ross 31), anger (40), bargaining (66), depression (69), and eventually acceptance (91). While pop psychology today also uses Kübler-Ross's model to describe the grieving process of the surviving dependants, its origin rests in the experiences and attitude of the dying. Priya, however, has to undergo the stages posthumously because her death was so sudden. The second Priya 'wakes' in the first scene, she is in denial, completely unwilling to conceive of herself as dead. Instead, she tries to reach out to her family as if she were still alive, trying to interact with them and ignoring the fact that they are ignorant of her presence. Upon being confronted with her own corpse, Priya enters the anger second stage, and it should be noted that this is a stage she constantly reverts back to until she transcends into the waiting room at the end of the play. She tries to bargain her way out of death, insisting that she is "trying to find a way to come back," and that she needs "just a

little more time” (TWR 36), but her bargaining leads to nothing and in an irreversible act, her body is burned, sending Priya into a deep depression. Only when she revolves her difficulties with her son in a dream-like sequence in which the living and the dead reunite for a magical, brief sequence, is she able to fully accept her death and thus figuratively dies a second (and final) time. Priya, who (for the most part of the play) is forced to take on the role of a passive spectator, has finally undergone a process of active catharsis while watching the events of past and present unfold.

20 By having Priya undergo Kübler-Ross' stages, the effect is that she is not so much dead as (like the subjects of Kübler-Ross' study) in the actual process of dying. A voice is given to the ultimate voiceless: the deceased. Priya's story can be heard, her wrongs can be righted.

In-between: Tradition and Modernity

21 The play develops its position between tradition and modernity on two levels, namely in the arenas of gender and ritual. While Akash's and Firoz's scepticism of the funeral rituals mirrors Gupta's own experience, Pradip embraces the traditional rites and tries to act them out. He places drinks all across the room because “the soul gets thirsty” and they “must make sure she has water” (TWR 16). According to Parry's *Death and Digestion: The Symbolism of Food and Eating in North Indian Mortuary Rites*, the thirst is related to “the parching experience on the funeral pyre” (618). Akash is “unconvinced” (TWR 16), and Firoz mocks the custom by saying “if any of that water disappears, we should inform the local Hindu temple committee” (TWR 26). This shows that the adherence to rituals is not located on a generational level: Firoz and Pradip are the same age (both are 60), but their positions differ significantly.

22 Priya seems to be more aligned with Pradip's position. She positively recounts Akash's first rice ceremony (cf. TWR 90) when she tries to connect with her son. She is also shown as being genuinely afraid of hell. Religion, interpreted as a traditional element of a person's life style, is contrasted with an urbanite lifestyle. Pradip and Priya embody religious traditions, while Akash and Firoz reject them. This conflict comes to a climax when Pradip demands that Akash “put a live burning coal in her [Priya's] mouth” (TWR 18), and he refuses to do so. Neither father nor son is willing to commit this act of perceived violation, even though Pradip sees the necessity of it, as the coal will “set the burning of her body in motion” (ibid). Firoz calls the custom “barbaric”, and in a surprising turn of events, only Tara is strong enough to enact it.

23 While Pradip is portrayed as wanting to make sure that everything is done right and behaving in the socially and religiously expected manner, his convictions and grief come to a collision when he cannot attend his wife's funeral because, as Firoz notes with compassion, "he's not in a good way" (TWR 35). In a reversal of roles between father and son, it is now Akash who wonders about outward-appearances and wants everyone to adhere to the funeral rules. This shift is continued when Akash prepares Priya's favourite dishes for the funeral dinner, another rite mentioned by Pradip, but carried out by his children. But Pradip's sudden and strict adherence to tradition and religion is questioned even by his own daughter, who incredulously points out that he is "not even religious" (TWR 41). Pradip does not elaborate on his beliefs, but simply states that "these things must be done properly" (ibid). It remains open whether he only acts out the rites because they are socially expected, because he wants to do right by his late wife or because he himself finds comfort in them.

24 Tara, who assumes some of her father's responsibilities in the funeral rituals, and generally acts like a self-assured and assertive young woman with a promising career, nevertheless felt ill at ease revealing her sexuality to her mother, instead hiding her lesbian relationship from her. As Schlote points out in *Either for Tragedy, Comedy, History or Musical Unlimited. South Asian Women Playwrights in Britain*, "traditional gender roles and the concepts of of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame), in particular, continue to be determining factors in British Asian women's lives" (74). Tara's position is difficult: while her mother assumes that she "changes boy-friends like socks" (TWR 29) but does not seem to be overly concerned by this, her father nags her to get married:

Pradip: I'm probably not long for his world either now. It would be so comforting to leave knowing that you at least were married... There's no one special?

Tara shakes her head.

(hopeful) But there is someone?

Tara: No – not really. *(Tara looks away, very uncomfortable.)*

Pradip: Your mother was very proud of you.

Tara: I know.

Beat.

Pradip: But I want to see you settled. (TWR 43)

This reversal of traditional and stereotypical gender roles, wherein it is usually the mother who worries about the daughter's marriage, and the father who wants to 'keep his little girl' unmarried, shows just how much the Bannerjee family is caught in the web of tradition and modernity. Pradip evokes memories of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mrs Bennet, who constantly frets about getting her daughters married. But while Mrs Bennet's motivation is the wish to ensure her daughters' economic security, Pradip just wants Tara to fulfil the traditional roles

of her gender. He rejects her lifestyle, and when he says that he wants her settled, he refers to both a social settlement in terms of marriage and a local settlement that would see her returning to England. Despite her successful career as an environmental lawyer, something that Priya was intensely proud of, Pradip would rather see his daughter married and near him, even at the expense of her career.

25 His emotional blackmail creates tension in their relationship and causes Tara to keep her distance. It may not be too far from the truth when Pradip accusingly questions Tara's nomadic lifestyle and says: "Sometimes, I think you do it to avoid me" (ibid). Tara can be free of paternally imposed gender roles and expectations in Paris, and perhaps it is that freedom that makes her so reluctant to visit her family in the UK. Freedom in her choice of partner and sexuality is tied to the geographical distance from her parents. Weedon points out that

generational differences are intensified for second generation South Asian women by the experience of growing up in British society where gender norms and expectations are not only different, but also in conflict with parental values. (110)

But is this really specific to daughters of first generation immigrants? The already mentioned similarity to *Pride and Prejudice* serves to show that this kind of conflict is a very universal one. It is related to the constant development of gender roles in general rather than to the development of diasporic gender roles in particular. Whether it is Lizzie Bennet who refuses to marry Mr Collins despite her mother's wishes or whether it is Tara who does not want to twist her identity to embody the heteronormative, traditional mode her father envisions for her, the basic gist is the same. Individual freedom for the second generation of women is portrayed as being imperative.

26 But Tara is not the only female character who defies traditional gender roles. Priya, who so longed to continue her B.A., looks back on her life and summarises

I was a housewife. An educated one – but still a housewife. I cooked, I cleaned, I made up rules, no shoes to be worn in the house and no phone calls after midnight. Not exactly a great offering to humanity. (TWR 100)

While Priya was not able to live the way she wanted to, she encouraged a more modern lifestyle for her daughter by ensuring a good education and then rewarding Tara's success as a lawyer with visits to Paris, positive encouragement, and the prospective journey to India. Akash, on the other hand, who failed to fulfil his mother's expectations of a successful career, received his share of nagging and belittlement before their reconciliation towards the end of the play. Fundamentally unable to communicate with his mother, Akash was convinced that

Priya disapproved of his choice of girlfriend, when in fact, Priya felt just the opposite way.

Tara: I never forget the way she [Tasleema] stood on the table at Shukla's wedding and sang that song!

Akash: She was completely legless.

Tara: Yeah but she went up at least ten points in Ma's book.

Akash: Did she?

Tara: Oh yeah. Ma said she had spirit. Which means she approved.

Akash: (*incredulous*) She liked Tasleema because she got slaughtered and stood on a table and sang a song?

Tara: She liked Tasleema because she could see she made you happy... said she was a bit fat, though. (TWR 83f.)

Priya, who was – despite her own classification as a housewife – anything but conventional, appreciates the same unconventional streak in her son's girlfriend. Unconventionality is what makes Tasleema a suitable partner for her son. Priya's own character and unfulfilled desires are passed on to the second generation of women in the play, ensuring she lives on. While Tara inherits her ambition, her *joie de vivre* can be found in her son's ex-girlfriend.

27 Furthermore, Priya seems to be the antithesis of the graceful Indian woman audiences have been introduced to in the popular Bollywood films. Her first words on the stage include “oy”, “crater face”, and “inch dick” (TWR 17) and instead of wearing the traditional clothing, a sari, she appears in a “track suit-type outfit” (TWR 16). Priya fights her way through the first act, not only verbally, but also physically. In scene three, she engages Dilip in a fist-fight when he tries to pull her away from her body prior to its cremation. Priya “smacks Dilip hard on the jaw” (TWR 37), violently rejecting any notions of female passivity. Already, expectations are broken, and gender roles subverted. But Priya's (masculine) aggression is not all that sets her apart from the female stereotype Gupta can be argued to be writing against. The life-long relationship Priya entertained to both Pradip and Firoz also falls into this role defying category. Priya met both Pradip and Firoz at the same time while they were all studying in India, but there was no instant attraction since the two men did not even notice Priya.

Priya: D'you know – I had seen them both around the college. Always together they were like Laurel and Hardy. I must have walked past them with flowers in my hair at least ten times.

Dilip: They never noticed you?

Priya: Not even a backward glance.

Dilip: Which one did you have a crush on?

Priya: To be honest – both of them. (TWR 78)

There was no room for a woman between Pradip and Firoz until Priya decided to “bugger up both their lives” (*ibid*) by marrying Pradip while sleeping with his best friend. Unknowingly,

Firoz fathered Priya's first daughter Chand, a little girl that died prior to the play's beginning. Pradip was aware of this two-fold treason, but stayed with Priya regardless. Interestingly, he also never cut Firoz out of his life, and the friendship continued despite the betrayal. With Priya dead, the omniscient Dilip asserts that "in their frail years to come – they will look after each other" (TWR 81). Chronologically speaking, the first important relationship of the play has been mended. While the marriage of Priya and Pradip initially restored the heteronormative order that was threatened by the two men's deep bond, it is once again subverted by an ending that leaves the two together.

In-between: Two Sides of Every Coin

28 In *Theatres of Difference*, Gabriele Griffin analyses trends in contemporary British-Asian women's playwriting, and identifies the following themes:

female agency, the status of women within their communities both historically and currently, mother-daughter relationships, female friendship, domestic violence, female experiences of and perspectives on relationships such as abandonment by males, misplaced romantic ideals within heterosexual relationships, and, last but not least, female experiences of migration. (12)

While some of these themes take centre stage in *The Waiting Room*, a focus on the female experiences, so often expected in the context of women's writing, is not given. Not only is the mother-daughter relationship explored, but also that of mother and son, which is much more conflicted and extensively dealt with. Priya, who wants to visit Tara in a dream, is convinced by Dilip to visit Akash instead. These visits are painful but necessary, as fixing the relationship to her son is the last act the deceased Priya has to accomplish before she can move on.

29 It is one of the play's strongest features that relationships are never just presented from one perspective (meaning the female one), but also always from the other (male) one as well. One is invited to feel for Akash as much as for his sister, for Pradip as much as for his dead wife. This way, as much as the characters are in-between, so is the audience. Gupta's work makes great efforts to portray both sides of every coin and conflict, achieving a great level of complexity that surpasses the limitations of the labels "British-Asian" and "women" writer. Griffin identifies these labels as "simultaneously and diversely claim[ed] and question[ed]" by the writers (11). But the questions remain: how does ethnic background figure in contemporary playwriting, how relevant is it to the stories that are being told? An answer may be found in the words of Asian-American playwright Velena Hasu Houston:

What is an Asian American playwright? Easy answer: an Asian American playwright is a playwright is a playwright is a playwright. (...) What is an Asian American play? It is a play written by an American citizen of Asian ancestry. However, the subject matter of Asian American playwrights is not limited to Asian American topics.” (in Schlote 67).

This statement about Asian-American playwrights applies to Asian-British playwrights as well: while a certain degree of ethnicity automatically features in the creation and reception of the plays by virtue of the writer having that background, it does by no means provide a limiting framework as far as the play's themes are concerned. It is drawing on matters of the supernatural and of death that establish a non-ethnically limited centre for the play. Ethnicity, still a contested point among the living, is no longer important once their world is left behind. Gupta's version of the afterlife is a place where religion (so often inextricably linked to ethnicity) no longer plays a role. All emphasis is on the individuals, their relationships, histories, and mistakes.

30 Gupta has explained her reluctance to have her plays classified as Asian plays because “that assumes that only Asians would want to see” them (Gupta in Sierz 262). Consequently, instead of neatly fitting under the label of Asian women's writing, the play explores a permanent state of cultural, physical, and temporal in-betweenness, dancing on the thin line between comedy and tragedy, and by dealing with the great and final equaliser of death, creates not only plenty of instances of hybridity, but also, finally, of universality.

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Masculinity under Imperial Stress – Mr Biswas and V S Naipaul

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Abstract:

In *Mr Biswas*, Naipaul creates his most destitute of protagonists. Born into a community of Indian labourers on a sugar estate, in a remote village of Trinidad, Mr Biswas grows to face a life without prospects. Cut off as much from the distant homeland of his ancestors in India, as from the African society around them, the circumstances of Mr Biswas and his people are a direct outcome of colonisation, and Indians in Trinidad are among the twice colonised. Claiming to be of Brahminical origin yet uneducated, caught in poverty and demeaning labour, East Indians living in West Indies, the circumstances Mr Biswas finds himself in are dire. His efforts to break out of this world to which he is politically and socially confined eventually crystallise into the one desire – to have a house of his own. The ownership of a house for Biswas is fundamental to establishing his identity as a man within the colonial context. This paper examines the impact of colonisation in the construction of masculinity in *Mr Biswas*, and insofar there are biographical parallels, and in Naipaul himself.

1 In V S Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr Biswas*, finding a house for Mr Biswas becomes an undertaking of epic dimensions. In Mr Biswas' desire for a house, Naipaul tells the story of an Indian rural community in Trinidad deriving from indentured labourers. Two facts are important: *A House for Mr Biswas* is a narrative of a male protagonist told by a male author; and it is located in the period of British colonialism. The narrative is therefore also necessarily concerned with the conditions and events which determine Mr Biswas' masculinity.

2 The novel significantly opens with the death of Mr Biswas, and the "Prologue" introduces us to a man whose life has been inconsequential in every way except for the one fact that he dies in a house that he owns:

And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous. (8)

Mr Biswas dies at the height of his achievement which consists of his house and a handful of possessions inside it:

The kitchen safe. That was more than twenty years old. Shortly after his marriage he had bought it, . . . the typewriter. That had been acquired when, at the age of thirty-three, he had decided to become rich by writing for American and English magazines; . . . the hatrack, its glass now leprous, most of its hooks broken, its woodwork ugly . . . the bookcase had been made at Shorthills by an out-of-work blacksmith . . . And the diningtable: bought cheaply from a Deserving Destitute . . . And the Slumberking bed, where he could no longer sleep because it was upstairs . . . And the glass cabinet: bought to please Shama, still dainty, and still practically empty. And the morris suite: the last acquisition . . . And in the garage outside, the Prefect. But bigger than them all was the house, his house. (12-13)

3 The “Prologue” is an incantation of the word “house”; it occurs 39 times in a text of 2,500 words. Yet for all its invocation, neither the house nor the things it holds are by any means distinctive; on the contrary they are nondescript, broken, damaged and scarred. Yet, precisely for this reason, the house and its objects carry nostalgic memories of a 46 year old, dying man, and define a chronology of how Mr Biswas came to associate the ownership of a house with the rationale for his very existence as a man. In his last days, Mr Biwas appreciates what the house means to him:

He could not quite believe that he had made that world. He could not see why he should have a place in it. And everything by which he was surrounded was examined and rediscovered, with pleasure, surprise, disbelief. Every relationship, every possession. (12)

These are words of a man who could not take anything for granted, for whom there were no givens – words of a man dispossessed by the colonial encounter. The chapters that follow the “Prologue” narrate the story of Mr Biswas’ life, the gradual unfolding of his adulthood and masculinity in the lowest echelons of a colonial society which lead him to realise that the only way of gaining some little self-worth lies in the ownership of a house. Mr Biswas is not born with the desire to own a house – this aspiration grows, step by step and in fits and bursts, from his experiences as an Indian in colonial Trinidad until it becomes an obsessive drive, shapes his entire being and becomes fundamental to Mr Biswas asserting himself as a man in the colonial system.

4 The impact of colonisation is everywhere in the novel. The family of labourers on a sugar-estates to which Mr Biswas is born, are there directly as a consequence of the colonial enterprise. Much of Naipaul’s novel is given to depicting the groups of Indian people in Trinidad, cut off from the land of their ancestors on the one hand, and their immediate social and political environment on the other, ceaselessly caught in the struggles for basic survival. It is an insulated world but not one of fairy tales and magic, but exactly the opposite: it is a perverted world of abject poverty and hardship, where almost everybody toils in inhuman conditions to scrape a living. In such a precarious way of life, traditions and rituals as well as spirituality understandably lose their efficacy and are reduced to absurd superstitions. The birth of Mr Biswas releases all kinds of negative currents. Shortly before his birth, Mr Biswas’ mother leaves the tyranny of his father with three other children and walks to the equally miserable conditions of her parents’ hut. His grandmother makes all the preparations for his birth that she is able to – call a midwife, gather cactus leaves in the middle of the night and hang them over every opening in the hut and organises a pundit to secure the baby’s

future (15-16). But in every detail he fills in, Naipaul builds a sense of inadequacy and desolation – the cactus leaves are overdone and a substitute for the mango leaves that are used by Hindus in India, the midwife is ignorant and the priest somewhat of a fake. The absurdity of the situation is highlighted further in the person of the new born baby which has six fingers and comes out the wrong way. The pundit, on his side, predicts that the newborn will be a liar, a lecher and a spendthrift, will have an unlucky sneeze and bring evil to his family. The scene is thus set to delineate the life of Mr Biswas amongst his community of inferior, doubly colonised people, without comprehensive rights or prospects.

5 In “The Birth of Mr Biswas”, Bruce Macdonald describes how Naipaul reworked materials from his father’s story “They Named Him Mohun” into his novel with the effect that reverence with which Naipaul’s father drew the pundit and the Hindu scriptures and traditions are replaced by satire. Macdonald notes that in his father’s story “Identity by name came first ... and was almost a way of making the child whole and giving him a place in the scheme of things”:

In the novel the identity of the child is lost in a welter of magic, and the name which is given to Mr. Biswas, Mohun, is hardly ever used. He has no place in this land of exile or in the cosmic order, and suitable even his name is forgotten at the naming ceremony. The contrast between the early ‘They Named him Mohun’ and the later adaptation for the first part of *A House for Mr. Biswas* highlights the tone which V. S. Naipaul establishes at the beginning of his novel. The conception of society has changed radically and we are prepared in advance by this scene for a world where there is no social order and where the individual no longer has a place defined for him in the world. All the old ceremonies and beliefs have been emptied of human significance and have become mere trivial forms. Even the powerful Hindu sense of Fate, of *karma*, becomes something to get around with non-sensical detail. The decay which follows in the novel is decay of the religion that has lost its meaning. (Macdonald 52-53)

Macdonald’s comments are relevant except that he neutralises the political context of *A House of Mr Biswas* by using phrases such as “land of exile” or “cosmic order”; Mr Biswas’ family are not exiles but colonial subjects and the cosmic order to which they have been assigned is controlled by colonial powers. The difference between Naipaul’s perceptions and that of his father is not simply generational but also political; Naipaul’s views are already coloured by his colonial education and from the British perspective of the time, Hindu traditions are degraded and seen to be incompatible with western values.

6 The family structures and social customs of the Indians in Trinidad must indeed be seen in relation to the wider political situation. The people among which Mr Biswas is born are disempowered and trapped in hopeless conditions. Their desperate position makes them

withdraw inwards and cling to traditions and rituals they bought with them for momentary acts of self-assertion and validation. The wider colonial system, with its securities and dominance represents rationalism, culture, civilisation and prosperity against which is posited the Indian family and community structure as weak, unchanging and inferior, deprived and thereby depraved. It is Mr Biswas' predicament to be caught between these two systems where each undermines the other, but both act to oppress him within their hierarchies. In moving between these two antagonistic worlds without belonging to either, Mr Biswas' masculinity is fractured. Hence Mr Biswas ends up defining his masculinity in the only terms allowed to him – materially and specifically in the form of ownership of a house.

7 From the beginning Naipaul shows Mr Biswas to be dislocated. Cursed to stay away from water and suffering from eczema, he is kept away from his father and brothers and spends his childhood with his mother and playing with his sister. While his brothers join gangs of other boys working on the sugar-estates, like their father, and thus make an easy transition into adulthood, the same path is denied to Mr Biswas. He is marked by a curse and relegated to the lowest of labourers, not to the group of strong men but “the boys and girls of the grass-gang” who on the sugar-estates “were easy objects of ridicule”. Mr Biswas contemplates the career charted out for him in the colonial society of Trinidad, which was a typical career available to most Indian labourers in Trinidad at that time:

And it was to be the grass-gang for Mr Biswas. Later he would move to the cane fields, to weed and clean the plant and reap; he would be paid by the task and his tasks would be measured out by a driver with a long bamboo rod. And there he would remain. He would never become a driver or a weigher because he wouldn't be able to read. Perhaps, after many, years, he might save enough to rent or buy a few acres where he would plant his own canes, which he would sell to the estate at a price fixed by them. But he would achieve this only if he had the strength and optimism of his brother Pratap. For that was what Pratap did. And Pratap, illiterate all his days, was to become richer than Mr Biswas; he was to have a house of his own, a large, strong, well-built house, years before Mr Biswas. (23)

The passage demonstrates the rigidity, the pre-determinedness and the limited prospects of the colonial system for the Indians living there. The maintenance of certain rituals and attitudes and behaviour of the Indian folk in the novel occur against the backdrop of this social and political situation and are invariably influenced by it.

8 The vulnerability of the Indian family structure in a colonial setting becomes clear when Mr Biswas' father dies. Without the male head, Mr Biswas' mother and all her children are driven from the land and exposed to the charity of their relatives. The break of the family is due to social, economic and political reasons; they seem not to have any political rights and

their claim to the place where they live is so tenuous that they can be easily removed from their house. With his father's death, Mr Biswas is thrown off the track designated for him and in the novel, his internal experiences of disorientation are highlighted by his physical rootlessness. Mr Biswas, together with his mother and the other children, are driven from their house by other villagers and without recourse to any viable options or support:

And so Mr Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brothers on the estate at Felicity, Dehuti as a servant in Tara's house, and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti who, broken, became increasingly useless and impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was really quite alone. (40)

This is a formative moment of Mr Biswas' life and from here on the connection between his outer and inner fragmentation is complete and each reflects the other. Once cut loose from his assigned place in the world of labourers, Mr Biswas steps into the world outside to find himself at a loose end. The rest of the narrative renders Mr Biswas' efforts to inhabit this other world, the society beyond the mores of the Indian migrant community; he is henceforth exposed to the conflicting claims and restrictions of the Hindu and the non-Hindu worlds, the hostile structures of the colonisers and the colonised.

9 These tensions are further demonstrated in that as a fatherless boy, he is taken into the Canadian Mission school where he receives anglicised education, but before the process is complete, his relatives pull him out of school in order that he fulfil his destiny as a Brahmin and send him to learn to be a pundit. It is Mr Biswas' predicament to fail on both fronts. Being ejected from the two main systems he knows, Mr Biswas considers his options, and these consist of a series of low level occupations or small-time enterprises, that form the next rung in the ladder after labourers. Also, as cultural and familial ties disintegrate, Mr Biswas begins to define his masculinity in impersonal and material terms. Left entirely to his own resources, Mr Biswas resolves, "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too", and then he contemplates the kinds of jobs that await him:

On Monday morning he set about looking for a job. How did one look for a job? He supposed that one looked. He walked up and down the Main Road, looking. He passed a tailor and tried to picture himself cutting khaki cloth, tacking, and operating a sewing-machine. He passed a barber and tried to picture himself stropping a razor; his mind wandered off to devise elaborate protections for his left thumb. But he didn't like the tailor he saw, a fat man sulkily sewing in a dingy shop; and as for barbers, he had never liked those who cut his own hair; he thought too how it would disgust Pundit Jairam to learn that his former pupil had taken up barbering, a profession immemorably low. He walked on. (67)

The other possibilities include a caretaker's or a grocer's shop or producing rum or running buses as some of his better off relatives do.

10 For a while, Mr Biswas contents himself with books by British authors and scientists such as people in the colonies can gain access to, but the more he reads the more intensely he becomes aware of the gap between the colonial education and his own real situation:

Mr. Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point when resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition, and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motorbus, what could he do? What could he invent? Dutifully, however, he tried. He bought elementary manuals of science and read them; nothing happened; he only became addicted to elementary manuals of science. He bought the seven expensive volumes of Hawkins' Electrical Guide (...)

Alongside the efforts to improve his mind, Mr Biswas takes on the unstable, status-less occupation of the painter of signs. With his masculine identity still quite fluid, or rather confused, and all kinds of different factors playing his destiny, he is just at the right stage to be swallowed up by the elaborate machinations of the Tulsi family.

11 The Tulsi household, though based on the family structure, functions as an institution. The Tulsis have made a name for themselves in Arwacas; they are part of the small migrant landowning elite and are engaged in several commercial activities which make them economically independent. They constitute a Hindu world within the colonial world of Trinidad, but one that stands aloof from and defies the wider society. Armed against the encroachments of the western and African societies, the Tulsis are a law unto themselves; they run an ultra-Hindu system and perpetuate their way of life by constantly adding to their numbers. No wonder then that to Mr Biswas, "Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were, and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless, and on the upper two floors the windows were mere slits in the façade" (80). It is also unsurprising that Naipaul uses phrases such as the "Tulsi organisation", "the Tulsi establishment", the "Tulsi contingent" or the "Tulsi patronage" to magnify them into something larger than a usual family unit. Mr Biswas enters the Tulsi clan by virtue of his upper caste and through marriage, hoping thereby to gain some stability and status. But his hopes are dashed as he realises he must be a small wheel in the gigantic Tulsi operation.

12 The Tulsi family are a Hindu version of a commune, where everybody is accorded a place and must contribute towards the greater good of the many, in return for which their

basic survival is ensured. Mrs Tulsi is the matriarchal head of this outfit and runs it together with her brother to whom she has delegated some of her powers. There is no scope for individualism in this set up. He exchanges the insecurities of his life for the overcrowded indifference of the Tulsi extended family. Befitting his minor position in the house, Mr Biswas is relegated to one of the inconspicuous corners of the house, to one small part of the long room: "His share of it was short and narrow: the long room, originally a verandah, had been enclosed and split up into bedrooms" (103). Forced to live within these narrow confines, Mr Biswas rebels by calling the people around him names, taunting them, spitting on them, spurning the food of the house. The others return his insults and openly humiliate him; they mock his notion of independence. Mr Biswas declares to one of his brothers-in-law, "My motto is: paddle your own canoe" (107) and thereafter he is nicknamed "the paddler" in the Tulsi family. Living in an enclosed world in order to avoid deracination has its price. Living in Hanuman House is reduced to the minimal form of existence; because of their economic dependence on Mrs Tulsi, the men in the household are emasculated. They spend most of their time being fed and mothered by their wives and periodically affirm their masculinity by abusing and beating their wives. The women take pride in being abused and beaten, for in the absence of other things, it is a sign of their husbands' latent masculinity. The energies and frustrations of the people living within the four walls find an outlet either in waging constant wars with one another or flogging their children at the slightest pretext. It is a society based on fear, mistrust and paranoia, a group of people who are hemmed in and therefore prey on one another. It is part of their herd instinct that in times of crisis they rally together. With time, Mr Biswas' attitude to the Hanuman House mellows:

The House was a world, ... everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant and could be ignored. He needed such a sanctuary. And in time the House became to him what Tara's had been when he was a boy. He could go to Hanuman House whenever he wished and become lost in the crowd, since he was treated with indifference rather than hostility. And he went there more often, held his tongue and tried to win favour. It was an effort, and even at times of great festivity, when everyone worked with energy and joy, enthusiasm reacting upon enthusiasm, in himself he remained aloof. Indifference turned to acceptance, and he was pleased and surprised to find that because of his past behaviour he, like the girl contortionist, now being groomed for marriage, had a certain licence. On occasion pungent remarks were invited from him, and then almost anything he said raised a laugh. (188)

13 The disconnect between the Tulsis and the larger society they live in is nowhere so evidently presented as when they move, in large scale, to a house in Shorthills. The surroundings are idyllic, and Naipaul in great detail recounts every feature of the lush landscape:

In the grounds of the estate house there was a cricket field and a swimming pool; the drive was lined with orange trees and gri-gri palms with slender white trunks, red berries and dark green leaves. The land itself was a wonder. The saman trees had lianas so strong and supple that one could swing on them. All day the immortelle trees dropped their red and yellow bird-shaped flowers through which one could whistle like a bird. Cocoa trees grew in the shade of the immortelles, coffee in the shade of the cocoa, and the hills were covered with tonka bean. Fruit trees, mango, orange, avocado pear, were so plentiful as to seem wild. And there were nutmeg trees, as well as cedar, poui, and the bois-canot which was light yet so springy and strong it made you a better cricket bat than the willow. The sisters spoke of the hills, the sweet springs and hidden waterfalls with all the excitement of people who had known only the hot, open plain, the flat acres of sugarcane and the muddy ricelands. Even if one didn't have a way with land, as they had, if one did nothing, life could be rich at Shorthills. There was talk of dairy fanning; there was talk of growing grapefruit. More particularly, there was talk of rearing sheep, and of an idyllic project of giving one sheep to every child as his very own, the foundation, it was made to appear, of fabulous wealth. And there were horses on the estate: the children would learn to ride. (391-392)

As the Tulsi people swoop into the region, "The solitude and silence of Shorthills was violated" (399). The bands of Tulsi children intrude upon romancing couples in the orchards, various family members plunder the gardens for their fruit, the swimming pool and the cricket field are levelled, the bamboos are destroyed and trees cut down to start a furniture factory. The Tulsis deplete the countryside they neither understand nor relate to, with the mentality of opportunistic sojourners and leave the place ravaged with few qualms. Naipaul depicts the Tulsis as alienated from their environment despite having lived in Trinidad for two or three generations:

Despite the solidity of their establishment the Tulsis had never considered themselves settled in Arwacas or even Trinidad. It was no more than a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India. Only the death of Pundit Tulsi had prevented them from going back to India; and ever since they had talked, though less often than the old men who gathered in the arcade every evening, of moving on, to India, Demerara, Surinam. Mr. Biswas didn't take such talk seriously. The old men would never see India again. And he could not imagine the Tulsis anywhere else except at Arwacas. Separate from their house, and lands, they would be separate from the labourers, tenants and friends who respected them for their piety and the memory of Pundit Tulsi; their Hindu status would be worthless and, as had happened during their descent on the house in Port of Spain, they would be only exotic. (390)

The presence of the Tulsis in Trinidad and their struggles for survival there are due to political forces beyond their control; they consider themselves temporarily planted there as part of some bigger project, but do not see themselves as natural occupants of the place.

14 The Tulsis, with a logic of their own and effortlessly, prevail over Mr Biswas' life, even deciding the names of his children and cause innumerable rifts between him and his

wife and children. The static, nondescript life among the Tulsis denies Mr Biswas every small chance of self-assertion or fulfilment. They neutralise him and render him ineffective; they constantly remind him of his own superfluity. Mr Biswas thinks, "He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him!" (131). Of all the people he had lived with, "In none of these places he was being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upsetter of routine" (132). His own life appears to be "a void. There was nothing to speak of him" (132). The only mode of resistance and escape he can devise against such annihilation is to have a house of his own. Mr Biswas' desperation to break away from the Tulsi control and his determination not to be eliminated unacknowledged articulates itself in the desire for a house, a space he can claim as his own, "the place where he not only lived, but had status without having to assert his rights or explain his worth" (169). Living with his wife's family, he is intellectually emaciated and experiences "a blankness, a void like those in dreams, into which, past tomorrow and next week and next year, he was falling" (190). So he attempts twice to build a house despite, or even because of, his meagre finances, and both ventures are pathetic failures, and return him to the Tulsi family more subjugated and even lesser of a man than he was before. Making of a house is such a severe affront and an act of individualism against the Tulsi system that when Mr Biswas buys his little daughter a doll's house as a present, his wife and daughter are relentlessly persecuted until his wife smashes the toy house and throws it out. The dream for a house is thus an act of subversion of the society in which Mr Biswas is born, it's the desire for the forbidden and the unattainable, cast not in romantic but ruthlessly material terms of a colonial society.

15 As Mr Biswas is sent to the labourers' barracks as a driver on the Tulsi estate in Green Vale, it breaks him down completely. The Tulsi mission lands him exactly in the place designated for him in the colonial society and which he had sought to escape all his life. Mr Biswas cherishes a definite vision of the house he would own:

He had thought deeply about this house, and knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted, in the first place, a real house, made with real materials. He didn't want mud for walls, earth for floor, tree branches for rafters and grass for roof. He wanted wooden walls, all tongue-and-groove. He wanted a galvanized iron roof and a wooden ceiling. He would walk up concrete steps into a small verandah; through doors with coloured panes into a small drawingroom; from there into a small bedroom, then another small bedroom, then back into the small verandah. The house would stand on tall concrete pillars so that he would get two floors instead of one, and the way would be left open for future development. The kitchen would be a shed in the yard; a neat shed, connected to the house by a covered way. And his house would be painted. The

roof would be red, the outside walls ochre with chocolate facings, and the windows white. (210-211)

Far removed from this dream, Mr Biswas works to turn out labourers from the estate; he reviles his job and he starts to live in mortal fear of his fellow labourers. His peace of mind is utterly destroyed,

Every man and woman he saw, even at a distance, gave him a twist of panic. But he had already grown used to that; it had become part of the pain of living. Then, as he cycled, he discovered a new depth to this pain. Every object he had not seen for twenty-four hours was part of his whole and happy past. Everything he now saw became sullied by his fear, every field, every house, every tree, every turn in the road, every bump and subsidence. So that, by merely looking at the world, he was progressively destroying his present and his past. (269-270)

Anxiety and stress make him ill and poison his relations with his family. Once he recovers from the trauma of belonging to the Tulsi tribe, he leaves the rural society of Trinidad to go to Port of Spain.

16 The city is organised differently to the villages and lets in lower caste people like Ramchand, who “Ostracized from the community into which he was born, he had shown the futility of its sanctions. He had simply gone outside it” (312). Here rural norms and taboos have no efficacy and Mr Biswas encounters diverse lifestyles. His colonial education, that had been such an obstacle to him during his village years, gives him credibility in this wider society. Mr Biswas rattles off the names of the authors he has read to impress the editor of *Trinidad Sentinel*, “Hall Caine, Marie Corelli, Jacob Boehme, Mark Twain. Hall Caine, Mark Twain,” and “Samuel Smiles” (320-321). It is a colonial subject’s burden, and not the coloniser’s, to prove their knowledge. Mr Burnett does not need to have read any of these texts to be the editor of the *Sentinel*. He offers Mr Biswas an opportunity to write for the paper and trains him to eliminate the colonialisms in his language and make it sound more commonplace for English readers. Mr Biswas’ fortunes change for the better once he joins the ranks of professionals, “Mr. Biswas’s name appeared almost every day in the *Sentinel*, so that it seemed he had suddenly become famous and rich” (328). The rural hierarchies of caste and class are replaced by urban, economic divisions of class, and here Mr Biswas as a member of the aspiring middle-class acquires a new dignity. A regular, decent income allow him to fulfil some of his long-standing desires – of living together with his family under one roof, of education for his children, of a car, and eventually also that of a house. Mr Biswas crosses over from the native to the formal, organised world of the colonial society and the transformation is not just social but also physical. He discards his native dress and manners:

Encouraged by Shama, he took an increasing interest in his personal appearance. In his silk suit and tie he had never ceased to surprise her by his elegance and respectability; . . . Sometimes, while he was dressing, he would make an inventory of all the things he was wearing and think, with wonder, that he was then worth one hundred and fifty dollars. Once on the bicycle, he was worth about one hundred and eighty. (346-347)

17 His altered circumstances enable him to redefine his masculinity. He returns victorious to people in the village, makes contact with his brothers and mother and other acquaintances, heals his relationship with the Tulsis and develops a new intimacy with his wife, Shama, who not only takes care of the household but also takes over new duties of looking after his paper and book-keeping. From an over-crowded extended family, with innumerable hangers-on, Mr Biswas sets up his nuclear family and the talk of Coca Cola and industrially manufactured ice-cream enters the talk with his children. And finally the two-storeyed house in the upwardly mobile neighbourhood of the city – Mr Biswas is finally ensconced in the initial stages of a career in the colonial system.

18 The change embodied by Mr Biswas begins gradually to permeate all sections of society. Whereas previously Mr Biswas has been overcome by a sense of stasis and inertia, he starts to notice movement: “Change followed change. At Pagotes Tara and Ajodha were decorating their new house. In Port of Spain new lampposts, painted silver, went up in the main streets and there was talk of replacing the diesel buses by trolley-buses” (367). Mrs Tulsi’s older son, Shekhar marries a modern educated woman of Presbyterian denomination, who wears frocks. The younger son, for his part, goes to Cambridge to study medicine. The rowdy children of the Tulsi household, constantly flogged by the adults, turn into “readers and learners”. The archaic Hindu traditions cannot withstand of Western influence and the Tulsi household is gradually dissipated, “The widows were now almost frantic to have their children educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone had to fight for himself in a new world, the world Owad and Shekhar had entered, where education was the only protection” (436). When Mr Biswas’s son, Anand, sits for the exhibition examinations, one of his Tulsi cousins is also among the candidates as there are a huge number of other boys; the triumph of colonial education is evident in “the numbers of students who were leaving the colony every week to study medicine in England, America, Canada and India” (524). In the days before his death, Mr Biswas counts as one of his achievements that two of his four children are studying abroad on scholarships.

19 However, Mr Biswas’ inclusion into the world of economic progress is tenuous and does not lead to personal fulfilment. As a journalist he dislikes the assignments he is given,

which confirm his inferior position in the hierarchy. He is sent out on a colonial mission to interview his kind of people – the destitutes of Trinidad. He gives up journalism to take up a government job as a Community Welfare Officer, secure in the belief that he cannot be sacked from a government job and with this he begins to “feel that he was at last getting at the wealth of the colony” (508). But his sense of security is false and he does lose his government job and has to return to journalism. He is sacked by the newspaper when he falls ill. Life for Mr Biswas is equally fraught in the colonial and the Hindu systems, although they are otherwise presented as contradictory. Thus Mr Biswas is able to affirm his masculinity neither through personal relations or social and religious sanctions, nor through professional, class status but rather through a material, albeit modest ambition to own a house.

20 Some aspects of Mr Biswas’ life have parallels in Naipaul’s experience. Naipaul too is marked by hybridity, “He was an East Indian West Indian who had been pulled out of his own society by a superior British education leaving him a double exile, a deracinated colonial who was legally prevented from migrating inside the new Commonwealth” (French 138). The tensions implicit in this statement are unfathomable. Patrick French’s biography describes that Naipaul’s grandparents claimed to have come from the Brahmin caste, although the pride and purpose arising out of this identity are undermined by the indignity of being a common labourer on a colonial estate. The Brahmanical culture in Naipaul’s life was to remain nebulous, never proven and always indefinite as Naipaul alternated between vegetarianism and eating meat.

21 Naipaul’s father desired him to be a writer as a way out of their lowly background, and like Mr Biswas’ aspiration for a house, the desire to be a writer appears to be, at first sight, something universal or trans-cultural. On closer observation it turns out to be one of identification with the dominant, colonial system. Naipaul too underwent colonial education and was steeped in British literature and put all his energies into getting a scholarship to Oxford. Later he was to assert his superiority by saying, “I was too well prepared for Oxford, I suppose” (79). Much of Naipaul’s life and works deal with the problematics of being caught in three-way bind between the colonised Indian-and-Trinidadian cultures and the imperialistic British culture, with the Indian identity and values undermining the reality of Trinidad and Trinidad being a source of resentment against the British. It is Naipaul’s predicament to aspire to be recognised by a system that is oppressive towards him and to which he does not belong. Naipaul’s determination to carve a place as a writer in a system which stands in a relation of imperialism to him, is fundamentally damaging and puts his masculinity under stress.

22 While Naipaul has managed to be a success in Britain, it is both ironic and inevitable that he should have got there on British terms and by following a somewhat typical colonial path – via scholarship to Oxford, on account of a tutor who is interested in India, working for the BBC radio programme *Caribbean Voices*, writing for British newspapers, supported by other British writers, writing on colonial subjects like India and the Caribbean primarily for the British readership, winning British literary prizes – right up to the ultimate British honour of knighthood.

23 However, nothing came naturally but had to be earned and had a price because Naipaul was in a relationship of the colonised to the coloniser. Peter Bayley, his tutor at Oxford is recorded to have said, “He wanted to be an Englishman” (75). This is endorsed by Naipaul himself, ““I want to come up top of my group. I have got to show these people that I can beat them at their own language”” (78). But statements such as these give him away as a colonial subject trying hard to be in favour of the superior power. In the same way, his expectations of Oxford are too unnatural to be met; it is not the amazing world he holds it to be nor does it open several doors for him. It is a period of extreme hardship and Naipaul is disappointed that Oxford functions differently for him than for the British students, but it was to be expected.

24 Naipaul’s first few years in Britain are crisis ridden and he is forced to confront his limitations. As Patrick French suggests, at Oxford “Literature meant English, or at least British literature: the canon of dead white male poets, playwrights and novelists from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century” (115) The Oxford norms exclude Naipaul and drive him to despair: ““The future is black as ever. Nobody loves me, nobody wants me. In England I am not English, in India I am not Indian. I am chained to the 1000 sq. miles that is Trinidad; but I will evade that fate yet”” (115-116). Feeling rejected in England generates insecurities in him that he never experienced in Trinidad, “I find writing very difficult & sometimes I fear that I may lose my grasp of English altogether and be left languageless!” (130) Naipaul’s exposure to England is very harsh and causes his nervous breakdown.

25 Naipaul’s situation throughout is that of one standing at an intersection, and therefore of dislocation and not belonging; every perspective he takes is immediately undermined by others and he suffers as an author and a man. His masculinity comes under stress – while in England, he feels inadequate as an Indian son who ought to take responsibility for his parents. This guilt weighs on him heavily as he is not even there when his father dies. In England he feels inadequate as a writer as a tradition to which he can relate is lacking. Like Mr Biswas, Naipaul gives an outlet to the inadequacies in his masculinity by abusing women.

Considering Naipaul's position in British literature, one wonders whether the celebration of post-colonialism might not have been a little hasty and premature, for Naipaul needs to make a minor criticism of E M Forster or Jane Austen, and the chasm between the colonisers and the colonised opens again¹.

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