Coldnoon envisions travel not as flux but instead as gaps in travelling itself, from which derives its theory of travelogy. Coldnoon means a shadowed instant in time when the inertia of motion of images, thoughts and spectacles, comes to rest upon a still and cold moment. Our travels are not of trade and imagining communities; they are towards the reporting of purposeless and unselconscious narratives the human mind experiences when left in a vacuum between terminals of travel.
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Contributors

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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION: TRAVEL AND POLITICS
(A NOTE ON THE INDIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS, 2014)

The language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable. To inhabit: this is a value that is quite disconcerting and equivocal; one never inhabits what one is in the habit of calling inhabiting. There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia. Most certainly. That is all too well known. But it does not follow that all exiles are equivalent. From this shore, yes, from this shore or this common drift [(derivation)], all expatriations remain singular.

I therefore admit to a purity which is not very pure. Anything but purism. It is, at least, the only impure “purity” for which I dare confess a taste. It is a pronounced taste for a certain pronunciation (Derrida and Malabou, 47).

The Indian General Elections of 2014 saw massive turnouts at its innumerable party campaign road-shows. In many ways it was a pioneering episode in the politics of travel. Quite literally the yatra of politics was staged on such a callously colossal scale—most astronomically funded, most pilgrimage-like its appeal, and its Gods advisedly worshipped on the television, most sycophantically. Indian television news media followed the campaigns extensively, with reasonable insistence on its own neutrality, while the Indian voter became a tourist before the television set. The theoretical justification for the semiotic complacency of the tourist—grappling economically (spatial/temporal/fiscal) with signs, contented with the typical “olde England,” “signs of Frenchness,” Oriental or Italian exotica from postcards (Tresidder, 60)—can come only under the aegis of capitalist hedonism. The
Jargon of touristic electioneering in India, and elsewhere, has ushered in a new encyclopaedic series of floating signifiers (signs without referents). The tourism of political economy relies on the hyper-multiple and indivisible hegemony of this tourist-bank that does not produce or even inhabit the political space: it merely consumes hedonistically. The tourist, unnoticeable to himself and ungovernable by his own choice, is transformed into an exile, without a pronunciation other than that which is subsumed under the *pronouncement*. He is no more equivalent to his other, for he is no more different from the other.

I am, like he who, returning, from a long voyage, out of everything, the earth, the world, men and their languages, tries to keep after the event a logbook, with the forgotten fragmentary rudimentary instruments of a prehistoric language and writing, tries to understand what happened, to explain it with pebbles bits of wood deaf and dumb gestures from before the institution of the deaf and dumb, a blind man groping before Braille and they are going to try to reconstitute all that, but if they knew they would be scared and wouldn’t even try (Derrida and Malabou, 53)

Yet, the hegemony of signs does not work in a totalitarian way; it does so binarily. The jargon of development in Indian politics created a semiotics of polarization. Even materially seen, the subject that resisted the seduction of this floating signifier was the one that claimed to travel, or acknowledged the potentiality of experience through travelling, what Derrida calls traversal. He may not have crossed borders, but he claimed to know against knowledge the real states of *development* (or its absence) in the most contested spaces that became the electioneering signs. The role of the traveller was reduced to being habitually anti-tourist, and his only articulation was in direct conflict with the pronunciation. He gave up his travelogic singularity for the pursuit of new empty signs, referring back in turn to a jaundiced semiotic system. Democracy had never been so openly the art of political travel.
It is in this decisive context that the present issue intends to reach out to the singularity of the—intellectual and, hence, political—exile. Indeed, many have foretold their wilful expatriation in recent times, and some executed too. Sadly, in the blinding scheme of signs without a bureaucratically notified statement of exile, the political economy fails, or refuses to rehabilitate the political singularity of the traveller. The Coldnoon moment revels in this state of irruptive homelessness.
REFERENCES


SIX POEMS

Melina Draper

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To Spanish

Like a sorrowing spirit, you croon.
Long river of sound tunneling
through me, you’ve carved
my grottos and holy alters.
I’ve embraced your confabulators,
bowed to your practitioners.
I cry when I hear you voiced
in some anonymous airport.
On the bus I woke up babbling
to the moustache next to me,
a pungent man who didn’t know you.

Ancestor, you call to me.
I wished to be singular and simple.
Yet you, with your accordioned
diphthongs—gliding vowels, *mío,*
sweet diminutives, *mamita querida*—
you, with your reflexive verbs
that make the cup fall from me,
turn my destiny into fate’s whim—
you, with your buzz, your *eñe* and *ll* and *rr*—
I speak you, but you live elsewhere,
and I am lonely without the hive.
CROSSING THE BORDER

I.

The bruise walks naked.
Nothing else beyond Juarez.
A truck flipped, pigs genuflected.

Mexico. Each day something sacred.
We ate nopalitos in a fortress.
The bruise walks naked.

Who was he you ask? We’d waited to visit Malinche and Cortez.
A truck flipped. Pigs genuflected.

Was she fork-tongued and jaded?
Mirage. All presaged passage.
The bruise walks naked.

Sometimes I am the bruise, ashamed.
The road is a dream, a vortex:
a truck flipped, pigs genuflected.

I remember a diadem of flies; we waited.
There is a mission: portage.
The bruise walks naked.
A truck flipped. Pigs genuflected.
THE PRADAS

They gained glory shaming
girls like me. Year after year,
an hour each way on the bus.

They rolled eyes, snorted, spit,
snickered, muttered, tsked,
sniffed, flicked, a la verga’ed, etc.

First this Prada, then the next,
a brother, a cousin, adopted
grey Eric Gurulé.

Girl Pradas, too, one Debbie
expert sneer, leer, jeer.
They grew somber, silent,

when we passed the church.
I watched them make
their gangster sign.

Hands passed from forehead to
sternum to shoulders to lips.
Their children carry on.
END OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

We walked barefoot between houses, 
dust caked in our toes, popping 
pockets of bitter moisture on our tongues, 
pigweed, green or purple.

At the mailbox we hoped for letters, 
trekked the dirt road through the village, 
past a braying donkey—we stopped 
in pity, fed it grasses through the fence—

past Don Pablo’s hand, brown, strong, 
raised in salute, his missing thumb, 
a polished spot where the secret 
of adulthood was revealed.

We gave his beery breath wide berth. 
We’d heard the story of the fight, 
a bar, a bite, how someone tasted 
blood, the chew of knucklebone.

We passed the red-roofed church, 
traversed the open campo santo, 
plastic flowers faded, wilting bows, 
tumbleweeds caught among the vases,

and Pete Loco’s grave, its marker carved 
in wood, Amigo de toda la gente. 
Before his house burned down 
with him inside, he always said,
finger pointing first to himself
then to the sky, I see the moon,
and the moon sees me.
Sometimes we sang, too.

This road we walked, we left by.
Paved now, it’s no place for children
to walk alone. Donkey gone. Church roof
painted green. Fenced-in campo santo.
CROSSING THE BORDER

II.

A nude man, backside bruised,
I saw him on the road I drove.

Refrain embedded in dreams, I cruise
the highway, one long trip, alone,
a nude man, backside bruised.

I never get where I’m going, or if I do,
I can’t remember why I’ve come.

The red is cholla fruit, the desert, news:
them once living, flat on the road,
a nude man, backside bruised.

All of us going somewhere else. Crews
in yellow hats arrive to clean up the road,

From desert to tropics and back I lose
myself. I saw the overturned load:
a nude man, backside bruised,
THE VIGIL

It turns out Death’s chariot
Is a trolley train, no black horses,
The only skeletons those in the closet,
Its passage presaged by sparks.

That’s how me and Dad dreamed it,
201 skimming the clouds,
Wooden slats straining from its load,
The figurehead a Chinese dragon,

Made to bless the skies, to frighten foe.
We peeked in and got a scare
When we saw him: Dad himself,
and then we waited for Mister Death

(How do you like your blueeyed boy)—
Six winters of frost feathers on the panes,
Tapping fingers, beard and pain blazing,
Little dogs—he took them to the grave—

And a parrot called Peter Green.
Stories dance in the corner
Like dust motes, three children, a tower,
Buried treasure, the freezer full

Of Chimayo red chile powder.
We were all lit and when the explosion
Hit, Dad slipped quietly out his feet
And winged away, eluding us all.
TWO POEMS

Rosie Garland

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TWO POEMS

Rosie Garland

AWAY FROM IT ALL

My mother is not speaking about my lack
of forwarding address, the one-way
ticket, the passport stamped with visas
in a script that ribbons left to right.

Fourteen hour flight. Three days
on a train, four more on a truck
(including breakdowns) to reach the sand-scoured
border town I’ll call home for two years.

On my first week off I travel west
into the hills, hitching a ride
on a potato lorry. Villages sputter out,
tarmac frays into dirt track, then sand,
then a road only the driver can see.
I trust he knows where he’s going.
At sunset, he brings out a shotgun,
lays it on the dashboard.
My bones are rattled to the mountain foot.
I walk six days, scuffing up dust; lugging
expensive boots I can’t wear
because they scrape my heels to blisters.

Climb away from voices other than my own.
I am three thousand miles from Manchester:
from bus stops, telephones, first class stamps,
double yellow lines that hug the kerb,
front gates, back gates, locked doors, keys. I reach
the crumpled lip of the caldera, the highest point,
three thousand metres up. Not far enough.
Can still hear her, not speaking.
**Wet Season**

On the equator, looking west,
the prevailing wind brings clouds
from the south, pushes them
across my line of vision. I watch them
for a month. They change each day.
I ought to write their poetry
but keep laying down my pen.

Two years later, I’m at a bus stop
in a rainy city fifty degrees north.
Looking west, I strain to watch
clouds swelling from the horizon,
but am distracted by shops, lights,
the constant bickering of cars.
I’m enveloped by distractions and have lost
the art of looking at the sky.
NEW YORK TONGUES (I)

Annie Zaidi

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NEW YORK TONGUES (I)

Annie Zaidi

I.

We gather round a bitten apple.
Water flows.
A drowsy heaven
Tints our blue faces.

Everything is just as we had left it.
II.

They come in thirsting
For charm, for a lord with
Careless hair, sinewy arms,
Who has no fear but himself,
Who can say, *drink with me
And there will be no thirst.*

They come for one who lets you
Sleep as he bleeds into your spine
An eternal fracture, someone
Who knows how to embrace.
They come thirsting.

What they found here,
They cannot say but they sit down
For a moment and speak of light,
How the builders have just let it
Blam in—great wide swathes like
Miscreant chunks of white rock,
Blinding those who drift in
To catch their breath in the pews.
Scuffing their sneakers against
Polished brass, they read aloud:
*Come, and there is no more thirsting.
Come into the light.*
They have come to a gentle place.
Sheep to the shepherd,
Children to the kitchen,
They have come here.
Here, the dead are not.

They squint, clear their throats,
Speak of however on earth
People managed to lose the art
Of blocking out the shock of summer,
Of hushed glass and wax so that
Flickering gasps of yellow light
Catch every splash of blood red
Bird blue crushed purple skin?

Heads turned up to the soaring above,
Eyes turned away from eyes, they speak
Of a lost generation that can bear
No beauty unless it be contained.
All the hurt of their hearts is nailed
To the empty wall above the bed,
Or trapped inside a narrow window
Frame, stripped of all seeing.
III.

Skins tumble out of the sky
And skins press up from under the concrete.

Skins in yellow jackets play
Music on the street under a sponsor's
Umbrella, calling out to the city's lunch hour.
Light skin with a dark voice spells out
His name, all gung-ho about love.

New skins listening to him walk away
To get coffee, dropping into the trash can
A hot dog they didn't like after all.
Newer skin stoops to pick up two half
Hot dogs with too much accidental mustard
And sits on the steps of the library, listening
To the song that comes from a place
Where he's heard his skin came from.
IV.

Hands gripping the back of a chair,
She moves her hips,
Feet flat, squishing on the floor
Down down down
Down.

Her man, Slim—she met him
In the queue outside, waiting
To get in, and just so you know,
It was a long wait—
He grinds forward, she back.
Her bottom twerking.
His arms closing her in,
She smiles a lot tonight.

Thank God she is not that
Girl, possibly French, unsmilingly
Rubbing against a red-haired boy.
Both skinny, nice shoes, but!

Her man, Slim, was let in
Though he wore sneakers.
Her new dress brushes her thighs.
A friend on a bar stool lifts
The swirling hem, waves it around
Like a black chiffon anaconda,
A rag to a colour-blind bull.
She throws her head back, laughs.

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Her man Slim does not lose
His cool; he's lost plenty that way.
Her friend pulls her dress down,
A spectre lodged in the crow's feet
Around his eyes, he reaches for
Her drink, loves the lemon rind.
They watch his tongue.
She. Her man Slim.

Her hips, his small hands.
And the French girl's twisted mouth
Leaning away from the red boy.
She shuts her eyes.

The night will collapse in an hour.
The light outside will still be bright,
The music gentle, these rounded 'rrr's
A sad new refrain to Saturday
Night and in the distance, a voice
Begging someone to stay please
Lord! Stay stay stay!
V.

There was a time, they say,
When the moon had horns.
Perhaps even fangs.

She keeps her mouth shut.
You only knew what you knew
And she wasn’t one to swallow
Any shit but she knows there are
Nights when the moon paces,
Dripping blood, a shriek braided
around her head. This she knows.

She wakes up smelling of cardboard
And black plastic bags, those nights.
To the sky-gazing folk, she says,
Our ancestors speak of goddesses
Who do not rage much but they keep
A pair of horns on their heads.
VI.

She steps in like a queen sinking
Into the blind belly of this place
Ringing with tongues.
She lives in Queens.
The place is named for her,
She would have you know.

Her lips shine like tolling bells
Of brass and cupping her
Shaven head, a tatter of silk
Like a dead snake coiled
Tight round her crown.
There is no poison in her heart,
She would have you know.
VII.

Can’t escape it.
The sense of being failed.
Failed, beaten back, clinging
To whatever little, last bit of

Something!

Something!

Something that once said we were not
a failed something, we were not crazy
for dreaming of mammoths and dinosaurs.

It drives us crazy to think of dreams.
Still, we remember to be kind
So nobody can say of us: Them!
So that they remember us and find

Something!
FOUR POEMS

Michael Berton

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FOUR POEMS

Michael Berton

PROPHETS OF THE RED CITY

a sun baked
desert oasis
cool blue turban
herbal medicine shaman
head cracking eggs
a blood orange
on the walls
of old Marrakesh

aerial symphony acrobats
soar a cacophony
of clangors & droning drums
while a human tea kettle
spouts Moroccan hospitality

farsighted fortune teller
winking rheumy eye
gurgles mumbles
in snake dialect
after puffing from
the kif pipe
a white bearded
ginbe’ player
lotus body
on the meditation rug
sweat bubbles
on his bald head
speaking on eternity
in the Square of the Dead
TANGIERS

a mindscape
of a body language
in the intellect
pimping the soul
while beat poet
puppets on pilgrimage
hashish smoked
petrified
through a waterpipe
taste of mint tea
the sharing of saliva
drumming with Berbers
is like a spell spun
webbing your satellite
to the earth circling
the belly’s girth
on the periphery
of comparative suffering
solitude wandering
among hustlers
Paul Bowles in djellaba
mocking tourists
off ferries
backpackers hunched
preyed by young
guides shifty eyed
scoping out to analyze
for majoun assimilation
into Burroughs’ interzone.
**BORGES ON LA RAMBLA, BARCELONA**

One morning moving from
one boarding room to a cheaper
I walked out about the public
to expire the last of the morning
as I ventured past
the newspaper kiosks
up ahead was some commotion
around the bird cages.

An elderly man in dark glasses
setting in motion
his mischievous cane
upset the birds
by wiggling his fingers
in between the wires
when one pecked his finger
commencing him to yell
in an anglicized Spanish
on Latin America’s Boom.

Then whirling arms
as in a trance
our distraught Sufi
in a locomotion flash
brought out his bravado cane
jabbing at people randomly
in a duel to foolish
the imagination or be pulled
away to publish the memory of it.
I could not bring myself to leave
the curiosity he sketched for me
in mapping a foreign city
so I followed the pensively
a few blocks down in Barrio Chino
where anarchy facades architecture
Jean Genet thieved flagrant sexuality
where muses come to flee
their poets mastery over them
and curse this dark labyrinth.

In the alley of graffiti
his calloused hands comb over
the braille manuscripts
ruptured by living inspiration
until his cane thrust into
my back staying there
until he finished saying
“poetry does not lie
however it moves
the predicament
of the soul”
I acknowledged and the lips
his wife gave told
where I could kiss
the night words
to obscene absinthe.
BORGES IN CONSTANTINOPLE

I thought I saw Borges
inside the Hagia Sophia
café with a Jewish
American princess.

Yes it was him
reading from the Kama Sutra
drinking Turkish coffee
smoking on a waterpipe.

He was domained by calligraphy
about facing Mecca
with the intellect spinning
the sweat of the soul
through a lotus body
smooth as labyrinthine marble.

I too would like to travel
for a thousand and one nights
seeking the multicultural gaze
like a dance in a foreign tongue
staccato for the spoken orgasm
bartering for the secret of alchemy.
THREE POEMS

Pushpanjana Karmakar

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THREE POEMS

Pushpanjana Karmakar

HUMAN PRIVACY

Doors are signatures of human privacy
Signatures of repulsive lines between rented bones of drifted past

I want a long purple inked signature
for privacy of my lament.
At tea-tables and between trains
Weightless and guardianless soil below the earth.

You can have my songs at your shoe’s tethers
So much that I give you. Only so.
Like a time’s fixed biology to clock.
My clock has gone slippery; into waste of fecundity
It needs doors, fate of a privacy
Beyond questions of
        Ruins and retrieval.

I can stand still even on quicksand
Behind mirrors sponged by summer sun
On your sensitive feet
A want of privacy
Of echoes between
        Walls of decrepit, washed down remains.
I have kept my eyes blind
so that doors can see me.

I have kept my nerves cool
so that anguish can breathe its own.

The door mats cling to your smell
like spiders on web,
crab-footprints on sea beaches
in goodness of hatred.

We will leave, and stride out of
Small and magnified doors.
Privacy of our hearts and diaries
naked and sonorous
for the henchmen of the beating world.
THE CITY OF PRODIGY

The city was not of prodigy
Unless they made it.

They created nails, hasps and staples, railway carinishes, crewel’s darnel;
published existentialism
and fractured cookers to dearness,
as Miss Sanyal trudged the market; looking through the hole of cookers
and calculated her loss, wearing brown-reddish lipstick.
She had to cook the vegetable with prawn head and feed her diamond fish.

Needles have faces; of Penelope’s dominance
Her shoulders folded into carbon copy’s fallacy
Nasal war of creationism and gluttony
The times of modernism plotting heads for a conjecture
One misprint, that city is not of a prodigy,
but her misspelt emotion.
The prodigy has untreated kindness
mixed into smiles and gutters of city.
The last laughter toils behind concussions of graphologists.
Evidence of badmouthing slips into my arms.

Where the emotions rest?
Is it between me and my metaphors?
Is it between sounds of moss of my privus brain?
The city is still of a prodigy between calmness of future and immuned past.
Lot of immunisation it needs: art of looking wary
There are still alluvial paeans to parched echoes of merchandise countries

Into my guardian soul
The lament, queer, false one may say
froths out, from hyper callousness.

• 39 •
And I walk into sky with abdominal pain;
Soil is to be carried into the other world: exiled to unctuous beauty
I withheld the rule, acting farcical holding my toe's gravity.
The city is still of a prodigy
between curtains of moss and fern.

Into my pungent ears
Rip-roaring of many buoyant phrases
Of fish-sellers, too much of cyclic doubts
of sermons and philosophies, I may not have attended to
while being sliced into anonymity.

I don't need purple evidence
Nor I spew one for future
The city of prodigy rushes into me
Opening windows from where tip of my green fingers
Spiral into untidiness of a moist belonging
to prejudices of nostalgia.
And the sound starts to believe
in raw treble, far into from nothing starts, but an echo.
Echoes of telegrams and typewriters
Carrying ages of vicarious communication
Making that city the harbour of prodigies.
RUST AND OPEN HAIR

The rust doesn’t grow on the moon’s sill
It breathes a swallow white
It lives like a dead grandfather’s thermometer
Still measuring fever of his stories.

The rust doesn’t grow
in those unseen crossroads.
Where the car lies silted
Beckoning its owner to drive to those amateurish seeds of colours
Colours of bluish-torment, bluish-grey and egg-yolk skies
As thresholds break apart
Like peas from gutter of pea-pods.

The rust grows
in “sense” of inquiry
in “sense” of sensibilities
in that woman’s feet
torn between computer tables and mud-braids.

The rust grows in that woman’s voice
who has drunk complacency
and not thrown her feet in weeds and volcanoes.

The rust grows in that woman’s voice
who hasn’t drunk air from blackberries and depths of gnarled tree branches
Because her voice is a wrecked ship
beneath tonic of a wild sea.

The woman still has questions
Simmering within her epicentre.
whether music is a matter of mind and a dip in soul, the word “respect” is introspective.

Whether man has faith in art or art has faith in man?
Whether trees grow out of roots or roots out of roots?
Whether sense of inquiry is her home or home is a notion of two catalyst?

Whether shadow is a speck of mere transiency or harmony of soul-skins made out of two colours of ginger-earth.
The greenish-mud.
And hair open on necks of our mirrors.
FOUR POEMS

J.D. DeHart

THE POSTAGE CITY

A town arranged
In postage stamp-sized
Squares

The original intent:
To slow traffic

Outside the hotel
Adults are at play
Keeping us awake

A large boat drifts
Slowly downriver.
MEMORIAL

Inside the author’s home
We learn about her book collection
Annotated with early wisdom

The backyard is a tiny frame
Front windows overlook a church

Within walking distance
They stack loved ones in tombs

We walk, snapping images
Of the weeping trees
And nameless headstones.
PITTSBURGH

Reckless we roll over the hills
Between the old buildings
Wrapped up in blizzard snow

When we emerge from tunnels
The city opens its arms wide
A series of interconnected bridges

We eat sandwiches
Stacked with fries
Purse our lips at modern art.
PINNACLE

The stone wall
Is the barrier holding
My family back

Benches of natural stone
The rustle sound of leaves
My father's voice

There is a slow drip
Of moisture from the mountains
It collects on the ground

There is no other security
Like being between these stones
Great rock mothers.
FIVE POEMS

William Doreski

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CRUISING THE MEDITERRANEAN

When friends fall off your yacht
you refuse to rescue them.
The Mediterranean looks dark

this season. The wind from Africa’s
hardly warm enough to tempt me
to swim, so I toss long lifelines

to snag your friends and drag them
into Palma where we anchor
with a white and sloping view.

Your friends crawl aboard gasping
like sand sharks. I count them:
everyone survived. An official

arrives to sniff our passports
and we indulge him. Mallorca’s
wine exceeds the mainland’s,

he brags. You tilt your snoot
and he cringes into his boat
and rows sadly back to the pier.

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The government won’t even grant him
a motor. You laugh and agree
lunch seems appropriate;

so your wilted friends settle
for crumbs of seafood on lettuce
and sips of wine we purchased

while anchored in the old Greek
harbor of Syracuse. Too bad
the ugly storms that still prowl

this sea in search of Jonah
can’t catch up with you. So pale
even in your leopard print

bikini, you look almost fragile;
but I know how deeply you browse
even the most brackish sea,

how you bundle yourself in kelp
to sleep so profoundly nothing
can interrupt your fondest dream,

and how you paid for this yacht
by pretending to mistake
your rich husband’s blood for wine.
WATER ROUTE TO CHICAGO

Your first train trip. The coach rattles like a can of gravel. Plush seats reek of spilled food. We quake around a curve as a view of factories ripples past, the umber brick so old it hurts our eyes. The conductor checks tickets as he swaggers along, fragrant with forbidden whiskey.

You fear the train, prefer to fly despite crowds and fake security. But you’ve agreed to travel by rail to Chicago for a conference on Serbian pop music. Posing as a couple of sophisticates for whom the Erie Canal route is ancient history, we pretend that cities drab as Syracuse exist only in the corners of our expertly corrected eyes.

Actually we’re frightened by the rush of low hills, the highway crossings gated to protect us, the totter of the lightweight tubular coaches snaking through cities so shabby they belong in one of those nations we’re too old and fragile to visit. Now the slather of Lake Erie with its windy surf reminds us how sullen geography can be.
The conference begins tomorrow.
We’ll arrive at dawn in a hush
of air brakes, then taxi five blocks
and enter the conference center
with posture stilted as our faux
Serbian. Underneath our poise,
the hiss of steel wheel on rail
like a pop song’s rhythm track
will brace us against the deadweight
of landscape dragging behind us
with the rest of our pointless facts.
FREUD AT THE ACROPOLIS

Freud at the Acropolis,
1904, his shovel-beard
wagging as he remarks upon
the unreality. I’m there
with my Number Two Kodak
and snap him peering sideways
at the Parthenon, hoping it
won’t fade in the Attic glare.

Freud at least believes in the mind,
a blue spark so dynamic
he has savored it by the fistful.
But landscape puzzles him. Why
should a famous place so muddle
perception and memory? I shake
his nervous paw and commend
his Interpretation of Dreams.

“Yes, yes, but the marble’s so white ….”
He peers at me to determine
whether the mental part of me sings
like bronze or dulls like iron.
My camera reassures him.
The blunt lens looks nothing
like an eye, its ignorance
as comforting as a child’s.

Freud will become as famous
as the Acropolis, but today
he’s a tourist like me, his face
a slab of middle-aged meat,
his German wool suit too heavy
for the static glaze of Athens.

He fondles my camera in awe
of its plainly objective function.

He doesn’t know that the click
of the shutter conceals rather than
reveals what it finds, broken marble
no more phallic than the bedrock
from which the ancients cut it,
only the most evolved gestures
such as sculpture and photography
soiling themselves with such thoughts.
STRANDED IN THE NAPLES AIRPORT

Stranded in the Naples airport,
my ticket and passport stolen,
I feel the cone of Vesuvius
mock me as it mocked Pompeii.
Its symmetry hurts like an insult
in a language half-understood.

The police are indifferent. No use
pursuing so minor a theft
for a foreigner whose lack
of lucrative occupation
has sent him to Europe in clothing
he should've left in a dumpster.

Since I’ve no money, I walk
from the airport back to the city
on a road lined with concrete blocks
erected since the war blasted half
of Naples flat. Only the bay
remains untouched by the cruelty
I let well up in me, distaste
for a city of bicycle thieves
and shoeshines. Traffic hustles past,
sizzling like gnats. Pastel houses cling
together like giggly little girls.
A thick moustache offers a ride.
He spotted the American’s
dirty L. L. Bean jacket
and wants to practice English.
As he drives me to the consul,
we pass a pint of grappa back
and forth between us. Night breaks out
like an unexpected disease.

I ring the consul’s bell. No response,
so half-drunk I collapse on the steps
and dream the terrible dream
of losing ticket and passport
at an airport not in Naples
but in Frankfurt, then finding
my corpse tossed into a dumpster
labelled "unfit for research."

When I wake the consul’s shaking me,
his face distorted with rage.
Citizens like me, careless and poor,
should revoke themselves. I agree,
but need a new passport anyway,
so I can pretend that all these years
of Freudian dreams and displacements
add up to an identity.
HAVANA

In Havana, square little houses
crawl down to the harbor to die.
In one dark room the writers
suckle great cigars and plot
the novels they're afraid to write,
their beards tingling with pale blue fire.

I want to tell them, "Publish
in New York, where no one reads
even subversive literature," but
my Spanish resembles the cries
of sea gulls adrift on the stink
of tidal flats, and no one cares

anyway, unless the government
publicly indicts the book
and Castro himself burns a copy.
The writers quarrel, their beards
enmeshed; the walls creak and telephones
jangle in government offices.

Walking alone through the old city,
I see the streets toss like blankets
on a deathbed, see the shops
pining for lack of goods. Ninety
miles to key West where fishermen
study marlin instead of novels,

where no one has read a book
since Hemingway pelted the walls
of his Idaho house with his brains.
Poor old Havana. Cigar smells
dominate, and traffic’s heavy
near the old fort with its view

of the mouth of the harbor. The miles
of open sea breathe stonily
with that patience all conspiracies
require, the island of Cuba
nailed to its collective unconscious
like an untanned pelt to a wall.
FIVE POEMS

John Amen

Citation:

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BUSINESS TRIP

you arrive in a mecca locked in referendum
yr hotel overlooking a frozen lake
you eat locally grown vegetables in a popular diner
where a drag queen reads yr palm
predicting long life & love that transcends the centuries

over spiked espresso you peruse a list of colleagues
scheduled for interrogation during the late show
you improvise a joke regarding posers
tearing yr nametag from yr lapel seconds before
the legal team commandeers the microphone

it’s a stellar evening you could say it reeked of legend
the boss left his hammer on the airplane
a clerk from the central branch indulged her fantasy
involving elevators & victorian garb
everyone agreed yr dance card was a masterpiece

you’ve proven you can escape yr metaphors
take a sabbatical from yr immaculate whip
now each time you claim
even the smallest opening & move forward
a man who looks like you will be waiting
outside a revolving door in the street beneath a marquee
he too has no idea how all this works
CASTAWAY

each morning the woman in black
stretched out in warm sand
head propped on her palm
asks me about my dreams

I can’t remember
beyond a streaking snapshot
strike the match the curtain flares
then the crest & crash of her interpretation

evenings I spin around
glimpsing who I was prior to exile
a boy collecting shells at the water’s edge
spindrift & seaweed in the moonlight
all those warnings & promises
threats of turning to salt & disappearance at midnight
expiring lifetimes ago

the woman rises to her feet
a breeze lifting her black dress
I choreographed this too years from now
me collapsing into the hunger of the woman in black
treading for the pleasure
she sways before me
1969 ART PROJECT
(For Ginny Mackenzie)

I tell the madam I own a hundred factories
each housing a hundred coffins
each coffin containing
a thousand love letters
earmarked for the time capsule

she asks if I own a crematorium as well
we have a good laugh over that
she spills formaldehyde on her boots

friends are still waving goodbye from their convertibles
newlyweds on a motorcycle starving for distance
I’ve kept the snapshots
a painter in a blue tuxedo
young mothers learning how to pray
the madam in her evening gown
that drags across the graves

we staged a falling star in the background
subbed dogwood petals for confetti
as the decade imploded
— so many eulogies then again one eulogy
echoing in the kitchen

I set myself up all those years ago
just think I wanted to be the gypsy forever
THE NEW WORLD
(For Rachel Sinitski)

in his sleep your da destroyed the family Spode
your mum clutching her breath in the crawlspace
mud on her pink dress & 4-inch heels

sibs ran amuck on the stairwell
rehearsing card tricks & rap routines
a babysitter’s blood pooled in the garage
your second cousin left a stain
on your oldest sister’s bridal gown

approaching the plane beneath an august sky
you paused on the steaming tarmac
storm clouds swooning into the earth’s green arms
your family idled behind you at the gate
revving the engines of guilt
riding the brake for a last-minute delay

like any phenomenon arcing towards its destiny
you refused to look back even once
left those hams pouting in your shadow
where they’ve forgotten their lines ever since
SELF-PORTRAIT AT NOON

I stand in the driveway
of the research lab where I was raised
waving a rifle at the neighbours

I can’t afford
to discard this story

I slipped on the staircase
now water won’t boil for me
each hour brings a new
declaration of war

contrary to classic depictions
the ferryman is an extrovert

are you suggesting
envy’s a door
behind which is an empty office
where no one ever died
from not belonging?

the birds nesting in my throat
have died overnight

what you renounce
will give you another chance
later

why visit a country
that’s simply a passage
back to where I came from?
what you say in one room
echoes in another
these are the things we live with

there’s no getting around autobiography
murder by metaphor

the kids in the kitchen
can tell I’ve been doing
black cartwheels in the basement

hours with books & movies & bills
& what doesn’t get said

these days I resist more
& surrender quicker

I thought I was on a ship
singing with the stars
I was actually
lying foetal on a yellow mattress
outside a stranger’s bedroom

a time comes
when horizons blur
schedules are abandoned

people fall in love with surrogates
every day
you keep saying shame is obsolete
you should read the fine print more carefully
it's never been hard for me
  to think of guns & flowers
  in the same breath

  you can’t push the mother out
  you can’t drag the father in

  no tracks lead
  to what hangs over us
FOUR POEMS

Saima Afreen

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FOUR POEMS

Saima Afreen

AT LAKE STREET

Potter-wheels-fingers
Light falls only in his hut

He mixed night with porcelain
A strip of Czech
Brushed-bruised-briefed
On bleached brunette head
The walnut
Missing its wires

Snaking through Apple’s map
Foxtails. E-mails. Blazers. Razors
Clumped into a globe of Day...

...your world, white, cold
A grey eyed child
Buries black bones
Every winter
In a hut—your Uncle whore As a crown!
CATERPILLAR VOICES

Tomatoes
Stuffed with periods
Gushed
To two worlds.
On cascading sewerage
P&G...Xerox...Britannia
Tossed into balls

Bell jars explode
In caterpillar voices

The green strip moves to Savannah fields
Pygmy pods open
With yellow seeds

The heart was never dark
Veins never change on map of blood...
Pitcher plants ate the last butterfly
Tattooed on my breath.

Who will make Russian salad with Chinese cabbage?

Red always cries
In tomatoes
Of Hanging Gardens buried
In tongues...
A CRUMPLED POST SCRIPT

Yesterday. Today. Many days...
Calpol of bad news
Saved your waxed laughter
For cold logs to burn

Till

Mad Hatter takes you
To Brooklyn Bridge
To a market
Where your last coin
Will be your laughter.
THE COLD LAMPS

Chop a watermelon
crescents of moon will
float to The Forbidden City
pack twitters in bon-bon wrappers
it will bring an army of ants
their blood thick ink

little boats ferry a memory become a seahorse
the Red Sea is a post office of dead letters
the battle goes on... paper knives... stamps... Mont Blanc pens... martyrs of
Nobel museum

a water-train puffs towards a peony poem
bury it with honours
or at least seven salutes!

...years of literary leukaemia
Drips
Churches. Birches. porches

Rip Atlas. The sky will flow in frontiers
There will not be any Earth...
FOUR POEMS

Mohan Rana

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FOUR POEMS

Mohan Rana

WALL

The wall that stretched behind so many houses
Could have fallen,
All were watching

The wall could have fallen,
And, one day it fell down
Those leaning their backs were injured, too
All watched, and nodded wistfully
This was our backyard
What will we do now?

So it fell down, after all
Said the neighbour, nodding gravely
And shut the door of his wall …
You are welcome to the world of walls
Shortly, the wall-making-wagon will arrive
Shortly, they’ll arrive to lean their backs on the wall,
As time will linger along public wall
**Haveli**

Why did you stop while descending the stairs
Of the haveli
As if startled by something?
A pigeon on the jharokha
Or the rickety shadow of an old woman crossing the balcony
The noise of a child running
Disappearing near the corner of the lane
Why did you stop, what made you hesitate?
Did time pull your shoulder behind …
The long shadow clinging to the wall
A piece of scattered sunlight—
How long have you stood here like a sculpted priest,
Time awaits you in another place
GLOSSARY

It’s not very far and there’s no reason to measure
its distance, nor even the need to look
at its map, or the need to ask directions
the country is just nearby,
Let us give it a name
just any name, before
there is no space left for it
Rug
(For Mother)

Dust, the dust of ages—
Which I never stopped to count—
Has covered the rug, a membrane
Turning transparent in light
And without retrospection I gaze on the past
Without a memory, not even yours
On some sunlit corner

On that dust gathering rug
The embroidery alters
The colours are bleached and muddy pale
The breath of autumn’s eternally withering elms
Vanishes
In those dying impressions the shadows of streets
From the past, have risen
No more a rug, it has become my diary
And thus have I lived my life
Tied to a day, a revolving ring,

Now it is no more a rug
It has become the soil
My mother says so
MAHABHARATA’S SPATIAL POLITICS
AND THE KHANDAVADAHANA

Kanad Sinha

Citation:

Abstract:
The Mahabharata as a text is itself encyclopaedic, and has produced a mammoth bibliography around it. The entire period of its composition being more than a millennium-long has been a major impediment in using the text as a source material for reconstructing the history of any particular period. Historians like Romila Thapar and R.S. Sharma, however, have argued for a separation between the narrative and the didactic sections of the text, claiming a Later Vedic context for the former. This paper tries to locate the origin of the Mahabharatan tradition in the Later Vedic Kuru kingdom, and argues that it is possible to identify particular episodes in the narrative as referring to the original Later Vedic context. The episode of the burning of the Khandava Forest is taken as a case to illustrate the point. The essay thoroughly discusses the various interpretations of the episode presented by different scholars, as well as the large historiography on the significance of the forest, and spatial politics in early India. Then, it is shown how the episode is completely located in the context of Later Vedic forest clearance for territorial expansion. Finally, following J.A.B. van Buitenen, the geopolitical significance of the episode has been explored. Therefore, the paper studies a particular case to illustrate the applicability of a new methodology in studying the Mahābhārata and its contemporary emerging geographies, showing how the text can be better understood often being studied in conjunction with the Vedic sources.

Keywords:
Mahabharata, Khandavadahana, Spatial politics, Early and Later Vedic period, Forest clearance, Emerging geography, Vedic history, Deforestation.
The primary concern of early Indian literature rests in the settled society. Still, the forest (vāna/arāṇya) has occupied a pivotal place in its domain. It has featured as early as in the Rgvedic hymn to the arāṇyaṇī. The Arāṇyakas and the Upaniṣads are known to have been composed in the forest hermitages of the world-renouncers. Often, the forest plays the role of a fantasy world, a world of utopian harmony in hermitages, monstrous demons with supernatural power, and spectacular natural beauty. Like the ‘wine-dark sea’ in Homer’s Odyssey, it often constitutes the ‘unknown other’ in the imagination of the poets. However, it will be wrong to assume that there is no realistic portraiture of the actual life in the forest or its relationship with the settled society. In fact, often this relationship is expressed through a language of massive violence. Especially striking, in this regard, is the ruthless violence displayed in the episode of the burning of the Khaṇḍava Forest in the Mahābhārata.

The episode is not only contrary to the modern ecological sensibilities but also against the general trend of Sanskrit literature which usually speaks for a harmony with the nature. But, forest is not just a fantastic space of natural beauty. It is an entity covering a vast space, inhabited by the forest dwellers. Therefore, the ruthless violence of the khaṇḍavadaḥana episode can also be read as a commentary on the actual relationship between the inhabitants of the forest and the settled society.

Any historical hypothesis based on the text has to address the issue of its chronological location first. Though the text has usually been dated between
500 BCE and 500 CE, there is no definite reason why the date cannot be pushed back. Rather, historians like Romila Thapar and R.S. Sharma—who have pointed out the difference between the narrative and didactic sections of the text—note that the older narrative section probably represents the context of the period of the Later Vedas (c.1000-600 BCE) (Sharma, 1983: 135-52; Thapar, 2008a: 613-29).

The relationship between the Vedic world and the *Mahābhārata* has indeed been very close. The Bharata-Purus are the most important people in the *Rg Veda*, and their hegemony in the Vedic world had been established for good by the chief Sudās who defeated a confederacy of ten hostile chiefs, on the banks of the river Paruṣṇī, and another confederacy led by a chief named Bheda, on the banks of the Yamuna. These Bharata-Purus evolved into the Kurus who, alongside their sister tribe the Paṇcālas, are the most important of the Later Vedic tribes. Michael Witzel has shown that most of the Vedic texts were composed under the patronage of these two tribes, and the first proto-state in India was formed under the Kuru king Pariṅkṣit.¹ The *Mahābhārata* is basically a tradition on how the North Indian plains came under his suzerainty, and its main narrative begins from the very period of Śaṃtanu, who is the last Kuru king to appear in the *Rg Veda*. Pariṅkṣit has been praised as a

contemporary ruler in the Ṛg Veda Khila and the Atharva Veda (AVS: XX.127.7.10). His son Janamejaya is quite well known in the Later Vedic texts. By the time of the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, however, the descendants of Parikṣit were no more prominent (BU: III.3.1).

Therefore, the Mahābhārata tradition seems to have originated in a historical context of the very early part of the Later Vedic times, roughly the tenth-ninth centuries BCE, the period intervening between the Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā and the Atharva Veda Saṃhitā. The traditional attribution of the text to the same person—Dvaipāyana Vyāsā—to whom is attributed the division of the Vedic corpus in Ṛg, Sāma and Yajur saṃhitās, which must have taken place precisely the same time, only strengthens our claim. Vyāsa’s disciple Vaisampāyana, the first public narrator of the Mahābhārata in Janamejaya’s sacrifice, seems to be a historical figure like his patron, and is known precisely as the teacher of the Mahābhārata even to the Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Śūtra (AGS: III.4). Therefore, we can agree with J.A.B. van Buitenen that, “It seems more likely than not that the origins of The Mahābhārata fall somewhere in the 8th or 9th century (Vyāsa, 1973: xxiv).” However, marking out the remnants of that tradition from the later layers is a difficult, if not impossible, task. The narrative-didactic divide can be useful to start with, but oversimplifies the matter (since all the narrative episodes are not necessarily from the earliest tradition, and it cannot be said for sure that the earliest bards had no didactic element in their narrations). Thus, it is important to understand the different Mahābhāratan episodes and legends separately, with internal and external corroborative evidences.

Thus, here, we will attempt to locate the event of khaṇḍavadaṇḍana in its ‘original’ context, using its internal references as well as other contemporary sources. In the process, we will also survey the wide historiography on forest and forest-clearance in early India, and the literature on this specific episode. The burning of the Khaṇḍava forest and the establishment of Indraprastha mark a crucial episode in the narrative of the epic. The story tells that when the Kuru realm was partitioned, after the Pāṇḍavas were maritally allied with the
Pañcālas, they were assigned the forest tract of Khāṇḍavaprastha, whereas the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra received Hastināpura proper. The Pañcāvas, however, went on expanding their circle of allies, and their alliance with the Vṛṣṇis got cemented when Arjuna married Subhadrā, the half-sister of the Vṛṣṇi chief Kṛṣṇa. The birth of Abhimanyu, the son of Subhadrā, was thus an event of ecstatic celebration. The Pañcāvas, their wives and Kṛṣṇa were enjoying themselves in a pleasure-trip. There the fire-god Agni approached Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, and asked them to burn the Khāṇḍava forest. He also pointed out the problems involved in the process:

> Indra always protects this Khāṇḍava Forest from conflagration, and as long as the good-spirited God protects it, I cannot burn it. His friend lives there with his people, the Snake Takṣaka, and for his sake the Thunderbolt-wielder protects it from burning (Vyāsa, 1973: I.215.5-10).

Requested by Agni, the water-god Varuṇa provided Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna with some extraordinary weapons necessary to meet the challenge. Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna then burnt the forest with massive carnage, defeating Indra and his forces. However, they spared Maya, an Asura architect, who—on return—built a magnificent palace for the king Yudhiṣṭhira. The burning of the forest increased the habitable and cultivable territory of Khāṇḍavaprastha to a great extent, and gradually Khāṇḍavaprastha became the great city of Indraprastha (Vyāsa, 1973: I.214-216).

The event has been interpreted in various manners by scholars. Biardeau interprets the event as a mythical representation of the theme of pralaya and recreation (Hiltebeitel, 218). She bases her argument on a story about king Śvetakī who held an unusually long sacrifice—on the advice of Śiva and officiated by the sage Durvāsā, a part-incarnation of Śiva—which caused a sickness to Agni. The remedy to Agni’s sickness was the devouring of the Khāṇḍava forest. Thus, it is Śiva—the lord of pralaya—who pushes Śvetakī to an excessive and unethical sacrifice. Agni’s sickness represents the pitiful
situation of dharma, on the verge of destruction, when restoration is possible only through a great disaster. The survivors of pralaya are only those who are indispensable for recreation after destruction, such as Maya, representing illusion (māya), which permits the empirical world to be recreated and subsist, and the four Śāṛigaka birds, representing the four Vedas. However, the whole thesis is based on a legend mentioned only in some Northern Recension manuscripts, and rejected by the Critical Edition. Therefore, this story of Śvetakī—and Biardeau’s subsequent theory—has little value in our search for the original content of the tradition.

Alf Hiltebeitel views in the story the initiation of Arjuna by defeating Indra—his father and the king of Devas—whose opposition is actually a test, and treats it as a parallel to the initiation of the Buddha by defeating Māra the lord of this world. He notices the similarities between Arjuna and the Buddha by showing that both married by drawing a great bow in a svayamvara. The Buddha’s wife was named Gopa or Yaśodharā whose son Rāhula kept his lineage. One of Arjuna’s wives, Subhadra, is often called yaśasvini and was once dressed as a gopa lady, and it is her son—Abhimanyu—who kept the Paṇḍava lineage (Hiltebeitel, 217-18).

The parallelism is too weak to take seriously. It stretches the adjective yaśasvini too much to make it a counterpart to Yaśodharā, and equating a gopi’s costume with the name Gopa is even more far-fetched. Most importantly, Subhadra was not the woman whom Arjuna married at the svayamvara. While Abhimanyu actually maintains the Kuru lineage, through his son Parikṣit, Rāhula takes pravrajya before begetting a son. However, initiation may be a sub-plot in the episode, as Buddhadeb Bose has noted that here—at the end of the ‘Ādiparvan’—Arjuna receives his Gāṇḍīva bow by passing the test of defeating his father, Indra, just like Yudhiṣṭhira who gets initiated at the end of the ‘Āraṇyakaparvan’ by passing the test of defeating his father Dharma (Bose, 2004: 61). But, initiation is not the main theme of the narrative, and definitely not in the manner Hiltebeitel presents it.

The section, in fact, clearly corresponds to the practice of burning forests to establish new agrarian settlements. Clearing of forests to establish agrarian
settlements was no doubt a major factor behind the rise of the mahaṇapadas and state-formation. Though Shereen Ratnagar has pointed out that large-scale deforestation began in the Ganga valley only when the British understood the utility of sal, it is undeniable that a great portion of the forests had been cleared to establish settlements (Ratnagar, 179-90). R.S. Sharma takes the introduction of iron-tools for productive purposes—c.700BCE onwards—as the pivotal break, arguing that the clearance of forest with iron axe and wet rice cultivation aided by iron ploughshare helped to generate enough surplus for state-formation and urbanization (Sharma, 2006a: 42-48; Sharma, 2006b: 150-68). D.P. Agrawal also argues that iron technology addressed the task of land clearance for agriculture and settlement in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab and Mid-Gangetic Valley, marked by monsoon forests, swampy jungles and kankry lands (Agrawal, 49-59). M.D.N. Sahi traces the iron-aided changes to the PGW-phase, and tries to show the existence of an agricultural base, new cereals, subsistence production, existence of full-time specialists, social stratification, proliferation of artisanal production, and beginning of urbanization in the PGW phase (Sahi, 191-97). B.B. Lal also credits the PGW-users for introducing iron-aided large-scale agriculture in the Ganga-Yamuna valley (qtd. in Habib, 17-27). The technological determinism of the thesis has undergone much criticism. However, the fact of forest-clearance remains. A. Ghosh, a major critique of Sharma’s thesis, points out that fire, not iron axe, was the popular instrument of forest-clearance (Ghosh,100-13). That fire had a major role in Aryanization and occupation of new areas in the Later Vedic Age is shown in the Śatapatha Brahmaṇa which says how the hero Videgha Maṭhava and his priest Gotama Rāhuṇḍaṇḍa stopped at the bank of the river Sadaṇīrā, before entering Videha, as Agni Vaisvāna cleared the other bank for them (ŚB: I.4.1.14-17). The role of Agni Vaisvānara, in both the colonization of Videha and the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest, may mean both the clearance of forest by fire and the process of Aryanization represented by the sacrificial fire. C.V. Vaidya sees khaṇḍavādāṇana as a marker of slash and burn form of land cultivation, interpreted as a dedication.
to Agni (cited in Hiltebeitel: 214). Thapar also views it as an instance of forest-clearance by burning (Thapar, 2008b: 68).

The burning of the Khāṇḍava forest as an instance of forest clearance is integrally linked with perceptions of the forest in early India. Forest (aranyā) in ancient India was conceptualized as an antithesis to the settled society (grāma/kṣetra). Therefore, the idea of forest was more about its cultural location than its landscape. The idea of different landscapes in ancient India has attained some attention in Francis Zimmermann’s book Jungle and the Aroma of Meat. Here, Zimmermann discusses the Āyurvedic concept of different caras (eco-zones). Thus uncultivated unsettled land (aranyā) could be of two distinct ecological natures—jaṅgala (dry) and ānuṇāpa (marshy). While the former is usually associated with the west, the latter is with the east. The jaṅgala is supposed to be an area of dry climate which leads to excesses of the Āyurvedic humors wind (vaṭa) and bile (pitta), whereas the unctuous climate of the ānuṇāpa leads to dominance of phlegm (kapha) and wind. There is no inherent superiority of one of the caras over the other implied. However, in other places it is time and again reiterated that jaṅgala is better, since the meat of the jaṅgala creatures and the water of the westward flowing rivers are dry, salty, light and beneficial, whereas the meat of the ānuṇāpa creatures and water of the eastward flowing rivers are heavy and unhealthy. Therefore, Manu and Yājñavalkya prescribe kings to clear forest and settle in the jaṅgala regions. However, the best eco-zone lies in between the two, in the Delhi Doab, called the saḍharaṇades or madhyades which provides the ideal balance of the three humours (Zimmermann).

Though these concepts are found in the Āyurvedic texts composed in a period much later than the period of our concern, the dominance of the Madhyadesa, the Kurupančāla region, is quite interesting. As forest-clearance and establishment of settlements is suggested mainly for the saḍharaṇadesa and thejaṅgala regions, the Khāṇḍava forest seems to be an ideal forest for clearance. It was located in the saḍharaṇadesa which also had certain jaṅgala characteristics implied in the name Kurujāṅgala for the region. Moreover,
Zimmermann also shows the assumed medical potential of the light and heavy jaṅgala meat, which may have some role in shaping the later northern legend about the Khāṇḍava animals being prescribed as remedial diet for the diseased Agni.

The forest-burning episode concerns not only the forest, but also the forest-dwellers. Aloka Parasher-Sen minutely surveys the relationship between the settled society and the forest-tribes in ancient India, and notices a flexible social environment. She quotes Andre Beteille to note that the tribes for centuries and millennia continued to exist in the lap of civilization and that the real issue is thus “not identifying the evolutionary stage to which the tribal type of organization corresponds but in coming to terms with the co-existence of the tribal and other types of social organization within the same social and historical context” (Parasher-Sen, 2004b: 292). She notices the distinction between subordinate and marginal groups from the Amarakośa of Amarasiṃha (c. 5th-century CE), where the lower varṇas within the varṇa-ordered society (śūdra, pānara, jatna, prakṛta, kṣudra, nihīna, itara), the untouchables subordinate to it (kiṅkara, daśa, bhṛtya, bhuiṣya, pṛṣya, paricāraka, caṇḍāla, maṇḍīga, jaṅgama, pukkasa, śvapāca), and the hunting tribes outside it (kīrāla, śabara, pulindā) are categorically distinguished (Parasher-Sen, 2004a: 17). The forest tribes are therefore marked by exclusion rather than subordination. Thus, the forest-tribes are invariably bracketed with the foreign, being outside the varṇa order, as mleccha. This tendency is not exclusive to the Brahmanical tradition, since similar categorization can be found in the Jaina Prajñāpana and the writings of the Buddhist scholar Buddhaghoṣa, both datable around the fifth-sixth centuries CE (Parasher-Sen, 2004a: 20-21).

However, exclusion does not necessarily mean antagonism. Instances of both cooperation and conflict between the ārya and the mleccha can be found in early Brahmanical literature. The Niśādas had a prominent role in the Visvajīt sacrifice in which the sacrificer had to temporarily reside among the Niśādas and the iṣṭi was to be performed by a Niśāda chieftain (Parasher-Sen, 2004b: 297). In Yaśka’s Nirukta (c. 7th-century BCE), the Niśādas alongwith
the four varṇas form the panaṇa jana. On the other hand, the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa describes the Niṣādas as evil-doers and thieves who robbed wealthy men in the forest. Both the tendencies are combined beautifully in the Mahābhārata legend where Niṣāda shares common ancestry with the first king Prthu, both being born of the evil king Veṇa’s body, but is excluded from the latter’s dominion. Here the Mahābhārata enlists some other forest tribes alongside the Niṣādas, which are the Karṇapravaras, the Kālāmukhas, and the Raḳṣasas (Parasher-Sen, 2004b: 299).

Like the Niṣādas, the Kirātas were another prominent hunting forest tribe mostly associated with the hilly tracts of the Himalayas and the Vindhyas. The Rāmaṇa describes them as wearing thick top-knots and subsisting on raw flesh (Parasher-Sen, 2004b: 298). In the Mahābhārata, they are shown as Himalayan tribals attired in skins, and eating roots and fruits. Their hunting characteristic is shown in the kiraṇājuniya story in both the Mahābhārata and Bhāravi’s later epic. Later on their conflicts with the rulers of the Vindhyan region have been recorded in the Śrāvaṇa Belgolā Inscription of Narasiṃha II who claims to have broken their power, and the claim of the Western Gaṅga king Satyavākyya Konganivarman to be the destroyer of the Kirātas (Parasher-Sen, 2004b: 298).

Less prominent forest tribes living in primitive condition were the Śabaras and the Pulindas. The Arthasastra mentions them among the hunters, trappers and forest-dwellers, who were to guard the frontiers. Greek writers mention them as Sabarai and Poulindai. They were included as a target of Asoka’s dharmma (Parasher-Sen, 2004b: 299). They are also quite prominent in the Kathaśaratisaṅgara. Other tribes like the Puṇḍras and the Andhras got gradually incorporated into the mainstream.

However, the line between the subordinated and excluded groups was not always rigid. Therefore, Manu tried to include both the Niṣādas and the Kirātas within the varṇa-jāti fold. Theniṣāda became an anuloma jāti born of a brahmaṇa father and a śudra mother, whereas the kirāṭa was designated a vrāya kṣatriya status (Parasher-Sen, 2004b: 298). Amarasiṃha categorized
the Niṣādas among the untouchables like the caṇḍālas. Thus, the system was flexible, and varied in different socio-political conditions (Parasher-Sen, 2004a: 19).

Parasher-Sen’s study provides us valuable insight about the forest-tribes and their position vis-à-vis the mainstream society. However, it does not go into much detail about the actual lifestyle and activities of these tribes, focusing more on their status in the normative texts. Moreover, the tribes prominent in the epic tradition—such as the Rākṣasas, the Vānaras and the Nāgas—are left out of the study. A closer scrutiny of these tribes would provide us clearer ideas about the representation of the ‘other.’

In her essay “Of Tribes, Hunters and Barbarians: Forest Dwellers in the Mauryan Period” Parasher-Sen underscores the settled society’s tendency to exclude the tribal communities from their cultural landscape, be it in the different Brahmanical concepts of Āryāvarta or in the Buddhist idea of Majjhimaśā. However, the forest had its importance as well, as a supplier of fuel, timber, hay, game, and edible produce. Thus, forest’s importance as a resource-base coexisted with the apprehension about the ‘barbarian’ aṭavikas. In the Mauryan period, forest gained more attention, and Kauṭilya, with his typical emphasis on resources, categorizes forests according to their resource potential, giving special importance to elephant-forest (nāgavana) and material forest (dravyavana). He also suggests special store-houses for forest-products and appointment of special officers for tapping forest-produce. Forbidding clearance of the elephant-forests and encouraging planting of the dravyavanas, he welcomes the possibility of clearing other kinds of forests for establishing new settlements (janapadanivesa). However, he shares the earlier apprehension about the forest-tribes. Thus, aṭavībala or force of the forest tribes is to him less desirable than a force of the aliens led by an ārya, and the former is recommended only in an emergency, like attack by a force consisting of forest-tribes. The Arthaśastra also recommends different ways of breaking up free and armed forest tribes. That even Aśoka was not free of this apprehension is clear in his Rock Edict XIII where he gives an oblique warning to the forest-tribes that his lenient policy only means “patience as far it is
possible to exercise." Still, sensitively enough, he strictly prohibited burning down of forests, and his Fifth Pillar Edict enlists a complete ban on killing of certain creatures and restriction on killing of some others, although this might not have been a welcome measure for the hunters and fishermen (Parasher-Sen, 1998: 173-91). In this dual antagonism and cooperation between the settled society and forest in ancient India, though important as a source of resources, the forest was the realm of the ‘other’ and the state practised as much non-interference as possible, being happy with the extraction of certain resources.

That the forest attained more focus in the Maurya period is not surprising: Candragupta Maurya possibly hailed from a forest tribe of Pipphalivana. In many legends, he meets his mentor Cāṇakya in a forest, also performing miracles. However, for us, more significant are the Aśokan decrees. The prohibition on burning down forests is an indication of prevalence of such practice in pre-Mauryan time. The restriction and prohibition on killing of several creatures also is a happy contrast with the massive slaughter and cruelty involved in the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest.

Thapar’s essay “Perceiving the Forest: Early India” discusses the dichotomous as well as complementary relationship between the forest and the settled society, and the threefold role of the forest as the site of hunting, hermitage, and exile. Hunting, with almost the entire army in action, often took the form of a “surrogate raid on nature.” The violent and massive hunting of Duḥṣanta or the great carnage involved in the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest, both in the Mahābhārata, seem more to be necessary precondition for power rather than used in a symbolic sense. The burning of Khāṇḍava appears to be a claim on the land as territory and differs in mood from the Satapatha Brahmana story of Videgha Maṭhava where the fire plays a more legitimizing role. The hunt could also be a mechanism of asserting control over the grazing ground. Thus, the Kurus seem to have extended their control over Dvaitavana where they established a pastoral settlement. Inspection of cattle becomes an excuse for hunt and display of power. However, the resistance of the forest-dwellers to this infringement of the forest comes in the form of the
Gandharvas of Dvaitavana. The Gandharvas are counted also as one of the forest tribes resisting the burning of the Khāṇḍava.

The most frequent imagery of forest people in the epics, however, is that of the Rākṣasas, appearing as the unfamiliar forest-dwellers who obstruct hunting expeditions and harass those establishing settlements in the forest, such as the rṣis establishing their āśramas. The hermitage of the renouncer, in fact, is to be located outside the settled society whose norms he renounced. But, for the forest tribes, it remains an infringement of the forest by the settled society, and the hermitage indeed played the role of a mediator between the two. As the realm of the unknown, forest is also the place of exile in both the epics, where most fantastic incidents of the epics unfold.

The equation changed a bit with the appearance of the state machinery. In the Mauryan period, Kauṭilya views the forest as a source of resources and also discusses the diplomatic possibilities of alliances with the forest people. That the forest-dwellers still had a dichotomous relationship with the state is indicated in the warning in Aśoka’s Rock Edict XIII. In the Gupta period, Samudra Gupta is known to have brought the aḷavika chiefs to servitude. Closer contacts between the two worlds were facilitated by the grant of agrahaṇa lands in the forested regions in subsequent periods. Thus, the distinction remained, but the antagonism became less ferocious. In Kālidāsa’s Abhijnānasakuntalam, Duḥṣanta’s hunt loses its Mahābhārata ferocity. In Bāṇabhaṭṭa’s Harṣacarita, the picture of the forest is quite close to that of a village. The description of the nephew of the Śabara chief matches the stereotypes of the Niṣāda or the Rākṣasa, but he is no longer feared or fantasized. Rather, Bāṇabhaṭṭa acknowledges him as someone who knows every leaf of the forest (Thapar, 2001: 173-91).

The antagonistic relationship between the forest-dwelling Rākṣasas and the settled society is reflected in the two exiles of the Pāṇḍavas. Whenever the Pāṇḍavas entered the forest as exiles, this infringement was resisted by the Rāksasa chiefs like Hiḍimba and Kirmīrā. On the other hand, when a Rākṣasa chief, Baka, tried to impose his authority on the settled society of Ekacakra, by
demanding the sacrifice of one human from one family of the village every day, he is slain by Bhīma, his body becoming a public spectacle.

The dichotomy of the village and the forest, in ritual and actual context, is also an object of interest in Charles Malamoud’s *Cooking the World*. Malamoud shows how *arautya* constituted the ‘other’ to the ‘self’ of the settled village, and could include all kinds of landscapes other than the cultivated village, ranging from forest to desert. The village was the settled society governed by social norms (*dharma*) observed by the householder (*grhastha*), while the forest, the ‘other’ world of wilderness. Therefore, forest animals were not to be used for sacrifice to prevent the householder becoming a part of the other landscape. Yet, as the sacrifice implied human authority over both the realms, the forest had to be absorbed into the village. In the horse sacrifice, forest animals were tied to the posts between the posts where village animals were tied. But, they were then set free while the latter were sacrificed. Forest was therefore both within and without the village. Within, as the realm inferior to that ruled by *dharma* and subjected to those worshipping Agni, the god of the sacrificial fire; without, as the realm of unknown wilderness that might account for the Absolute. It is the forest where, in contrast to the *grhastha*, the renouncer (*sannyaśin*) sought the Absolute, transcending the normative reach of *dharma*. Ascetics would sometimes use only the hollow of their hand as dish for eating, while some others would directly eat with their mouth like animals. Man could be a part of both the worlds. He was the village animal par excellence, the ideal sacrifice, the only animal who could also be a sacrificer. But, he was also considered among the forest animals in many cases including the list of sacrifices in the horse-sacrifice. The secret lay in the contrast of the *grhastha* and the *sannyaśin*, though each could be a stage in the same man’s life. However, the ancient Indian thinkers also tried to juxtapose the two in the stage of *vānaprastha*, a utopia according to Malamoud. It is a stage when the householder entered a forest establishment, permitted only to take his wife and his fire. However, the sacrifice would be of wild rice, not of anything cultivated. Thus, the natural harmony remained undisturbed, and that harmony of nature in the hermitage attained fantastic proportion in Kālidāsa’s
picturesque language (Malamoud, 91-94). Malamoud also agrees that the relationship between the forest and the village in ancient India was both dichotomous and complementary. Whether his description of vānaprastha as a utopia can be accepted is, however, questionable. Vānaprastha abounds in early Indian literature. Whereas, the complete harmony of nature in the hermitages, described by poets like Kālidāsa, might have utopian elements in it, the existence of vānaprasthaśrama as a social reality cannot be altogether relegated as utopic.

From the state’s perspective, perceiving the forest as a place of both antagonism and complement to the complex society could not be enough. Though the forest space was othered, it was to be subordinated to the complex society over which the king ruled. B.D. Chattopadhyaya notes that the mystique of forest with transcendental as well as evil characteristics can be traced as early as in the Rgvedic hymn to the ārattyāni, and the Āranyaka texts. However, the complex society could not treat the forest by complete separateness, since the forest was an important source of resources and often pivotal to the security strategies. Therefore, forest was to be brought within the moral-cultural authority of the complex society, though as a marginal area. The forest dwellers were to provide services to the complex society, but as marginal untouchables or outcastes. The attempt of culturally hegemonizing the forest space, and the resistance of the forest dwellers to it, created a certain tension between the two. This led to the repeated references to the forest-dwelling Rākṣasas spoiling the sacrifices. We have already seen that even the usually lenient and non-violent emperor Aśoka speaks apprehensively of the forest-dwellers, and issues veiled threats to them for making them adhere to the moral order. These attempts of hegemony became widespread from the Gupta Age onwards. Samudra Gupta vanquished many forest-chiefs, and the practice of granting lands in forested areas gradually led to the transformation of many forested areas into settled villages or towns. The forest chiefs, with this incorporation, often acquired symbols and substance of political authority of the contemporary complex society as well. Sanskritization became a major tool for that, as Chattopadhyaya shows from the inscriptions of Samkṣobha, a


parivṛṣṭaka mahaṛāja subordinate to the Gupta kings, and of the Hoysalas. He also notes elements of Sanskritization on the forest hunter Kalaketu of the Caṇḍīmaṅgala, a 16th-century Bengali text by Mukundārāma Cakravarti. Conversely, those chiefs who did not take part in the transformation, remained forest chiefs, rather than becoming monarchs matching the requirements of a complex state society, even up to the 20th century, as Chattopadhyaya shows from the instance of the forest rāja in the Āranyaka, a Bengali novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyaya (Chattopadhyaya, 23-37).

At least, in the pre-Gupta days, the state’s attempt to hegemonize the forest-space often took the form of violent confrontations. The forest dwellers could have been violent in spoiling sacrifices, as the state could be violent in imposing its order on the forest. With this background in mind, we may proceed to the most comprehensive study of the concerned episode in Ruth Katz’s Arjuna in the Mahābhārata. She does not accept Biardeau’s description of the event as a representation of pralaya arguing that the pralaya imagery is nothing but a descriptive tool. In fact, one major methodological contribution of Katz is pointing out the formulaic nature of various literary imageries used by the poet, which are majorly literary and descriptive tools, rather than serious mythical or historical pointers. Indeed, there is hardly any thematic possibility of the Khāṇḍava-burning being conceived as dissolution, since mythically the Mahābhārata represents the end of Dvāpara and beginning of Kali, not the time of dissolution at the end of Kali.

The principle interest of Katz lies in understanding Arjuna at three levels of his personality: heroic, human, and devotee. However, the violent massacre in the Khāṇḍava forest becomes problematic at the heroic level. It not only offends modern sensibilities (both Hindu and Western), but also hurts the moralities of nonviolence (emphasized in the didactic sections of the very text as well as in classical Hinduism) and rightful warfare (in which, according to the epic narrative, innocent bystanders were not to be slain). More surprising is the lack of attempt to justify the act anywhere in the epic. To understand this aspect, Katz explores several possibilities. One is that a battle against cosmic forces might not have been bound by the moral dilemmas that battle with

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human enemies would entail. Therefore, the code of warfare might not have been adhered to in this case. To prove that the battle was actually conceived as one between cosmic forces, Katz draws a parallel with the *Iliad* where Achilles fights the river Skamandros. There Achilles, aided by Poseidon and Athena, could ultimately overcome the combined strength of the river and its tributary Simoeis only when he was aided by fire brought by the smith Hephaistos. This duality of fire and water in Indo-European myth is represented in the fight between Agni and Indra in the Khaṇḍava episode as well. Moreover, this violent cosmic duel can actually have a positive overtone if it is conceived in a sacrificial nature which the presence of the Fire-god indicates. Katz refers to other such instances of massive positive cosmic destruction in sacrificial cause in the epic mythology, most notably the churning of the ocean by the Devas and the Asuras. She also compares the companionship of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in the event with that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* where the two heroes fight the forest-guardian Humbaba. There Humbaba had both fiery and watery characteristics which Gilgamesh could overcome with the force of the winds sent to his aid by the sun-god Shamash.

This episode leads to the maturation of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa as warriors. Therefore, the two display an amoral and premature martial ecstasy which was to be refined later on. That Arjuna was to mature into an ethical warrior, rather than continue to be a brutal ecstatic killer like Bhīma, is indicated in his brief spell of chivalry to save the architect Maya (Katz, 71-84).

Finally, at the level of Arjuna’s devotion, Katz notes that Kṛṣṇa is still not a deity. He needs Varuṇa’s aids to face Indra as boldly as Arjuna does. However, the duo is described as the incarnations of the sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa at the end of the narrative. These two brilliant sages, believed to be upholders of *dharma* incarnated in every epoch, would gradually be deified in the Paṇcarātra Vaiṣṇava tradition of *bhakti*. There Nārāyaṇa would be identified with Viṣṇu, and Nara conceived as the human universal. Thus the indication to the Nara-Nārāyaṇa characters of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa can also be an indication to Arjuna’s character as a devotee of Kṛṣṇa. This devotion and
companionship would also lead to Arjuna’s deification as early as in the time of Paṇini (Katz, 213-21).

The hypothesis of Katz is well-argued. However, while she dismisses the dissolution imagery as a descriptive tool, why the sacrificial imagery could not be the same is not clear. The sacrificial imagery is definitely there, as is the antagonism between water and fire. However, the biggest problem in viewing the event as a sacrifice is the presence of Indra in the antagonistic side, a problem Katz herself notes but prefers to ignore. Moreover, while in the Achilles-Skamandros story, it is the power of fire that defeats the water, here the ultimate fight was not between Indra and Agni, as the two human heroes dominated the scene.

The comparison with the Gilgamesh-Enkidu story seems too far-fetched. It is true that the Indo-European and Semitic traditions may not be as separate as is usually believed, and there are reasons to claim some mythical connections between the Gilgamesh tradition and Indian mythology. But in this case, companionship of two heroes, and the fiery stormy nature of heroic battles, is too general a commonality to argue for something substantial. Moreover, in the Gilgamesh-Enkidu story, both fire and water are on the side of Humbaba, and the forces those help Gilgamesh are wind and sun which are not very substantial in the Khaṇḍava episode or the Iliad story.

Therefore, Katz also agrees that it is probable that the episode represents a historical forest-burning for the purpose of conquest or land clearing, wiping out the wild tribes. In that case, the violent nature of the massacre becomes understandable. In fact, in both the Indian epics, it seems that the codes of warfare were observed only in the cases of battle between the ksatriya warriors, whereas ruthlessness is well-approved in the contest with forest tribes. We have already discussed the killing of Vālin in the Raṃāyaṇa which makes the matter clearer. The case of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna may be similar here.

Holtzmann (the younger) views the forest as a retreat for Natives (Asuras) against Aryan onslaught (qtd. in Hiltebeitel, 214). But, in this case, the Nāgas rather than the Asuras are at the centre-stage. Irawati Karve thinks that
the Nāgas and Birds were forest-clans whom the Aryan ‘conquering settlers’—Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna—liquidated (Karve, 93-108).

The description also points to a human, rather than beastly, nature of the victims. The fact that the Nāgas were an ancient community, who reappeared time and again in Indian history, is well-known. They were a powerful ruling group, who were sometimes allies or antagonists of the kṣatriya rulers. Thus, even in the Gupta period, while Samudra Gupta fought several battles against them, Candragupta II married a Nāga princess. The Bhāraśīva Nāgas were a powerful ruling group. Similarly, in the Mahābhārata, marital alliance between the Kurus and Nāgas is mentioned (like Arjuna’s marriage with Ulūpi). Kosambi notes the importance of the Nāga cycle in the epic, reflected in the Nāga aid to Bhīma, Nahuśa’s conversion into a Nāga, Balarāma’s transformation into a Nāga, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s assumed Nāga characteristic (Kosambi, 39). The Nāgas were also antagonistic to the epic heroes. Legends hold that Kṛṣṇa subdued Kaliya Nāga on the banks of the Yamuna. Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa butchered the Nāgas of Takṣaka’s lineage in the Khāṇḍava forest. A Takṣaka later killed Parīkṣit, the grandson of Arjuna. Janamejaya resolved to kill all Nāgas to avenge his father’s death.

The poet(s) of the Mahābhārata represents these forest-dwelling tribes with all their characteristics with much sensitivity probably derived from better first-hand knowledge than of the Raṇayāga. Vālmīki, whose geography starts faltering the moment it moves beyond the North Indian plains, perceives the forest tribes as cannibalistic monstrous Rākṣasas or animal-like Vānaras, adorns them with fantastic qualities, and punishes the open display of sexual desire of their females by mutilation of their organs. Devoid of much first-hand knowledge about these communities, he also attributes Sanskritized names—like Kumbhakarṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa, Sugrīva and Śūrpanakhā—to them. But the case is different in the Mahābhārata. There we notice the possibility of a greater contact with these people whose names (Hiḍimba, Baka, Kirmirha, Ghaṭotkaca) bear clear non-Sanskritic origins. The ways in which the settled society and forest dwellers tried to preserve their own spheres, and resisted any
infringement by the other, are shown in the Hiḍimba and Baka episodes mentioned above. The open sexual advances of the Rākṣasa and Nāga women have been accepted in most cases, and not punished by mutilation.

The difference between the Brahmanical society and that of the Nāgas, the forest-dwelling Rākṣasas, and the non-Aryan tribes of the North-east is made clearer by the instances of matrilineal succession among the latter groups. Thus, Ghaṭotkaca, the son of Bhīma by the Rākṣasa Hiḍimba, remained with his mother and became a chief. Similarly, Irāvan, Arjuna’s son by the Nāga princess Uluśṭa, also remained with his mother. Citraṅgadā, the Manipuri princess, kept her son Bābhruvāhana with her, who eventually succeeded to the throne. The aggressive nature of the conflict is also clear by the fact that Arjuna killed Takṣaka’s wife when she tried to save her son.

But, describing the episode as an outright Aryan/non-Aryan conflict is difficult. Rather, the forest-dwellers—in this case—seem to be Vedicized people who worshipped Indra. Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna actually fought against a full army of the Vedic deities, excluding Agni. However, they were aided by two Vedic deities, Agni and Varuṇa, as well. The army they faced was a mixture of opposites, as the deities fought alongside the Rākṣasas, Daṇavas and Daityas. More surprisingly, it was not only the Nāgas who resisted Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, but also the Garuḍas—the chief adversaries of the Nāgas. The fact that the Nāgas and Garuḍas might have been closely related—despite their antagonism—is indicated in the myth which shows them as born of the same father—Kasyapa—and different mothers—Kāḍru and Vinatā—who were sisters, just like the Devas and Asuras. Therefore, it was a combined resistance of all the residents of the forest, who set aside their conflicts to protect their abode. The account seems to represent not an Aryan/non-Aryan conflict, but a conflict of two ideas—the old Vedic and tribal idea of association with nature and forest, and the rising idea of settlement and proto-urbanization through forest-clearance. Even the Aryan elites were divided on this issue is indicated by the presence of Indra and Agni as opponents, and of Varuṇa in both the sides. The setting is still Vedic, and not later, as shown by the list of the deities involved—Agni, Indra, Varuṇa, Yama, the Āsins, Dhār, Jaya,
Tvastṛ, Arśīśa, Aryaman, Mitra, Puṣan, Bhaga, and Savitṛ. Śiva is present, but only as a participant in Indra’s army, and nothing more.

That the Khāṇḍava Forest suddenly disappeared from the geography of Kurukṣetra sometime in the Later Vedic Period is indirectly attested by Later Vedic literature as well. Therefore, the concerned forest is a part of the geography of Kurukṣetra in both Jaiminīya Brahmaṇa (JB: III.168) and Paṇčavistha Brahmaṇa (PB: XXV-XXVI) but not in the slightly later text Maṇava Śrauta Sūtra (MŚŚ: IX.5.4.1).

After these analyses a natural question arises: why did the forest have to be burnt, when so much opposition was involved? Apart from the fact that it occupied a substantial section of Khāṇḍavapraṣṭha, assigned to the Paṇḍavas, there might have been some geopolitical reasons as well, as J.A.B. van Buitenen writes:

The oval figure beginning at Hastināpura, continued through Aśchicchatra and Kāmpīlya, and reversed through Mathura of the Vṛṣṇis, must if it is to return to its source, once more intersect the river Yamuna. It is at this approximate spot that we find Indrapraṣṭha, the city founded by the Paṇḍavas in the Khāṇḍava Tract given them by Hastināpura after the alliance with Paṇcāla. It is surely Kuru country, but it is Vṛṣṇi riverside, and it is the Vṛṣṇi diplomat Kṛṣṇa who helps them to clear the area and establish themselves. A triangle of alliance has been formed by Kṛṣṇa, from Indraprastha to Mathura to Kāmpīlya, and the security of Mathura secured by the marriage bond of Indraprastha and Kampīlya. In the process Kṛṣṇa has also wound up with the balance of power: If war is to break out, Indraprastha, Mathura and Kāmpīlya can jointly converge on Hastināpura (Vyaśa, 1973: 10-11).

Kṛṣṇa’s engagement in burning the forest may become more meaningful in this light if we remember that the Vṛṣṇis were also trying to regain Mathura from the Magadhan chief Jarāśandha who had driven them out to Dvārakā.
Thus, the burning of the Ḫaṇḍava forest can be safely contextualized in the period of the later Vedas, as an instance of forest-clearance by fire for establishing a new settlement of economic as well as geopolitical advantage. The pantheon involved in the legend is essentially Vedic and the episode is a remarkable instance of different antagonistic Vedic forest tribes fighting together to defend their abode. The legend also shows the beginning of the rise of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as heroes, and the former’s assault on the old religious system, through his deification was yet to mature. Indraprastha, the resultant settlement, survived for a considerable period. While Hastināpura was deserted for Kaushambī around 800 BCE, Indraprastha remained a centre of the Kuru power at least till the time of the Buddha. The Daśabrahmaṇa Jālaka refers to the Kaurava kings of Yudhiṣṭhira’s lineage ruling from the Kuru capital Indraprastha. However by the time of the Buddha, the Kurus had lost their Later Vedic glamour, with the Ḫaṇḍavadāhana having been exemplary of their reign.

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2 *The Jālaka*, ed. E.B. Cowell (Vol.IV), trans. W.H.D. Rouse (Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 2002): 227-231. Kuru is one of the sixteen maha janapadas known to early Buddhist literature; however, its past glory was clearly gone.
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GEOGRAPHY FABULOUS: CONRAD AND GHOSH

Padmini Mongia

Citation:

Abstract:
Commenting on the world he imagined for The Sea of Poppies, Ghosh has said that it is Melville rather than Conrad who influenced him. I, however, seek to examine Conrad’s presence in Ghosh’s works primarily via Conrad’s 1924 essay, “Geography and Some Explorers.” Meditating as it does, on “known” and “unknown” corners of the earth, the essay captures some of the remaining magic associated with those “unknown places.” Like Marlow’s nostalgia in Heart of Darkness for an earth where places to discover were available, Conrad’s late essay is also a document of nostalgia and yearning as he talks of “geography fabulous.” The domain of the novel Conrad helped hone (the adventure novel), has a hundred years later been filled by many postcolonial writers. The most interesting of these, in the Indian context, is Amitav Ghosh, whose novels have taken upon themselves to revisit “geography fabulous” and reveal it as “geography militant.” Yet, even as Ghosh’s concerns are postcolonial ones, his reliance on the tropes of adventure allow us to explore continuities between these two writers rather than to see their interests in opposition to each other.

Keywords:
Amitav Ghosh, Herman Melville, Chris Lydon, Geography fabulous, Adventure, Colonial adventure.

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GEOGRAPHY FABULOUS: CONRAD AND GHOSH

Padmini Mongia

In an impressive body of work often located in South and South East Asia, Amitav Ghosh revisits territory many readers of novels in English have known through colonial writers such as Conrad, Kipling, and Greene. This is not a surprise. Several writers we categorize under the rubric postcolonial are impelled, at least in part, by a revisionist agenda, which leads us to question the worlds the colonial novel offered. Among these postcolonial novelists, Amitav Ghosh is one of the foremost, and not only in the context of India. His training as an anthropologist and his involvement in academic debates inflect his novels so strongly that the latter are often more scholarly than novelistic in their engagement with issues that concern postcolonial theorists and historians. Ghosh’s works, more than those of other writers on the world stage, are critical to an ongoing understanding of the previous two centuries and their legacies in this one.

What might it mean, then, for Ghosh to say, as he did in a 2008 interview after the publication of Sea of Poppies, that breaking the imperial gaze brought by Kipling or Conrad did not interest him? Conrad’s maritime world, Ghosh said, contained few, if any, Indian or South Asian characters of note. The few that appear there are caricatured, whereas Ghosh claimed that Melville is the truly cosmopolitan writer with whom he wanted to engage. There is no denying the truth of Ghosh’s understanding of Conrad: Conrad’s colonial worlds, situated though they may be outside Europe, are peopled by Europeans, Europeans disintegrating through their location and their interaction with the locals with whom they come into contact. Yet, one ghost

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hovering over Ghosh, it seems to me, is that of Conrad. Kipling seems a more
distant ancestor, but Conrad, concerned with the moral and psychological
ambiguities that mark his characters and deliberating on particular moments
of contact between Europeans and others, seems an unlikely figure for Ghosh
to distance himself from.

By probing Ghosh’s comments on Conrad and Melville, I want to
understand better the weight behind what seems an unnecessarily precise
distinction between affiliative connections. In order to tease out what may be
at stake in Ghosh’s position, I will work my way through Conrad’s “Geography
and Some Explorers,” a late essay which has received little attention except as
another articulation of Conradian concerns better spelt out in Heart of
Darkness. Through this essay I argue for the presence of Conrad in Ghosh’s
work. Having done so, I address his comments quoted above and try to
dismantle the simpler oppositions implied by the binary
colonial/postcolonial.

**GEOGRAPHY AND SOME EXPLORERS**

“Geography and Some Explorers” was published in Britain by Strangeways, in
a limited edition of thirty copies, in January 1924. In February that year, it
appeared as “The Romance of Travel,” again in Britain, in a publication called
Countries of the World that came out between 1924 and 1925, and was intended
as “a photo-illustrated gazetteer of all the world’s countries and regions in
alphabetical order.” ¹ Conrad’s essay was included in the first volume of the
publication and afforded prominence by being cited on the cover itself. ² In

¹ This information is from Conrad First,
² Although Conrad’s essay is cited often, there is next to no sustained work on it.
Ray Stevens’ “Conrad, Gilbert Grosvenor, The National Geographic Magazine, and
‘Geography and Some Explorers’” is the only full-length article I have found on the
essay. The article addresses, as its title suggests, the life of Conrad’s essay in The
addition, this first volume also carried an essay on Conrad by the series’ editor, John Hammerton. Later that year, in March 1924, Conrad’s essay was published under the title “Geography and Some Explorers,” in The National Geographic Magazine, complete with sixteen full-page illustrations, selected by the staff at the magazine without any consultation with Conrad. It featured as the lead article in the magazine. On 24 August 1924, an extract from the essay was published as “Conrad on Geography,” in The Oakland Tribune, just two weeks after Conrad passed away.

At the time of the essay’s publication in both Britain and the US, Conrad was a well-known, much celebrated writer. By the time the work appeared in the US, he had already been on the cover of Time magazine and had completed a successful literary tour of the country the previous year. Peter Mallios’ fascinating Our Conrad examines the concerns and impetus behind the North American embrace of the Polish/British writer. The construction of Conrad as a literary master had as much to do with his will-to-style as it did with the ways in which he could be seen as a European frontliner to where the novel was heading. Not surprisingly, then, Conrad’s late essay was sought after and solicited by Gilbert Grosvenor at The National Geographic. Conrad was a name, and a respected authority on matters of exploration, the sea, geography, and the foreign. His status was the main reason for the several appearances of his essay within a very short time, as if it were some sort of composite reflection on hitherto disparate and scattered concerns. Further, Grosvenor approached Conrad with a proposal for a series of essays on “seamen explorers especially for the Geographic” (Stevens, 198). As Stevens points out, “[t]his request was...
consonant with Grosvenor’s compelling desire to increase interest in geography by increasing the circulation of The National Geographic and by broadening the Geographic’s base of appeal” (ibid). Conrad declined the invitation, citing lack of time and knowledge, but he did suggest writing a “general article on a period of sea exploration in its picturesque aspect at some indefinite time in the future” (ibid).

Conrad’s prominence may help explain the lack of reaction to what seems to me a series of interesting but contradictory approaches to geography and exploration within the essay. Whereas Conrad’s text positions itself to reflect on what he calls “geography,” the piece is a much more explicit meditation on “exploration.” Ranging from Columbus to Tasman to Captain Cook, the work examines different moments of geographical/seafaring exploration, addressing variously the travails and trials that attended these journeys. The essay seems neatly divided into different stages of geographical awareness—geography fabulous (the medieval phase), geography militant (the post-Columbus phase), and geography triumphant (the phase prevalent at the time of Conrad's writing)—but, as Shirley Chew astutely suggests, "by linking from the start his fanciful mapmaking with the deeds of adventurous men, Conrad draws geographical discovery into the province of romance" (119). Further, Chew goes on to emphasize their similarity:

- both have their origin in action, in particular the lonely endeavors of the heroic individual in distant places and times;
- both yearn to ‘remake the world in the image of desire’; and
- both, in their moments of greatest intensity, are characterized by a perfection that carries with it its own dissolution (119).

While Chew’s essay is focused on Conrad and Naipaul, my interest in her reading of Conrad’s late work lies in the attention she pays to the nostalgia that inflects his comments on geography. Chew rightly underscores the “all-consuming” (120) quality of Conrad’s nostalgia, so pervasive that his meditation is able to ignore, amongst other features, the Great War “or the decline of sea power in the face of new technology and inventions” (120).

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As a result, despite his efforts to organize and categorize different stages of geographical awareness, Conrad himself collapses the distinction between geography and exploration that he is at pains to make. From the beginning of the text, where he distinguishes them, only then to see them as coterminous, the essay remains a paean to geography, but geography of a particular kind. The easy transposition of titles for this work when it was first published in Britain and the US may say it best: “the romance of travel” and “geography and some explorers” are one and the same. That world of boyhood wonder when the young Conrad gazed at blank spaces on the map and vowed to visit them, a moment remembered in Heart of Darkness and in “Geography and Some Explorers,” is the one that accentuates what Conrad has to say about geography as a science and explorers as the tools for at least some part of that geography.

The power of romance—romance understood as expressive of heroic action, lonely men, and distant places—is exerted not only in the worlds that Conrad created in his fictions and lived out in his own seafaring days. It is that same power that I see in Ghosh’s writing, even as I am acutely aware of the ways in which Ghosh revises the idea of romance that compelled writers such as Conrad. Perhaps there is no work more explicitly responsive to Conrad’s essay and its celebration of the force of romance than Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines. Drawing its title from Conrad’s story, “The Shadow-Line,” Ghosh’s novel creates an unforgettable character in its nameless narrator: a boy stuck in Calcutta who learns to dream with precision as he learns that places are to be imagined, and so must be imagined with care. This passion for travel has been nurtured and developed in the narrator through his uncle Tridib; they spend hours poring over Tridib’s tattered copy of Bartholomew’s Atlas, as Tridib—his uncle—tells him stories of places with magical names. “[T]hose names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed them out to me” (20), help train the young narrator to use his “imagination with precision” (24), laying the groundwork for the narrative imagination that leads him to construct the moving and cathartic tale he tells.

Those hours spent gazing at the atlas recall Conrad’s childhood passion for maps, of which he speaks in “Geography and Some Explorers”: “[M]ap
gazing [...] brings the problems of the great spaces of the earth into stimulating and directing contact with sane curiosity and gives an honest precision to one’s imaginative faculty” (13). Just as Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* dreams of visiting the white heart of Africa as a boy, so did the young Conrad. The magic associated with travel and discovery that so compels Marlow’s urge to visit the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* has a distinct flavor, particular to the period Conrad evokes in the novella. But the excitement and childish wonder associated with unknown spaces and a world newly-discovered, that both Marlow and Conrad recall from their boyhoods, is shared by the nameless narrator of Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*. Tridib gives his nephew, through their map gazing, “worlds to travel in and . . . eyes to see them with” (20). Not only capable of using his imagination with precision, the narrator becomes a storyteller who uses his passion for travel and adventure to discover the mystery of space and contiguity rather than the limitations placed by boundaries of geographical difference determined by national borders.

Like Conrad’s meditation on map gazing, Ghosh’s narrator’s meditation on space reveals nothing but the mystery of distance. Despite the honest intentions of map makers who believed in the “enchantment of lines” (228), the narrator discovers the tenuousness of borders which do not separate but reflect sameness, so that Calcutta and Dacca become in *The Shadow Lines* the “inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free—our looking-glass border” (228). Inevitably, Ghosh’s meditation on borders and distance has a different inflection from Conrad’s boyhood passion for maps. While both are compelled by the mystery and attraction of the unknown, Ghosh’s novel struggles with late-twentieth-century concerns, particularly the imagined community of the nation. The rapid changes between “known” and “unknown” in the maps that fascinated Conrad have given way to new realities in Ghosh’s novel, which he approaches in ways unimaginable to Conrad or in Conrad’s time. Yet, despite these differences between Ghosh and Conrad, the power of romance remains an important feature in the works of both novelists.
**GHOSH AND LYDON**

Chris Lydon’s program, produced by the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University, was set up as a conversation with world writers on the global stage. On 20 November 2008, Lydon introduced Pamuk and Ghosh, his guests on this show, as the children of “Achebe and Naipaul,” each telling “the other side of the story.” In the interview, Lydon asks Ghosh if he saw himself “confronting Kipling and Conrad, […] old voices which told the world story one way.” Ghosh agrees with Lydon that indeed these writers told the story one way, and adds that of Kipling he has nothing to say. On Conrad, Ghosh comments: “his was a more ambiguous voice.” But when Lydon proposes to him that it may be Ghosh’s “project to retell those stories from the subcontinent’s point of view,” the writer’s response is strong and forceful: “No, not at all.” Ghosh goes on to add that Conrad does not evoke a strong response from him and does not interest him; the author who does interest him is Herman Melville, who Ghosh considers the greatest writer America ever produced. It is Melville’s more cosmopolitan vision that compels Ghosh, who again reminds us that “Melville is the only nineteenth-century nautical writer who paid enough attention to Indian sailors.” But of the lascars—for example Asian and Arab sailors—there is no mention in the worlds of either Conrad or Melville, and it is “their absence from the imaginative record of sail that made [Ghosh] curious about them” and compelled him to explore their story.

Ghosh is right that the stories of the lascars are not the stories that either Conrad or Melville told, although occasionally lascars do appear in both their works. However, Ghosh’s rejection of the mantle of respondent to colonial writers such as Conrad and Kipling appears odd given his stated interest in telling the story that Conrad and Melville did not. What might it mean, then, for Ghosh to say that Conrad does not interest him? Why would Ghosh so deliberately want to distance himself from Conrad and assert his artistic links to Herman Melville?

Inadvertently, perhaps, by placing both Pamuk and Ghosh within a “writing back” model, Lydon may have set up the response Ghosh gives. It is
hardly surprising that Ghosh should reject Lydon’s model where the children of “Achebe and Naipaul” are simply telling “the other side of the story”: Ghosh understandably sees his own mission as a writer as quite separate from being a respondent to the colonial fictions of Kipling and Conrad. Returning the imperial gaze seems a limitation of Ghosh’s agenda, which is a sprawling set of concerns offering alternate visions of the history and intellectual traditions which we have inherited in the 20th century.

That said, it remains of continuing interest to me not that Ghosh should prefer to align himself with Melville, but that he is so invested in distancing himself from a forebear from whom it is impossible, it seems to me, to do so. Even if Conrad’s ghost may not hover as near Ghosh as it did for Naipaul, Ghosh’s set of chosen interests were visited a century before by Conrad. These, loosely put, would include not only the colonial encounter and its residues, but more importantly, although with great delicacy, the romance of travel and adventure, and the allure of distant places.

That romance that Conrad locates in his boyhood imaginings of adventuring and glory, of going to places nobody he knew had visited, is an allure Ghosh’s novels also reflect. In his Lydon interview, Ghosh mentions meeting some Indian sailors in Alexandria who invited him to join them on their sea voyage. He was certainly young when this encounter took place, but what is startling is that he packed his bags and went down to the port to join the sailors, only to see their ship sail away. That romantic response to the unknown, to a journey leaving behind known structures that makes Ghosh say of these sailors “they were truly free,” is one that Conrad’s characters seem to understand so well. Nor, it seems to me, is Ghosh able to distance himself from the magic of places, the allure of distance, the hypnotic quality contained in the names of places and the ways we imagine them, however different that imagining is in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries from the ways the appeal of unknown places was articulated by Conrad in the previous one.

Another answer to the question of why Ghosh needs to distance himself from Conrad and align himself to Melville may lie in Ghosh’s self-placement, in this 21st century, as a cosmopolitan American writer. That Ghosh is placed in the interview in the same context as Conrad is no surprise, given that the
empire has been writing back quite robustly in the US (as well as in Britain) for in the last fifty years and longer. However, to see Ghosh in the context of Melville, and to hear Melville’s cosmopolitanism celebrated, is to see the US outside of that “isolation” that is so much a part of the country’s understanding of itself. Just like the rest of Ghosh’s interview, it also firmly connects the time of the interview with the British colonial past. Ghosh explicitly states that he started writing *Sea of Poppies* when Bush Jr. invaded Iraq. From the outset, Ghosh wants us to connect the British in India and the opium trade that funded the empire to the US in Iraq and the US dependence on foreign oil.

Connecting the time of the American invasion of Iraq with a US which had just elected Barack Obama, Ghosh says Melville is the true ancestor of Obama. And, why? Because Obama’s family and affiliations are reflected in those worlds Melville created, whether in Moby Dick or in Melville’s other narratives of exploration and anthropological curiosity. To see a trajectory linking Melville to Obama, on one hand, and to our cosmopolitan novelist, on the other, is definitely to widen the contours of literary history where Indian novelists, writing in English, of empire and its aftermath, have been placed.

Such a context restricts these authors’ scope and interests to the “writing back” model. This paradigm, so important in the 80s and 90s when it served, to help clear space for novelists such as Ghosh, now seems restrictive and outmoded. As we look back now on three decades and more of energetic activity in the area known as postcolonialism, we can reflect on what was once a fruitful opposition between the terms colonial and postcolonial. Works such as the series *Europe and Its Others* (pub. University of Essex) or the first anthologies that appeared in the 1990s, such as Chrisman and Williams’s *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, helped solidify a tension between the colonial and postcolonial. Increasingly, though, the value of the “writing back” model appears limited, in part because it fossilizes a relationship that ought to be and is more productive than the one suggested by the binary on which it is based. Ghosh’s alliance with Melville rather than Conrad, then, may be a way for him to widen the conversation on the novel and to steer it away from the national or empire-and-its-aftermath model that has been so influential in literary studies.

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DEMYSTIFYING THE IMPERIAL TRAVEL GAZE AND SYNCHRONIZING THE BORDERS: A STUDY OF VIKRAM SETH’S FROM HEAVEN LAKE

Pronami Bhattacharyya

Citation:

Abstract:
From Heaven Lake is a travelogue which steers lucid of all Lonely Planet Guides and the habitual travel routes and Vikram Seth manages to sketch a picture of China, Tibet, and Nepal from a hungry (quite literally at times!) but open to the ‘others’ student traveler’s perspective. Travel writing is prevalently believed to be a means of spanning disproportionate worlds, of bridging gaps, of making sense of differences in culture. It is assumed that travel writing is a kind of reporting from a subaltern/mystifying culture, a culture which belongs to “them,” to one, which is modern and rational, and thus belongs to “us.” From Heaven Lake, which won the Thomas Cook award, is a class apart. This travelogue does not fall into the category of “rescue and recovery mission.” Vikram Seth in From Heaven Lake recognizes that modern day travelers must know how best to negotiate borders that are often the result of invisible lines of geopolitical force. Most of the Imperial travel writers furnished details about the legends and myths of a place they visited, instead of bringing into life the people who inhabited those places. Seth does exactly opposite of what his colonial counterparts did. The details he furnishes are related to the people he encounters. It’s not places and monuments which hold the utmost importance for Seth. But by and large, people are the real hero for him. By and large, the world Seth travels through is a homosocial one. There is bonhomie, there is solidarity, and there is kindness. Borders are almost indiscernible.

Keywords:
China, India, Borders, Subaltern, Globalization, Negotiation

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DEMYSTIFYING THE IMPERIAL TRAVEL GAZE AND SYNCHRONIZING THE BORDERS: A STUDY OF VIKRAM Seth’S FROM HEAVEN LAKE

Pronami Bhattacharyya

We share the same biology regardless of ideology
What must save us me and you is that the Russians love their children too (Sting, qtd. in Hollander, 54)

In the changed milieu of border conditions, due to which modern concepts of cultural boundaries and political territoriality are being destroyed by the process of globalization, the usual view at migration as involving border crossing between two non-physical (state) entities is no longer hypothetically satisfactory. Borders have become “moving objects.” It is easy to be a liberal multinational in Paris or New York. But Vikram Seth is at home in remote cultures, too. As in his California, London, Vienna or Venice settings, China and its people, though situated far away, are never unfamiliar to him or his readers. It is a general assumption that travel writing is a kind of coverage from the margins or a culture of them to a culture which belongs to us. Them consists of the culture of the others. But Seth, the adaptable and innovative traveler that he is, is at home wherever he goes, and China was like another home to him, so much so that he could not make out whether he had crossed the border and stepped into Nepal, when he had actually done so walking past a midge-infested stream. Seth’s travel narrative brings together two adjacent but politically separated spaces in an artistic or literary form and combines them in

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a unique yet fundamentally relational point of view. The hard border consisting of a tightly-closed no man’s land, between the two giants of Asia, is turned into a porous, easy-to-cross, and an appealing space by Seth.

When meeting new cultures, there are chances of mutual growth. But at the same time, due to the imbalance of power in the world, spaces for newer forms of violence often crop up. It depends entirely on the course of the traveler’s discovery and exploration whether s/he wishes to dominate, or listen to, the other. For Seth, violence seemed to be an unknown term. He grows with the other’s culture just as the other enjoys his company while hitchhiking throughout the country in a truck, stopping occasionally at places and making friends for a lifetime.

The issues of bridging gaps or cultures in travel literature have the idea of border innate in them. The numerous borders on the atlas divide the planet into continents, countries, states, and so on. These boundary lines, which divide everything physical (even non-physical such as air), are themselves non-physical. In the colonial era, the gap between two countries, their cultures, even if they were neighboring ones, was relatively large. And the opportunities of knowing them were clouded with the colonial travel writers and their imperial gaze. Thus, the gap was not only physical, but there were borders of culture, and tradition. Globalization, the phenomenon of integration of economy, society and cultures around the world, has squeezed the globe and turned it into a global village. Travel writing in such an era, when all the boundaries of colonialism or imperialism has collapsed, has undergone a drastic change, and the borders between countries (not necessarily political or geographical), have visibly shrunken to a great extent.

Seth writes the most refined poetry as effortlessly as he writes an aria or a travelogue or a novel. Seth is not bothered about the diasporic dislocations, or the search for roots. Possibly, he does not feel dislocated or uprooted. He does not seem to address any issue that shakes the western world, or pander to critical theory. He just writes narratives about people and places visited while making those people and places come alive out of the pages for the readers to undergo a firsthand experience.
In an interview with Meenakshi Mukherji, he said that he was just a writer: not an Indian or of the commonwealth. He is one of those human beings privileged and fortunate enough to be able to travel and make the world their own. Nandini Chandra looks at the world travel writing and tries to see if Seth fits the “postcolonial hat.” Seth does not seem to, or he may even not want to. Though as a postcolonial traveler to an “Oriental” communist country Seth carries some baggage on his travel, but his gaze is not at all like those of his colonial counterparts. He does not look at China as a post colonized traveler through the “high meditation of western viewing glasses.” From Heaven Lake does not group into the category of the “rescue and recovery mission” that the colonial travel narratives come under. Seth’s journal is more akin to the classic western trope of travel for the sake of travel; as Rilke says a poet must travel in order to write. The very first paragraph of the book describes a place akin to an Indian town in the scorching summers:

The flies have entered the bus, and their buzzing adds to the overwhelming sense of heat…Donkey-carts pulled by tired-looking donkeys, pestered by flies…It is not long past dawn, and already the heat has struck (1).

This description is of Turfan, a desert town of China, which Seth finds similar to the summers of Delhi. The geographical distance/dissimilarity between the two countries are attempted to be blurred. Often the real essence of a place and the lived experiences of a traveler amidst the “natives” of a place she/he is visiting are erased by the formation of a prototypical ‘traveler’s gaze’ based on the nationalistic affiliations, color of the skin, race, gender, class, education or any other formative factors. Moreover, the knowledge about a place or people that one gathers before coming to a particular place, which Mary Louise Pratt terms antecedent literarios, or prior/earlier literary productions, also leads to the formation of one or the other kind of a gaze/s in a traveler. Vikarm Seth too had some kind an image of China in mind. Being born and brought up India, a country which shares a very long borderline with China and the border wrought with an extensive turmoil, he has a prior and a very strong image of
China in his mind. But unlike the colonial travel writers, he does not hold the “all knowing” subject position gazing at the passive “to be studied” objects. The colonial travelers had a sense of cultural authority implicit in their writings. In Seth’s case, the subject-object binary gets blurred. Vikram Seth can be termed a cosmopolitan person/leader, one who embraces multicultural demographics.

The most deeply entrenched border, evermore difficult to change, is the mental structure. Despite the similarly of people all over the world, nations and their residents are often categorized on the basis of certain national traits. It is believed that there is a Chinese way of thinking, of liaising, negotiating, interacting and communicating just as there is an Indian way. For instance, a tilted way of saying things is apparently Chinese. At Heaven Lake, the hotel owner wanted to warn the author not to swim in the lake, he does not tell him directly. Instead, the cook and he give examples of people who have drowned earlier, especially citing the case of the Beijing athlete:

“So swimming?” Mr. Cao says. “You aren’t thinking of swimming, are you?”

“I thought I might,” I confess. “What’s the water like?”

“He doesn’t answer me immediately, turning instead to examine some receipts with exaggerated… Mr. Cao, with great offendedness, addresses the air. ‘People are often drowned here,’ he says. After a pause, he continues. ‘When was the last one?’ … ‘Was it the Beijing athlete?’” (Seth, 23).

Friendship alone can transcend these barriers. Sui, the Liberation truck driver, who is taking Seth to Lhasa, as he is on a hitch-hiking trip, goes about his travel in a way which is suggestive of a Chinese temperament. He follows his own whim and pace. His long trips depend on the stock of his comic books and the number of stopovers he has to make at the homes of friends and acquaintances to spread goods and gifts en route to his destination. Once, he suddenly stopped at the middle of nowhere because he wanted to catch fish for his wife from a river, although it was raining heavily and the river, swollen. Seth was
getting irritated of Sui’s phlegmatic nature because he was running short of time, and his exit visa was to expire in a few days. They fought as if they were close friends, and their fight is amicably resolved. Sui’s heavy smoking and the resultant glob of blue-green phlegm of cough makes Seth too much concerned for him. Their accidental last meeting in a Lhasa street is extremely poignant. Seth, like Amitav Ghosh, is separated from a majority of contemporary travel writers due to his avant-garde gaze at a “historically subjugated culture.” Seth tries to settle a history of “mutual ignorance and conflict” (Holland and Huggan, 56). Seth understands that time and patience is required to solve the long drawn-out border problem between the two nations. Thus, he says:

To learn (on a personal level) about another great culture is to enrich one’s life, to understand one’s own country better, to feel more at home in the world, and indirectly to add to that reservoir of individual goodwill, that may, generations from now, temper the cynical use of national power (178).

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* throws light on the idea of a traveler’s gaze. For the imperial travel writers, “the Orient, as it emerged as a body of knowledge about other (eastern) regions and cultures, involved techniques of representation that were designed to assert or reconfirm the intellectual authority of the west” (Holland and Huggan, 70). Orientalism goes hand in hand with imaginative geography, a concept framed by Said: it redistributes knowledge in space to serve the needs of a dominant culture. Seth, in *From Heaven Lake*, recognizes that modern day travelers must know how best to negotiate borders that are often the result of indiscernible lines of geopolitical forces. In his Chinese journey, Seth is precisely drawn into such marginal or contested areas. He reaches Xinjiang, a north-western province also known ambiguously as the “New Borderland,” and the partly autonomous, closely guarded and supervised country of Tibet. Seth finds himself engrossed in battles with authorities, arguing endlessly over entry visas, exit permits and traveler’s rights. “Travel, for Seth, seems to be less a celebration of human freedom than a confrontation of political obstacles that are placed in freedom’s path” (ibid,
71). The disputed India-China border is one such insurmountable border—the reminder of a fraught history of international relations that has kept these two cultures irreconcilably apart. Seth’s journey home is crossing all these borders of culture, tradition and politics is only a small victory in the face of continuing cultural ignorance and political distrust.

The anthropologist-ethnologist, Arnold von Gennep, suggests that frontier crossing often has a “magico-religious” aspect whereby one moves from the known of the community and its mores to the territory of the unknown, marked as evil (15-20). The distinction between us and them is thus created and sustained. A classic text of western journey to China is Paul Theroux’s Down the Yangtze published in the same year as Seth’s book, in 1983. Pronouncing his verdict on the Chinese as a racial category, Theroux says, “the Chinese were practical, unspiritual, materialistic, baffled and hungry, and these qualities had brought a crudity and terrible fatigue to their country. In order to stay alive, they had to kill the imagination; the result was a vegetable economy and a monochrome culture” (50). All this is of course observed from his seat in a luxury cruise as it sails down the Yangtze. The border between Theroux and the oriental Chinese thus, looms very large and very threateningly in the narrative. For him, descriptions of unpleasant experiences in China occupy a substantial part of the narrative. Even in his travel narrative, Dark Star Safari, he says: “distant places were unknown; the unknown was dangerous” (125). Seth’s reflections are not based on any overt judgments and he is by no means a seasoned or courageous traveler. But, his reflections are more nuanced and warranted, given that he was student at Nanjing University for a year and he was hitch-hiking through the innards of the country. The journey to Tibet is a sort of homecoming by a cheaper and more interesting route. Seth is lazy, slipshod and not very motivated by any overt ethnographic operation. He was in fact not visiting, but passing through Tibet. Throughout his journey, either in a vehicle or on foot, he never seemed to be engaged in separating one piece of land from another. He felt at home everywhere awaiting humans made him see the difference created by man-made borders. In the chapter ‘Into Nepal’, Seth is seen traversing on foot towards Nepal with his luggage carrier, Tenzing.
We traverse a smooth, meadow-green yet almost vertical slope, hundreds of metres above the river…. A woman wearing a sari is washing clothes in a small stream. She looks up at us as we cross. The forest continues beyond… (169).

Suddenly a man steps out from behind a tree. He warns them to stop and show the luggage. He is a Nepali customs officer. It is only then that Seth comes to know that he has crossed the border and stepped into Nepal.

‘But I didn’t know we had crossed the border,’ I say.
‘That stream there, that’s the border. You’ve just crossed it.’
‘That…?’ I look back at the stream. The woman is wringing out clothes over the water. Her soap lies on one rock, her washing on another … (170).

Most of the imperial travel writers furnished details about the legends and myths of a place they visited, instead of bringing into life the people who inhabited those places. Mentally divorced as the Orientalist travelers were from the people and places they visited, it was not possible for them to be one amongst the natives and look through the latter’s eyes. And thus, the baggage of Orientalist discourse and knowledge that these travelers were carried got magnified and established in layers through their narratives. In doing so, the people (natives) got relegated behind, and what captured the traveler’s attention were the legends and myths, which, as the terms suggests, were in most cases, simply legends and myths. Seth does exactly opposite of what his colonial counterparts did. The details he furnishes are related to the people he encounters. It is not places and monuments which hold the greatest value for Seth. Rather, people are the “real hero” for him, as when he says, “(w)hen I think of China, I think first of my friends and only then of Qin Shi Huang’s tomb” (36). While doing so, Seth is able to present the underlying social context of the gestures or incident that is being described. And in doing so, Seth demystifies many myths which the colonial gaze had created about the
other. For instance, when at Lhasa, Seth witnesses a ‘ghastly’ ceremony which the imperial gaze attributed to the inherent barbarism attributed to Tibetan rituals. The dead bodies were chopped and minced, the skull broken, and were fed to eagles. But it is amply clear that all this is not barbarism, but is the result of scarcity of firewood to burn, and the ground is hard for much of the year. Seth thus indulges in dual activity. He lifts the veil of ignorance around the myths or wrong notions that people held since ages and ends up celebrating raw human values.

In Theroux’s account, the Chinese seem to be a “slavish mass.” In contrast, the Americans who are cruising with him, and thereby all other Americans, are deemed better off in that they are at least seen to be thinking individuals. It happens perhaps because Theroux hardly gets a chance to speak to this slavish people. Moreover, Theroux constantly has a belittling tone. Seth is radically different in the compassion and the love with which he remembers his Chinese and Tibetan friends. They are to him a happy race, with an instinctive kindness and a universal sense of hospitality. Though, it must be remembered that Seth had the twin assets of a brown skin and the song from the film *Awara* to break the ice.

By and large, the world Seth travels through is a homosocial one. There is bonhomie, there is companionship, and there is kindness. Borders seem to be nowhere. When Seth describes an old woman sitting on the doorway reading a letter, or soldiers passing by cracking sunflower seeds between their teeth, it is not merely an exercise in jousting.

Similarly when he finds that the border between Nepal and China is defined by a couple of rocks, and wonders at the absurdity of a customs man emerging from behind a tree, and the fact that it makes no difference to the woman washing clothes that her soap is on the China side and her clothes on the Nepal side, he is in a way trying to assert the unity between the pragmatic hard-edged world of geo-politics and international relations on the one hand and the other realm inhabited by Sui, old women, and other such people of the workaday world (Chandra, 31).
Seth closes the book with an optimistic vision of a world of bonhomie between India and China, a world where borders matter least. The days in China as a Nanjing University student are cherished in his heart forever in spite of all the physical or political hardships that he had to undergo. It is in China where, perhaps, he made a few of his best friends for life. The invisible but non-erasable political borders between the two countries could not stop Seth from experiencing the same feelings of brotherly, friendly, familial or any kind of comradeship in China, just as he did back at home. But at the same time, Seth is aware of the flip side of the coin too when he remarks:

...unfortunately I think that this will continue to be the case: neither strong economic interest nor the natural affinities of a common culture tie India and China together ... The fact that they are both part of the same landmass means next to zilch. There is no such thing as an Asian ethos or mode of thinking. (178).

From Heaven Lake ends with the traveler’s victorious negotiation of a final border: the customs barrier at the international airport of New Delhi. Thus, Seth’s narrative demystifies the trend of the colonial travel narrative and aptly belongs to the postcolonial era by blurring the man-made borders and amalgamating the two adjacent cultures historically distanced so far.
REFERENCES


THE COLONIAL MISSION AND THE TRAVELLING GAZE: REVISITING MARY MEAD CLARK’S A CORNER IN INDIA

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Citation:

Abstract:
The north east region of India has been witness to a flurry of colonial activity, especially in the 19th and early 20th century. Accounts of imperial administrators, anthropologists, missionaries and the occasional prospector all qualify as travel accounts about the region, leaving behind an irrefutable legacy of the colonial “heydays.” The paper views the missionaries as part of the colonial project, taking into account the role played by the missionary wives in the colonial enterprise and how they negotiated with the ongoing male discourses of colonialism and travel in their narration. A Corner in India sheds a new perspective to the existing genre of adventure narratives in women’s travel writings. The adventure narrative as one of the conventions of travel writing was appropriated by women writers in the plot form, but it was mostly with a degree of uneasiness because the adventuring hero role clashed with other discursive constructions of how women behaved. It is interesting how Mary Mead Clark negotiates with the adventure narrative, positioning herself as the narrative voice while foregrounding the figure of her husband as the adventuring hero. The paper also brings into focus the production of missionary texts as determined by a number of complex factors. A Corner in India serves as an instance of how texts were determined by the demand of readership, at the same time highlighting the interest of the “Christian” world in reading about the “heathen” populations.

Keywords:
North-east India, American Baptist Mission, Naga Hills, Christianity, Orientalist travel writing, Missionary writings, Heathen anthropology
THE COLONIAL MISSION AND THE TRAVELLING GAZE: REVISITING MARY MEAD CLARK’S A CORNER IN INDIA

M. Tianla

With the Saint Helena Act of 1833, the East India company lost all its commercial monopolies, and with the new clauses of administrative reforms there was a deluge of foreign missions to India from England, Netherlands, Germany and other European nations, and then, increasingly, from North America.¹

The American Baptist Missionary Union occupied Assam in 1836 and subsequently carried out wide-scale conversions in the hill districts of Assam. Mani Chawla Singh observes that the Protestant denominations at this time encouraged their missionaries to proceed to their appointed stations as married men. She instantiates the case of James Thoburn, later Bishop of the Methodist Missions in India. When Thoburn applied to become a missionary to India in 1859, the corresponding secretary had requested for a team of six married men. A man without a wife was not seen as an ideal overseas missionary, and, as Thoburn recalled in his memoirs, his discomfiture on discovering that his appointment was “a matter of regret and that had all the facts of the case been known ten days earlier, (his) commission would have been cancelled” (Thoburn, 25). Thus, many marriages were performed just before the missionaries embarked on their journeys and as a result many

missionary wives proceeding to India or China were often young brides, sometimes much younger than their husbands, with little or no travel experience (Singh, 84).

**Pioneering Travellers of a New Enterprise**

Mary Mead Clark sailed from Boston to India aboard the “Pearl,” a trading vessel of three hundred tons burden, bound for Calcutta via the Cape of Good Hope:

> During our voyage of one hundred and sixty days we put into no parts, sighted no land, were indeed prisoners on the deep, subject to the storms and hardships incident to a winter on board a small trading vessel (Clark, 6).

It was a long and uncomfortable journey, and sometimes they found themselves fearing for their lives from the storms at sea:

> When our little cockle-shell habitation was tossed like a football by angry waves, dashing and breaking and flooding the decks, while mingled with their roar and dash we heard the dragging of ropes…we were in no mood to write of the awful grandeur of a storm at sea (6).

The Pearl reached “far India’s shores” finally and like all transit passengers at the time, they spent a few days sight-seeing and shopping in Calcutta before boarding a “snail-like traffic steamer for the long, tedious journey up the turbid waters of the crooked, winding Brahmputra,” taking fourteen days to reach Assam (7).

Clark was accompanying her husband Rev. E. W. Clark to take up an appointment as the Superintendent of the American Baptist Mission Press in Sibsagar, Assam. The arrival of the Clarks in Assam would have a far-reaching
impact on the Naga Hills. For Clark the voyage from Boston was in fact the
beginning of numerous journeys. Life as a missionary’s wife meant that she
would be accompanying her husband in his Mission tours through the
“untamed” jungles and terrains. Disembarking from the steamer, after crossing
the Brahmaputra, the rest of the journey was a novel and fascinating
experience for her:

The next morning several miles by elephant through the jungle
brought us to a point on the Dikho River where we found a native
boat sent down by Doctor Ward, of Sibsagar. The trunks of two
large trees dug out, supporting a bamboo platform, furnished a deck
on which a miniature house for cabin was built of bamboo and
canvas...How wild, and strange, and fascinating withal that
journey! (7).

To ascend the hills required a transportation of twenty-two miles from
Sibsagar to Amguri, with the help of an elephant and bullock-carts. They
continued their journey to the Naga Hills with the assistance of the “goods
train” and natives who carried her in a basket on their backs. This was Mary
Clark’s first foray into the hills and her words betray her consciousness of
herself as a conqueror, a pioneer venturing triumphantly into undiscovered
territory:

On and on we went, up and down the lower hills, crossing the
mountain streams, through forests of stately trees with delicate
creepers entwining their giant trunks, their branches gracefully
festooned with vines, and orchids swaying in the breeze. For all ages
past, unobserved and unappreciated, this wilderness of beauty has
budded and put forth, only to delight the eyes of Him who makes
even the desert to blossom as the rose (30; italics mine).

It is hard not to miss the enthusiasm that she felt for the new project at hand;
after all for a missionary going off into the unknown among the heathens was
the ultimate fulfillment of God’s plan. Mary Clark’s account resembles the
parlance of a colonizer on the verge of an important acquisition because, like
the colonizer, the missionary too was looking for subjects. The only difference
here was that these subjects were sought to serve a Heavenly king.

IN QUEST OF A VOICE

Mary Louise Pratt talks about two essential types of narrative figures in travel
writing—the ‘manners and customs’ and the ‘sentimental’ figure. The basic
difference is that the former is largely impersonal, with an absent narrator,
while the latter foregrounds the narratorial voice. Pratt says that even within
travel texts, the narrator is not a unitary source of information and all of the
statements within travel writing do not issue from the same voice. In the
manners-and-customs figure certain statements emanate from an impersonal
source “an unknown site behind the speaking “I,” behind the periphery of what
is seen, from a seat of power that should probably be identified with the state”
(126). In such a situation, people only occur in the texts as representative
figures or as traces when landscapes are described as if they were empty of
people. Instead of human interaction, there are many descriptions of the
landscape and “(i)n the main, what is narrated proves to be a descriptive
sequence of sights/sites, with the traveller presented chiefly as a kind of
collective moving eye which registers these sights” (123).

The second type is the sentimental traveller, where the narrator and the
individual indigenous inhabitants are portrayed as taking part in a dramatic
narrative. Here, individuals from the country are presented in dialogue with
the narrator:

If the land-scanning, self-effacing producer of information is
associated with the state, then this sentimental, experimental voice
must be associated with that critical sector of the bourgeois world,
the private sphere, home of the solitary, introspecting Individual
(Pratt, 133).
Because of this concentration on the private sphere, many women travellers adapted this narrative figure for their texts. However, Pratt notes that these texts, although they seem more personal, are just as much part of European colonial expansion as others. Their intention of making the country known to Europeans is submerged in their personal tales of adventure, but their function is still that of expansion and domination (133).

Clark’s *A Corner in India* is a complex text, the events in the narrative do not follow a chronology or definite pattern. Besides departing from these conventional norms of writing, the narrative voice itself is problematized in the text, as it shuttles between different tropes. Some incidents are presented rather dramatically, whereas sections which deal with the environment, climate, native customs and lifestyle are directly reported in the convention of an impersonal guide book. This serves to heighten the feeling that the narrator does not figure anywhere in the narration, yet simultaneously highlights the mediated nature of the narrative.

In the very beginning of her book, Mary Clark proceeds to acquaint her readers with the Nagas, the “savages” who would later become her “subjects”:

I don’t want the goat! I don’t want it! I will not have it! Take it away, take it away,” was reiterated again and again; yet these strange, uncivilized men, down from their mountain fastnesses, still persisted in dragging up the steps of the veranda of our bungalow a large, long-horned hill goat... Thus I was introduced to these stalwart, robust warriors, dressed mostly in war medals, each man grasping his spear shaft decorated with goat’s hair, dyed red and yellow, and also fringed with the long black hair of a woman, telling the story of bloody deeds (1).

This dramatic and colorful opening shifts to a description about Assam, rendering a change in the narration where she appropriates an impersonal voice-over:

But first, ere we enter this hill country, a few words about Assam. Originally it was the valley of the Brahmaputra River, and for the
last three-quarters of a century has been part of the great empire of India…it extends to the extreme northeast of India, touching Tibet and Burma and reaching far toward China. It is peopled by various races of Aryan and Mongolian stock, which differ widely in customs, language, and religion…The atmosphere is very humid, and the annual rainfall about one hundred inches. This heavy precipitation upon an extremely fertile soil causes excessive vegetable growth and decay, and induces, as would be expected, much malaria and fever. Cherra Punji, an exposed point in the hills, has some four hundred and eighty-nine inches of rain yearly, the largest known rainfall in the world (2).

She records the management and division of political power among the Nagas in the villages, noting that “each village is a little democracy managing its own affairs, except as other villagers interfere either voluntarily or by partisan invitation” (45). The Naga ceremony of courtship and marriage are also objectively discussed (49). However, there are passages in her narration which show her dealing with the natives on a personal level, as was expected of a missionary’s wife, who had to foster a relationship with the natives, especially with the women. She presents an interaction with the womenfolk in the extract below:

As I went among the women, one would ask:
“Is your mother living?”
“Yes.”
“She must be awfully old.”
“Have you any children?”
Then as the story was related of one angel child above, there would come from a sympathetic, sorrowing mother:
“Beautiful, beautiful words, how sweet to hear! I wish I knew how to believe them. Did you come all the way to tell us this?”
As we continued to speak of the home above and of salvation through Jesus alone, another would say:
“Do hear her sweet words!”
Another calls out,
“How is your cloth woven?”
“Do they wear such cloth in heaven?”
“How smooth your hair is; do you have lice in it?”
Answering this last, several voices exclaimed: “Do tell! What medicine do you use?” (94-95).

The missionary’s duty of making house calls ensured a steady contact with the personal aspect of native life but the difference is always stressed in the account. The passage serves to widen the gap between the civilized and the uncivilized, which is illustrated clearly in the awe felt by the natives for their masters. It reinforces a relationship which can be possible but never on equal terms, for the ‘memsahib’ is a world apart from her native subjects. The differences of their two entities are further stressed by her:

The people of our village were, in their way, considerate of us, and evidently tried to show us sympathy in our isolation; and yet, poor creatures, how could they appreciate what we were giving up to bring so much to them! (69).

Sara Mills illustrates how the travel writing genre experienced a number of changes in its conventions over time, and by the 19th century writers tended to divide their books into two distinct sections, one for their journal and one for general observations, and it was only the latter which was published. She adds that this “demonstrates the way in which external discursive factors structure the format of the text” (84-85). The absence of a clear form and structure in Mary Clark’s text can be understood better when we look at the position taken by Percy Adams, who considers interpolation or digression as central to the structure of the travel book. He suggests that digressions are essential in the travel text because they authenticate the journey and “what may be called digressions in some forms of literature are for travel accounts structurally inherent” (209).

As illustrated earlier, Clark’s account shuttles between the intimate and the impersonal. One reason for this could be because she was conscious all the
time of writing as a missionary as well as a woman, and thus a balance between the two experiences needed to be forged. The conventions of travel writing presented a framework of largely masculine narratorial positions and descriptive patterns with which women writers had to negotiate when they constructed their own travel accounts (Mills, 86).

THE CLARION CALL

Travel writing across the 19th century followed strict conventions that stated exactly what type of information could be included in it. However, Charles Batten points out that these conventions are not static but change according to the dictates of the age. He notes that in the 18th century, travellers generally described architecture, but then there came a radical shift to descriptions of soil and crops (99). This shows that the production of travel literature was influenced by the changing tastes of the reader and the traveller, who usually liked to read and write about the unknown and the strange aspects of life, which were far removed from their everyday, otherwise sophisticated, experiences.

Missionary writings, especially of the 19th century, disseminated the knowledge of the ‘heathen’ to the civilized world, and at the same time highlighted the sense of romance and adventure associated with uplifting people of a lesser situation. The missionary texts operated at various levels:

On the one hand they contributed to creating “knowledge” about the ‘poverty-stricken’ and ‘down-trodden’ Other for churchgoers at home. Simultaneously, they created an appealing discourse of service underscoring the challenge and adventure inherent in the choice to become an overseas missionary. Using specific metaphors and stereotypical images, such texts served a clear political purpose, appealing to the “superior” Christian/European self to go forth with the Message in order to “redeem” souls (Singh, 158).
Clark’s travelogue is, quite conspicuously, a clarion call to potential recruits. Dedicated not only to her husband and “friends in this and other lands,” the book is also addressed to the young American men and women:

It is sent forth with the earnest prayer that the young men and women who may chance to read it will not only be entertained, but moved to action in behalf of the savage tribes whose habits, customs, and possibilities are here depicted from personal observation through many years (4).

Here, the Christian readers are requested to intervene on behalf of the savages, who cannot be redeemed without help from people of more fortunate circumstances. The glowing Introduction to *A Corner in India* was written by William Ellsworth Witter, a fellow missionary and contemporary of the Clarks:

> We especially commend this interesting narrative to the hosts of young people, many of whom are almost persuaded that the heroic in missions is forever passed. Let them follow some of those distant mountain paths, cross the steep ravines and swollen rivers, face the wild tribes still waiting for the gospel. It smells of the forests, kindles the imagination, warms the heart, is better than a novel, for it is not only full of romance, but is true.2

By highlighting the romance of the missionary profession and at the same time stressing the aesthetic quality of the book, Witter, like a true exponent of the Mission, urges the young readers to step out and proselytize to the heathen in the wilderness. However, the missionary makes it clear that in spite of the sense of adventure and romance, evangelizing in the hinterlands is a difficult task to follow, often leading to frustration and desolation. There is always the reminder to readers that life as a missionary entails sacrificing the comforts of home for a life of austerity. Mrs. Clark quotes a letter from Rev. Perrine, a missionary who with his wife came to assist the Clarks in 1892:

\[2\] See “Introduction,” *A Corner in India.*
If you don’t know how much ‘stuff’ you have, move to the Naga Hills, and you will find out… Life in the jungles of this frontier is a Swiss Family Robinson sort of life with variations… Let no one get the impression that all of our surroundings are ideally perfect—that we have no trials, no strain on our patience, and what is more, nothing to test our faith and Christian character (136-37).

However, despite the inconveniences of the surroundings, the cheerful countenance of the missionary is constantly foregrounded. The letter sums up the ideal missionary spirit of optimism, enthusiasm and the ability to adjust with any kind of discomfort, and such virtues were particularly celebrated in their literatures:

How we learned to love the soft, fleecy clouds resting quietly in deep, dark glens, or sending their vapory sheets creeping up the hillsides in charming contrast to the dark blue mountaintops! How grandly solemn too, in a storm! (36).

Thus, the experiences of the missionaries away from their homeland were glorified in the literatures they produced. However, the heroic discourse of the overseas mission brings up the issue of the adventure narrative and its implications for a female narrator.

GAZING ON THE ADVENTURING HERO

According to Martin Green, the adventure narrative is "the energising of (the) myth of empire" (xi). A celebration of adventure meant a celebration of empire (37). Green describes the way in which this myth is profoundly gendered, making itself more available for male writers (23). Incidents of danger and survival in the adventure narrative decreed that it was a male domain and descriptions of such incidents by women would be considered improper and indecorous. The adventure hero is the perfect colonial subject, or at least the
perfect colonial male subject (Mills, 77). However, the 19th century saw many women traveller-writers. According to Peter Hulme, it was also an age which marked a rise in the popularity of adventure narratives: “as the tentacles of European colonialism were at their greatest reach” (183). The adventure narrative as one of the conventions of travel writing was appropriated by women writers in the plot form, mostly with a degree of uneasiness because the adventuring hero role clashed with other discursive constructions of feminine behaviour. Clark assumes the adventurous role, positioning herself as the narrative voice, while at the same time foregrounding the figure of her husband as the adventuring hero. Numerous instances from the text are attestations of her unease in dealing with this convention. Rev. Clark emerges as the heroic figure, marching on ahead into the untamed wilds, far beyond the protection of the English flag, as his wife dedicatedly documents his progress. The initial foray into the hills required a certain courage and determination well beyond promise of support by the English government:

The English government was still smarting from the recent rout of a large survey party sent to reconnoiter this territory and the brutal murder of Captain Butler with one of his native soldiers. But the call, “Go teach all nations,” and the promise, “Lo, I am with you always,” nerved my husband to brave all perils that he might there plant the banner of the cross (16).

She depicts the constant danger that threatened her husband’s well-being, but determined to disseminate the Gospel among the heathen, Clark labored on. He faced the strong opposition of the natives, most of whom were antagonistic to the new religion he professed:

Hostility to the new religion waxed stronger and stronger... To intimidate the missionary, a war party of young men ambushed one whole week for human heads, which they intended to throw down before him as symbolical of what he might expect himself in case he did not retreat to the plains. They returned, however, without booty, but racked with fever, thus affording the missionary an
opportunity of exercising some medical skill and taming their savagery (17-18).

In typical missionary parlance, the beliefs and superstitions of the natives are shown as ineffective when pitted against Christianity. Mrs. Clark relates how her husband, in one of his tours, shattered a common superstition of the natives, thus solidifying his own status as more powerful and invincible than any of their gods:

…Mr. Clark inquired why the path at a certain point made such a sudden detour down the steep hillside. He was told that an enormous rock, standing vertically and alone and in which dwelt a mighty and influential spirit, was up there, and no one must pass that way. Mr. Clark kept to the ridge, and to the amazement of his attendants walked back and forth unharmed before the sacred boulder. This direct and easy route…ere long well cleared and opened as a public highway (59).

The success of this venture resulted in a mockery of the once revered and deified rock by the local village boys who had “outgrown their fathers’ theology” (59). Apart from opening the natives’ eyes to the baselessness of their old religion, Rev. Clark was also the new champion and defender of their safety. Clark relates how he helped in disposing off a man-eating tiger in the village, which had carried off a woman (60-61). In another instance, the villagers come asking for Clark’s help to kill an elephant. This situation presents an example of how the once fierce headhunters have become dependent on the white sahib (79). The possession of the phallic gun enforces Rev. Clark’s importance in the village, and the villagers are likened to children unable to do anything without the help of their colonial “Father.”

Yet, in Clark’s making her husband the hero of her adventures, there is a slight imbalance in the power relations. She often emerges from her enforced invisibility as the submissive missionary wife, and assumes the dominant position in her narrative. However rigid the gender attitudes back home, colonial structures inherently privileged the white woman over the oriental
other: she supervised and lorded over the “native” male laborers, they were liberated from some of the gender hierarchies within their own patriarchies (Singh, 90). On the occasion of Mrs. Clark’s first venture to the hills to join her husband, she notes that despite the difficult journey, in being carried by her subjects and escorted by her chieftains there was “never was a queen more revered by her subjects” (29). Her duties in the Hills were numerous as she actively participated in the “quest” for “winning souls” along with her husband (68). Knowledge was used to conquer the prejudices of the people, and the missionary couple soon won their confidence, making their way into the intimate arenas of village life. A particular trait of missionary literature seems to be that, in writing about the heathen, both male and female missionaries joined in the common cause and echoed each other’s rhetoric about the ‘plight’ of ‘Christless souls.’ The parlance of female writers in this respect appears to become one with the voice of the male adventurer and conqueror, and as a result complicates the power equations of the narrative.

The indispensability of the Clarks to the village is seen in their reception after paying a brief visit to Sibsagar. One parishioner exclaims: “there has been no flavor in my food since the Sahib and Mem Sahib have been away” (78); and later, as the daunting prospect of going uphill dawns on the couple, the subjects reply: “Why, Mem Sahib, the whole ‘kingdom’ is down to take care of you” (101). Clark becomes an adventuring figure in a position of power; the ‘savages’ became her ‘body-guards.’ However, assigning to herself the heroic role, as well as describing the inconveniences of travelling creates an awkwardness in the narrative of women travellers. Unlike the robust hero figures of travel narratives, Clark has to hark back to her feminine helplessness, and depends on the natives entirely for her commutation and other needs. She may be the ‘Queen’ here, yet her reign is offset by its harshly material delimitations. On the other hand, the travel narratives written by women were expected to conform to the codes for feminine writing and the tremendous amount of physical endurance that the journey demanded. Accordingly, Clark disclaims her appropriation of the ‘hero’ position by constantly stressing on the difficulties of travel. In the course of her first visit to the Naga Hills, she mentions the constraints caused by her clothing:
I constantly alighted from my chair for a little walk, a relief to my bearers as well as myself, but it was very certain that the long skirts from New York dressmakers were never intended for jungle paths and the crossing of deep ravines on a single tree trunk (30).

Her predicament is presented with humour and self-mockery and it explains her unease with the heroic role. Sara Mills adds when women writers adopt the ‘adventuress’ role, they often modify it by disclaimers and by humorous interventions, and also by stressing on the difficulties of travel (78). It follows that the female travel-narrator’s account is in no way simple or entirely concordant with that of the male traveller’s. It is rendered with certain tensions, liberties and self-determinations that are a far cry from the ‘civilized’ drawing-room conversations of the 19th century women writers.

**COLLECTING CURiosITIES**

The production of missionary texts was determined by a number of factors. In the first place, they were expected to compile reports in the usual colonial tradition of documentation of knowledge, presenting the natives and their customs as curiosities for the civilized readers. Secondly, overseas missionaries were ‘encouraged to write not only letters to kin and home congregations but also reports, articles, memoirs, travelogues, and autobiographical and anecdotal narratives’ to their friends, family and church at home (Singh, 138). Thus, they were fulfilling a professional obligation by keeping up a steady flow of correspondence from their respective stations to the home mission. Such texts usually presented the missionary’s life by romanticizing and glorifying the profession. A Corner in India exemplifies how a woman/missionary/wife/writer negotiated with these duties.

Sara Mills’ thesis on women’s involvement in colonialism is that the texts produced by women are no different from those produced by men, although their relation to the dominant discourses differ. She further says:

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Because the critical work on women travel writers has centered on the women authors as individual rebels against the constraints of Victorian society, much of it has simply discussed the women themselves and not their relation to the countries they are describing or the part women travelers played in colonialism (39).

In *A Corner in India*, Mary Clark endeavors to document the natives in the manner of an anthropologist. The titles of the chapters such as “The Savage at Home,” “Savage Oratory and Visiting Cards,” “The Savage in Costume and at Work,” and “Savage Worship and Strange Legends” indicate the documentation of every aspect of native life for her readers. Nature and the organic life all around were documented as a part of the great unknown, and all available information was disseminated to the readers at home. While presenting this information, there was a constant textual interplay between the familiar and the unknown that defined the limits of the female traveller’s experience. Clark goes on to describe the agricultural implements, crops, the quality of the soil and the articles of commerce in the hills. Further she talks at length about the animal life, etching an insecure and unsafe picture of life in these wild areas. Native customs and values, on the whole, were condemned as “uncivilized” and “barbarous,” belonging to a lesser people of a lesser culture (41).

As far as the missionaries were concerned, the people inhabiting the hill districts of Assam were “demon-worshippers”; however, because of the absence of any established religion among them, the region was regarded as “…a virgin soil, the richest in all this valley for gospel seed-sowing.” (3). This was incentive enough for the missionaries to justify their evangelical zeal. Conversion of the natives is portrayed as easily brought about, with their complete consent. The actual details of initial hostility and opposition to the new religion are conveniently left out in the discourse. There is also an attempt to draw a parallel between the ancient religion of the natives and Christianity, especially regarding the concept of ‘Sin’ and through Biblical allegories:
The Aos define sin as “unclean,” “foul,” “a stain,” “a spot,” and greatly abhor anything they denominate sin. They live in great dread and fear of it, and cleansing from sin is costly both in sacrifices and time… Atonement for sin among the Aos costs something, and no strong argument is required to convince them of personal sin and the need of salvation therefrom (59-60).

The Christian concept of Hell as an eternal place of damnation for all sinners also had a place in the Ao religious belief:

Again, Mr. Clark, in his Bible translation, has had no difficulty in finding an Ao word “for the fire that never shall be quenched.” The idea too is advanced that in the last days men will be filled with all manner of wickedness, and that everything will be consumed in a great world conflagration (62-63).

The missionaries participated completely in the dissemination of knowledge about the other, while simultaneously contributing to the entire process of colonial image-making. This was clearly a fraught enterprise. Joan-Pau Rubies, in talking about the full dimension of Renaissance anthropology, says that its phenomenon cannot be understood “merely by studying the intellectual constructions of jurists and theologians concerned with defining the nature of man and of human political society” (xii-xiii). The authority of a traveller, he goes on to say, was never an issue to be challenged:

Writers increasingly appealed to the experience of the traveller as a source of authority for the truthfulness of particular observations concerning human diversity. And yet the traveller’s experience was complex and his authority questionable. It is therefore very important to understand properly what was actually involved in the process of observing and describing a non-European society (xiii).

Western missionaries contributed to the activity of image-making, presenting the native to the civilized world as a being in need of deliverance. The
The reliability of their ideologically mediated accounts needs to be seen against the economic pressures exerted on them by the sponsors and the Board at home. While maintaining discretion by avoiding altogether too fantastical reports, they did not fail to highlight how the native population was in desperate need of missionary intervention and redemption.

(Re-)Presenting the Noble Savage

Nicholas Thomas says that while missionaries seem quaint, absurdly pious and intolerant from the perspective of today’s self-consciously secular western societies, it is important to recall that “they had not just a considerable impact on some colonized societies, but also a tremendous influence on perceptions at home of places such as the Pacific islands” (126). Even if missionary visions and ideas were often not accepted, they were certainly widely circulated through cheap periodicals, books and photographic media. One of the central features of the missionary propaganda, Thomas says, was the narrative of conversion, which contrasted former savagery with a subsequently elevated and purified Christian state. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the mission discourse must simultaneously emphasize savagery and signal the essential humanity of the people to be evangelized, because “if the savages are quintessentially and irreducibly savage, the project of converting them to Christianity and introducing civilization is both hopeless and worthless” (128). Thus, in missionary literatures we find the typical trope of the ‘before-after’ story, which contrasts the horrors of the past with the happiness of the Christian present. In this regard, David Zou Vumlallian remarks that the often repeated term “savage” in the language of the missionary registers a kind of change in its connotation over time. He says:

While the negative and malicious association of the term gives way to a new loveable and hopeful connotation in its later usage, phrases like ‘savage tribes’ or ‘wild races’ continue to thrive in the missionary records. The possibility of reforming the ‘savage’ is
always admitted, but the difference between the white missionary
him/herself and the reformed native had been sometimes
maintained (74-75).

The potential of the savage to become a subject for conversion is discussed at
length by Rev. E. G. Phillips:

But the savages and demon-worshipers have their redeeming
features, when viewed from a missionary standpoint. They are
virgin soil, not waste land, full of the roots and seeds of Hinduism,
or Buddhism, or Mohammedanism...Sow the true seed
abundantly and prayerfully, and expect without fail to reap
abundantly and speedily... They are independent spirited, free of
caste. From untold generations they have recognized none as their
masters...This spirit of independence, when brought under the sway
of the Cross, is immensely superior to the cringing spirit that is the
child of religious caste (Phillips, 78).

To magnify the goodness of the Christianized savage, comparisons are drawn
with the natives of other established religions and thus, we see that the
characteristics which earned the natives notoriety among the missionaries
now act as their finest redeeming points. In the history of colonization, the
comparison between the savages who can be subjugated and those who refuse
to be dominated has generated several discourses within colonial discourse,
which include the discourse of the civilized other and the discourse of savagery
(Hulme, 21). *A Corner in India*, too, constantly sees potential Christian
converts in the natives of the Hills: “The Nagas once civilized and
Christianized, will make a manly, worthy people” (45). The transformation of
the “strange, uncivilized men” in the beginning of Mary Clark’s narration to
the Christianized gentle savage in the end is a picture that perfectly attests to
the before-after story. The savage has finally become a full entity with a name
and an identity; the ‘stalwart, robust’ warriors have finally been rendered
‘homely’ by Christianity. The Christianized village is held up as a model village
in an idyllic setting. Rev. King, a visitor at the Clarks, gives an enthusiastic report of the mission in the hills:

Among such people as this, it is a matter of no small encouragement to see even one Christian church and one nominally Christian village, keeping the Sabbath and holding itself aloof from all the petty wars that rage about it; a village which, without skulls or other warlike distinctions, compels the respect of others because it is Christian. Such is this village of Molung (103).

Distinctions are being drawn, with the Christian village upheld as an epitome of piety and virtue, which is a far cry from the condition of life in the dark past of the natives. During this time of great change in the Hills, David Zou Vumlallian writes, “representations of hill men as the savage headhunter were gradually replaced by images of sainthood and soul hunters” (97-99). The manner in which the Nagas adjusted themselves to the changes in their surroundings and their new way of life is related by Clark with bemusement and motherly indulgence:

The adjustment of the Nagas to these advanced accommodations was amusing. Some of the men looked for a moment, then steeped up on the seats and sat down on their feet. The women, a little more modest, stood, as if considering for a little what was most fitting to do; then some sat down properly, others put their children on the seats while they themselves sat on the floor in front. Soon, however, all accommodated themselves to the new arrangement with no little merriment and with much appreciation (83).

The once fearsome and warlike Nagas, slowly experienced the loss of their identity with the coming of Christianity and their “headhunting” days became a thing of the past. They are almost childlike, bereft of all their identity-markers, and the realization that they are not invincible is a devastating one. Owing to their contact with Christianity, the Nagas got their first glimpse of the outside world and it resulted in a toppling of all their age-old belief systems.
The entire order of their universe changed, as they had to reconcile themselves to the fact that they were only a small part of the world—a mere ‘corner of India,’ as it were. The savage was no longer a threatening figure but a rather helpless and pitiable soul in need of redemption. During her initial days in the Hills, Clark notes of the heathen Naga savage that some “casual observer would never imagine the ambition for fame and glory that lurks in the Naga’s breast. He is ready to sacrifice to the utmost that his praises may be sung and his name perpetuated” (46). This is a contrast to the newly civilized Nagas, stripped of their ambition for greatness and instead subjected to the greatness of a superior culture and God. Clark jubilates in this change, as the mission has succeeded in taming these difficult people:

We never can tell our joy when the young men and women in our congregation began intelligently to handle the scriptures and hymn books! What did it matter if sometimes the books were held upside down by the older ones who did not wish to be outdone; their honest pride spoke volumes (109).

Clark’s missionary writing is embedded deeply in the politics of visuality and representation of colonial spaces. The characterization of the savage was part of a larger colonial discourse which was filtered through accounts of the success of mission fields among heathen tribes. Nicholas Thomas writes that the social process of conversion and the development of a new Christian society are represented as a dyadic affair. He invokes an image of the missionaries, on one side, showing the light and providing guidance, while on the other side the natives respond to the dawn and happily learn and work within the new order (139-40). This situation aptly sums up the missionary representation of Christianizing in the Naga Hills. But it would be amiss of any observer today to assume that the changes were merely along religious lines. Christianity was the determining factor which affected all aspects of Naga life; it was the total imposition of an all-new order of things, and in such circumstances the ‘before-after’ story was not simply about portraying the new ideal order but of negating an entire history of untold events.
A Corner in India, as an account from the centre about a subjugated people, is a valuable text, not only because it echoes the spirit of colonialism in its heyday, but also because it is documented by a woman. It becomes a study in how a woman writer in the later part of the 19th century had to produce her work according to the conventions of the genre and the readership—conditions she had even internalized. It also throws light on the participation of women in the 'missionary zeal' taking place on a parallel plane with imperialism. Clark’s narrative abounds in Orientalist politics when read as a missionary’s travel account, and proves that the discourse of the Other is never a gendered discourse, or that the frail weaknesses—that the colonial regime sees as an essential component—of femininity do not intervene in the representation of the savage, unless with an ideology of colonialism itself.
REFERENCES


REMAPPING THE MALE ROAD OF TERROR: BLACK WOMEN’S GEOGRAPHY OF HEALING IN TONI MORRISON’S A MERCY

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Citation:

Abstract:
This essay reads Toni Morrison’s A Mercy (2008) as an African American road narrative that exposes the insecurity of the masculine logic that designs the norms of mobility and sessility. In particular, the essay explores how the space of the road projects a patriarchal society’s concern with ethnic and racial terror. One specific example is related to the 17th century American society that has integrated the fear of ethnic and cultural unpredictability in mapping the geography of road travel. However, certain African American women’s road narratives redefine fear as an intrinsic convention to the masculine discourse of the American road. As such, this essay demonstrates how Morrison’s A Mercy re-reads fear as symptomatic of this male-regulated zone but exclusively projected toward women who are supposedly not able to endure or even respond to unexpected road encounters. Arguably, A Mercy reveals how a black female traveler challenges fear through female solidarity and communal survival and heals the geography of insecurity that shapes the male-constructed road. In this concern, the concept of communal agency as perceived by the African American female is crucial in addressing the gendered and racialized women’s fear of specific places. This proposed reading contextualizes recent scholarship that addresses women’s road narratives where women supposedly fail to survive on the road while unchaperoned, and incorporates space and political geography theories and psycho-geographical studies to address gender, fear, and space in A Mercy.
Keywords:
African American road narrative, Discourse of fear, Geography of insecurity, Female mobility, Female solidarity, Communal empowerment, Geography of hope

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REMAPPING THE MALE ROAD OF TERROR: BLACK WOMEN’S GEOGRAPHY OF HEALING IN TONI MORRISON’S A MERCY

Majda Atieh and Susan Deeb

Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men (Morrison, 98).

This essay integrates the collation of geography and psychology in light of “gendered space” studies to address Toni Morrison’s A Mercy (2008). Set in the 17th century nascent America, A Mercy presents the wanderings of Florens, an African teenage slave girl, who is transferred to Jacob Vaark, a land owner and a merchant, as a debt repayment. The narrative addresses slavery, the responsibility of freedom, cruelty and hunger, orphanhood, and the gendered representation of men and women. This essay particularly reads A Mercy as an African American road narrative that contests the insecurity of the masculine logic that articulates the paradigms of mobility and sessility. Morrison’s narrative presents the landscape of the road to project a patriarchal society’s preoccupation with ethnic and racial terror. In this respect, A Mercy highlights fear as indigenous to this male-regulated zone but exclusively projected toward women who are supposedly considered as not able to endure or even respond to unexpected road encounters. Arguably, A Mercy reveals how a black female traveler demolishes fear through female solidarity and communal
empowerment and heals the geography of insecurity that shapes the male-constructed road.

The trope of the journey, whether personal or communal, has always promoted masculinity to become a deeply rooted protocol in the mythical subconscious of world’s nations. Through centuries, the “mobile” has become one of the epithets associated with men, and obviously correlates women with sessility.1 This kind of description is the product of a long history of masculine narratives of mobility that aim at highlighting men’s masculinity and women’s femininity. The historical narratives of Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Aeneas and Columbus, to name but a few, present sustainable paradigms which construe travel as a mainly masculine concept that serves as “the medium of traditional male immortality” (Leed, 268). By crossing spaces and recording their journeys, men have not only been transcending the boundaries of time but also permanently rooting their existence. While examining these narratives, critics have demonstrated how the concept of mobility and certain spaces have been gendered by patriarchal societies. For instance, Sidonie Smith chronicles the transformation of home into a gendered place that anchors women and makes them sessile and the road into a masculine terrain. Nevertheless, home, for women, is also associated with being fixed in space. The road as opposite to home has been related to the freedom of adventure and consequently to masculinity. That is, myths of mobility, around the universe, including American myths of mobility that encompass the focus of this reading, have reflected the white male’s historical perspective and constructed hegemonic politics of territorial confinement. Through these myths, men have confined women to the domestic terrain and imposed spatial ideologies such as the “feminine mystique.” 2 Consequently, we have a long process of interpellation that pushes women into accepting the patriarchal standards of femininity as

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1 Sidonie Smith’s Moving Lives examines two opposing terms, the masculine logic of mobility in which men are privileged with the freedom to move, and the masculine logic of sessility that confines women to the domestic sphere.

2 This concept is fully discussed in Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique. This notion assumes that, being devoted wives and mothers, women should find the satisfaction they seek inside domestic boundaries.
the norm. One example of maintaining the masculine/feminine hierarchy is the narration of stories about the male adventures and the female terror. For example, Odysseus is notably known for his adventurous spirit and legendary journeys. Little Red Riding Hood is another prominent story that presents a female who projects defiance as she transgresses the allowed space for her. In this context, Helene Cixous demonstrates how “Little Red Riding Hood makes her little detour, does what women should never do, she allows herself the forbidden … and pays dearly for it” (43-44). The two emphasized sentences summarize the female ordeal. Little Red should have never left home and since the journey was simple, being sent from one home to another, she should have not tarried and deviated from the road drawn to her. As she chooses to be adventurous, which is only a masculine trait, she pays “dearly for it” and suffers a great punishment. Both Cixous and Ganser demonstrate that through inflicting punishment, this “early example of a road narrative” advocates “a normative spatial behavior dictated by prevalent gender roles” (Ganser, 13). Thus, women are forced to stick to the role of the submissive and vulnerable and to believe that they will be in jeopardy if left alone on the road. So, the road has definitely been gendered for it has been reified by men and consequently transformed into a dangerous territory that only men can survive. In this respect, Doreen Massey discusses this mutual relationship between the social construction of gender, space, and mobility:

Space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through. Moreover, they are gendered in a myriad different ways, which vary between cultures and over time. And this gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live (186).

The social construction of the masculine and feminine identity in relation to gender roles affects and is generated by the construction of a gendered space. Women are confined to home because they are supposedly delicate and
in need of their men’s protection from other men’s violence. As such, the space of home becomes a signifier of confinement. To understand this kind of relationship, Linda McDowell’s definition of gender is crucial. She reads gender both as “a set of material social relations [that also has] symbolic meaning, and is something that has an effect on my attitudes, beliefs, and future intentions, on my knowledge of and understanding of the world and different people’s place in it” (7). So, being a woman means to absorb a set of beliefs such as not going out to public spaces unchaperoned in fear of being harmed. The kind of knowledge we get from society is what shapes female identity and understanding of the world around us. However, gendered identity contributes to the shaping of spaces and our movement in these spaces as they construct our ways of behaving and thinking. Jennifer Hyndman argues that “individuals [don’t] simply decide their mobility patterns. Mobility, displacement, and migration are all constituted through politico-spatial relations” (170). These socio-political relations are mainly shaped by power relations that “are embedded in political arrangements, organizations, and practices both locally and across political boundaries” (180-81). Throughout history, females have been the victims of the socio-political strategies of the patriarchal power that confines them after tapping on their gender insecurities. Of course, in the complex relation between gender and power, the male stands as the powerful while the female is the powerless. This binary relation is the root of the binary relations of female/ private/ home/ stasis vs. male/ public/ travel/ mobility. All these binaries are combined under the important concept of dominant power. In this context, Anna Mehta and Liz Bondi suggest that “women embody discourses that construct them as …vulnerable and physically powerless, particularly in the face of male violence, and as the object of aggressive male sexuality” (77). So, women, being physically weak, should avoid places where they might be violated. Obviously, different manifestations of the masculine control are all exhibited through fettering the female movement. Thus, women are doomed to be feminized through their bodies and, consequently, transformed into located subjects.

In the context of travel, women have been conscripted to domestic spaces and subjected to what critic Gill Valentine calls “the geography of fear.” The
The concept of fear is quite connected to the collation of gender, power, and spatial travel. Since the social production of space is built on hierarchies, spaces have been designated as either public or private. Of course, the masculine is the public while the feminine is the private. Deborah Bialeschki suggests that “the historical roots go back to a gendered division of space that occurred during the industrial revolution when public space was defined as the space for men while the private space of the home was defined as appropriate for women” (3). Nevertheless, these two separate spheres existed at earlier ages, as demonstrated earlier, through myths. Yet, they were not fully crystallized as social norms till the industrial revolution where men had to work and women had to stay at home and take care of the children. As such, home and the road have become gendered, and now encompass opposite realms, representing the private and the public respectively. Ideologically, home has been described as the secure arena that insures women’s safety. On the other hand, the road has been described as a public space where women are prone to get hurt. Valentine demonstrates how

“... unlike men women find that when in public space their personal space is frequently invaded by whistles, comments or actual physical assault from strange men. This inability of women to choose with whom they interact and communicate profoundly affects their sense of security in public (Valentine, 386).”

According to the masculine logic, women are confined to the domestic realm in order to be protected as the public space is shaped by unexpected encounters. This unpredictability has turned the road into a dangerous space. Moreover, men worked to instill notions of fear in women’s minds in order to eventually feel constant threat when on the road. Men took advantage of this fear whose essential characteristic is related to the silence of the human being. This silence will make women easier to control and eventually guarantee men full power by turning women into dependent human beings who are unable to get on the road without a male companion. Patriarchal society keeps sending women these negative messages about the outdoors which prove to be false in...
certain situations. These messages construct the discourse of fear that ensures men’s dominance. Forcing women to avoid the road for fear of being raped or even murdered has turned the road into a gendered space and more particularly a masculine terrain. Moreover, fear has become a tool employed in the masculine game of power. Hille Koskela notes that the “social production of fear is a question of power in space or lack of it” (314). Consequently, women are depicted as victims who will always live in the shadow of the male. For a long time, females have adopted the male gendered ideology and their practice of power without questioning it. This passive acceptance has legitimized fear: “A normalization of women’s fear of violence in public space has taken place as women are expected to be afraid and adapt their spatial behavior to avoid risks (Koskela, 1999) and to express themselves as potential victims” (Ganser, 4). But why is it important for the male to control female agency through the projection of fear in particular? Critics Moona Domosh and Joni Saeger observe: “it is hard to maintain patriarchal control over women if they have unfettered freedom of movement through space” (115-16). Thus, the patriarch’s relentless attempts to ensure patriarchal control over women expose the male’s feelings of insecurity towards a powerful female who is as capable as any man of handling society. Therefore, through maintaining their power over the female body and agency, men have been trying to hide their own anxiety that is related to preserving their image.

The discourse of fear has been sustained in women’s literature of the road. Various women’s road narratives have projected concerns about safety and depicted the female as vulnerable and the male as violent or, sometimes, as the protector who rescues the weak female. In this respect, Ganser discusses Doris Betts’s *Heading West* that includes elements of romance. In this novel, the journey of the main character Nancy is enforced by a kidnapper. However, it is also a journey of escaping the suffocating confines of domesticity. Throughout the novel, fear of sexual assault on the part of the kidnapper hovers over Nancy and reveals how fear is exploited by men to transform the geography of the road into that of fear and threat. Though the kidnapper expresses his self-reluctance to rape Nancy, she keeps drawing different scenarios of the assault, which reveals how the discourse of fear is internalized.
in the female subconscious. Another example is Erika Lopez’s *Flaming Iguanas* where the main character Tomato expresses her agoraphobia through fancying herself “discreetly jump[ing] down a flight of stairs and break[ing] [her] legs so [she] wouldn’t have to go” (Lopez, 250). Tomato, just like Nancy, is caught in the ambivalence that shapes the freedom that is celebrated in the males’ road narratives. Yet, they are fully aware of the social constraints drawn by society. In this concern, recent readings have maintained fear as a lurking element in women’s imagination even if they have not been molested or hurt in any possible way in a public place. In addition, circulating stories about women who are raped or murdered in the public sphere terrorizes and makes others hesitant to cross the doorsteps of their homes. In this respect, Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* presents one specific example related to the 17th century American society that has integrated fear of racial and cultural unpredictability in mapping the geography of road travel. In *A Mercy*, Rebekka who is a traveler from the old world to the new one in order to be wedded into a total stranger, Jacob Vaark, draws a comparison between the necessity to escape her homeland and the fears generated and sustained by her mother’s and others’ stories. She clarifies the primary motive of taking such venture as an “escape from the leers and rude hands of any man, drunken or sober, she might walk by” (Morrison, 78). Consequently, she prefers the unknown land as she continues, “America. Whatever the danger, how could it possibly be worse?” (*ibid*). Yet, on another occasion, Rebekka declares her need of the male figure as a protector for “tales of [Vaark’s] journeys excited her, but also intensified her view of a disorderly, threatening world out there, protection from which he alone could provide” (88). Such stories along with women’s narratives are part of the social ideology that nourishes women’s agoraphobia and their tendency to stick to their homes.

However, *A Mercy* violates the conventions of women’s road narratives by negotiating the regulations of patriarchal power. Interestingly, such initial negotiation is performed by the same confined female body. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault investigates the workings of power over the human body and “how it explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it” (138). And such “discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (138-39).
In *A Mercy*, the female body is possessed by the male that practices his power and remolds it through subjugation. He “breaks,” gets hold over, fixes, and teaches it to be submissive. As such, the female body becomes docile, static, and vulnerable especially when addressing female sexuality. Interestingly enough, Morrison uses the verb “break” when Minha mãe, Florens’s mother, describes her sexual experience:

> But first the mating, the taking of me and Bess and one other to the curing shed. Afterwards, the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later an overseer gave each of us an orange. And it would have been alright. It would have been good both times, because the result were you and your brother (165-66).

Minha mãe is not able to defend her usurped body. Instead, she totally accepts and surrenders because, ironically, the men who “break” her in have apologized and the result is a daughter she has to protect and give up. Of course, this sexual encounter is pretty much close to these of Sorrow, the melancholy orphan in Vaark’s farm. Nevertheless, power is in a constant state of changeability. In this context, Foucault defines power as “a network of relations between people, which is negotiated within each encounter” (Mills, 49). In *A Mercy*, a negotiation of power over the female body is clearly discerned in the scene of intercourse between Florens and the Blacksmith:

> [They] were rocking and, unlike female farm animals in heat, she was not standing quietly under the weight and thrust of the male. What Sorrow saw yonder in the grass under the hickory tree was not a silent submission to the slow goings behind a pile of wood or a hurried one in a church pew that Sorrow knew. This here female stretched, kicked her heels and whipped her head left, right, to, fro. It was a dancing. Florens rolled and twisted from her back to his. He hoisted her up against the hickory; she bent her head into his shoulder. A dancing Horizontal one minute, another minute vertical (Morrison, 128).
Unlike Sorrow or her own mother, who are both passive, Florens is active. She “stretched,” “kicked,” and “twisted.” So, her sexual involvement with the Blacksmith is transformed into a dance that definitely needs two dancers and presents the male as not totally in power and the female as not totally powerless. Instead, there are two equal parties switching roles and sharing them. However, the gendered doctrine of a passive female body during sexual intercourse is totally enforced on women as their bodies become pinned down to their homes. Such fixation in one place and restriction of movement can be read as a kind of punishment to the challenge of having an active female body. As such, the wanderings of a lonely female are punished by violence. But if a female is allowed to move, she needs permission or an excuse to regulate her solitary movement. Thus, Florens is forbidden to willingly seek the Blacksmith on her own. She has to be formally sent on an urgent errand to save her mistress’s life by the one who is in charge of the house. So, wearing Jacob’s boots and stuffing them with her mistress’s letter of authority become reminding symbols of constant regulation to Florens’s wandering body (97).

However, Florens’s journey challenges this gendered ideology of women’s spatial restriction. While wandering, Florens encounters a community of riders “all male, all native, all young” (103), which rings the bell to the caution of the Native American Lina who warns Florens that “not all natives are like her […] so watch out” (5). Florens’s internalized fear is obvious. She says, “I have fear of them,” “I am shaking,” “I drop to my knees in misery and fright,” and “I am too trembling to reach” (103). However, she is “shocked” to see how benevolent the riders are after they provide her with water and salty leather belt to soothe her aching stomach. Florens’s fear is the fear of a native Other, whose image has been distorted through stories and transformed from a benevolent self to a malevolent Other. The geography of fear in this incident is both gendered and racial. It has led to the exclusion of other ethnicities. The African American Florens is afraid of the native male Other without recognizing that she is to be feared later on because of her color. At this point of the journey, Florens’s racial identity, unlike her gender, is not highlighted. Thus, both the road and home are negotiated. Home is no longer a “safe haven” (Ganser, 69) but a place of violence and oppression. The road is
not always a place of danger but a place of kindness presented by the strange Other.

It would be significant to mention that, as an African American road narrative, *A Mercy* presents both a racial and gendered geography of fear. Historically speaking, African American women claimed and redefined the private space as a political arena. Consequently, their experience with the road is different as it is affected by their African roots. Before colonization, African women’s relation to the dichotomy of private/public is different from the one in the western part of the world. Black Women have participated both in the public and private spheres while in Africa. For instance, records of missionaries have revealed how active Black women were in the political field. Researcher C. G. Marareke explains that “records dating back to the 17th century indicate that Ishe (chief) Mutapa had many female madzishe (sub-chiefs) who administered their matunhu (provinces)” (11). So, African women were not passive but active in every possible way. They were not victims and did not live in the shadow of the man. Hence, gender differences did not affect the Black women’s behavior and attitude towards different spaces. There is no monopolization of power. The family struggle is a collective one where every member of the family participates. As for agency, African women had indulged in the same freedom that men had. Their movement has been considered essential for sustaining the family as the survival of the whole family is shaped by cooperation:

Inherited frameworks of gender have significantly undermined Africa’s survival strategies which revolved around the participation of both genders. Women’s agency and the performance space they had used to contribute meaningfully to survival were rearranged with the arrival of the imperialists (Muwati, 6).

The imperialist project has affected Black women’s spatial identity. It has implanted the western ways of thinking in a different environment. It has effaced a way of life in which gender and ethnicity has had no traceable effect on the African woman’s concept of the self. She has become minus to the male
and to other white females. Hence, she is in a double danger, being an African woman. In A Mercy, Florens’s racial awareness is highlighted after the painful incident in Widow Ealing’s house. As Daughter Jane, Widow Ealing’s daughter, bleeds to contest her demonization, black Florens arrives and diverts the attention from Daughter Jane to her story:

One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. Afric and much more, says another. Just look at this child says the first woman. She points to the little girl shaking and moaning by her side. Hear her. Hear her. It is true then says another. The Black Man is among us. This is his minion (Morrison, 111).

Florens’s dark skin is a signifier of evil. She is doomed by her blackness and deprived of her humanity as she becomes an object of examination. Not even Rebekka’s letter could save her from the buds of racial prejudice that yet to develop. As Florens attempts to perceive the Presbyterians’ feelings, she encounters total blankness: “Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition” (113). This blank gaze is symptomatic of the imperial strategies that transform blacks into both objects for examinations and savages that need to be tamed. The Presbyterians do not even consider her situation as a female travelling alone or think of Rebekka whose survival depends on Florens’s success in her errand. In an interview with NPR news, Morrison highlights A Mercy as a pre-racial narrative (Martin). Such description implies that ethnic concerns have existed, especially after the Bacon’s Rebellion. However, they were not fully developed until later centuries. In A Mercy, the narrator mentions that “[b]y eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever” (Morrison, 10). So, this act of punishment is mainly motivated by any possible contribution to the rebellion not necessarily by
mere ethnic factors. The white merchant and farmer Jacob Vaark criticizes these regulations and considers them to be lawless as they encourage “cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue” (11). Taking Vaark’s view into consideration, it becomes clear that racial prejudice has not yet intervened in the social structure of the emerging 17th century American society. As such, Black people’s punishment included restriction on mobility. They were prohibited from road travel as they were prone to be killed or seriously harmed with no laws to defend them. Thus, the fear of travel has evolved and altered the black individual’s relation to geography. Black women, in particular, were deprived of the ancestral freedom of agency celebrated before they were taken into slavery. Thus, the geography of fear in the 17th century America becomes racially-constructed for blacks in general and both racialized and gendered for black women in particular.

Recognizing her racial identity as a black slave, Florens’s perception of herself as a traveler on the road is altered as she gains new knowledge and loses her sense of belonging. She realizes that she is “a negrita” (Morrison, 165) and an Other that is to be excluded and feared. In this concern, it is essential to address the dynamics of Florens’s relation to both fear and freedom on the road and her perception of her identity and the world around her. The incident at Widow Ealing’s house and the conflict that took place at the blacksmith’s dwelling dictate these dynamics. Since the beginning of her journey, fear controls Florens. She projects her inner terror on several occasions: “My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost. Nothing frights me more than this errand and nothing is more temptation…Who lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help me or [harm] me?” (Morrison, 4). Florens’s conflicted self is torn between the impulse to continue her mission to reach her direction and the fear that is lurking inside. Though fear somehow cripples Florens, her urgent need to see the Blacksmith is more powerful. So, she is tempted by the hope of a fresh start with her lover. Florens’s inner fear is symptomatic of her social consciousness. Florens is a solitary young female on the road, which makes her a tempting target. When Florens arrives to the tavern, she has to make an important choice. Florens reflects:

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I have a cold stone in my chest. I don’t need Lina to warn me that I must not be alone with strange men with slow hands when in liquor and anger they discover their cargo is lost. I have to choose quick. I choose you. I go west into the trees. Everything I want is west. You. Your talk. The medicine you know that will make Mistress well. You will hear what I have to say and come back with me. I have only to go west. One day? Two nights? (41).

Florens is aware of the male danger as Lina has warned her before. Lina plays a major role in Florens’s life, and she plays a major role in Florens’s life and forming her social consciousness. She is the only family Florens has. So, the impact of everything she says or does on Florens is enormous. Lina’s warning provokes fear not of men, but of being alone and without protection. As she is not ready to be violated by the masculine body at this point, Florens chooses to resume her journey. However, the motivation of her choice is related both to her fear of being raped and determination to meet the Blacksmith. Fear plays an important force behind her choice to pursue her destination. To be precise, it is the need to get rid of this feeling and meet the one she presumes will afford protection of the ad hoc world she is living in. Hence, the fear that emerges from being a solitary female traveler on the road has turned into a catalyst. She does not succumb to it but manipulates to reach the intended destination which is itself a great motivator. The obvious goal of the journey is to save Rebekka’s life.

However, Florens has another agenda in mind which is the reason behind choosing her for this mission in the first place. Florens’s determination to reach the Blacksmith is what distinguishes this road journey from those in other women’s road narratives. In other words, while most women are motivated by the need to escape patriarchal confinement, A Mercy challenges this pattern and presents a female traveler who seeks masculine hegemony. Women who choose to be on the road in order to escape patriarchal confinement are confronted with the fear of being raped or murdered. Yet, they face their fears in order to prove them groundless and get the freedom
they aspire to. For instance, both Doris Betts’s *Heading West* and Sharlene Baker’s *Finding Signs* articulate the need for liberation from domestic ties. In *A Mercy*, Florens is eager to move from one state of enslavement into another. So, her motive is to reach not to escape the male. By so doing, she embraces her fear and, more importantly, refuses the freedom of the road that each male road narrative celebrates and each female road narrative seeks. When Florens encounters a stag on the road, she attempts to tap her inner sensation. She reflects: “It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don’t like it. I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you. When I choose and say good morning, the stag bounds away” (Morrison, 70). Florens is even afraid of this freedom. Florens’s understanding of the concept of freedom on the road is dictated by the dichotomy of slave vs. free. She perceives these two labels in terms of ownership. If you are owned by someone then you are a slave; if not then you are a free person. She projects this understanding to the freedom the road offers. On the road, the traveler is usually free of social constraints and obligations. Florens is unable or unwilling to visualize her own autonomy. She cannot live without being tied to someone. She defines her identity through the eyes of others. Rebekka even admits that Florens appreciates “every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval” (61) she is offered. She feels weak and in need of others’ kindness. Florens recognizes only one adjective to describe her entity, which is “a slave.” Therefore, her fear of the road becomes the fear of being free with no adjective to pin her down. Utter subjugation shapes Florens’s encounter with the native riders. She does not react in any considerable way. Slavery becomes her typical response. Some would argue that Florens’s way of behaving is the result of her need to belong.

After her being abandoned by her mother, Florens feels she is to be blamed and there is something wrong with her. Arguably, Florens rejects the freedom of the road as it makes her feel an outcast. Unlike both the male and the female road travelers who are eager to escape social confines, Florens needs to belong to society. Florens even becomes a slave to the sensation of belonging. Also, her enslavement to the Blacksmith is gendered. She wants
him to own her as a female, to own her body, and to teach her how to think. She needs his approval. And she waits for him to give answers to her racial dilemma. Furthermore, her enslavement is even racially motivated as she becomes enslaved to her color after the incident at Widow Ealing’s house. At the end of the novel, Florens recalls what the Blacksmith told her once:

I am remembering what you tell me from long ago when Sir is not dead. You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild. I know my withering is born in the Widow’s closet. I know the claws of the feathered thing did break out on you because I cannot stop them wanting to tear you open the way you tear me (160).

This reflection implies that what is inside the human being determines either enslavement or freedom. Florens fails to interpret the Blacksmith’s words. She makes her discovery of her racial entity control her actions. She internalizes the blank gaze of the people in the house, and accepts her blackness in a negative way as a reaction to the Blacksmith’s rejection of her. Thus, “slave” is the word that describes Florens’s relationship to her identity and other characters in the novel. At this phase, Florens’s fear of the road disappears. She is not to be afraid anymore. On the contrary, Florens now perceives herself as someone who is violent and should inflict fear in others. As she claims her racial identity negatively, she stops to be a vulnerable female. She becomes a violent black female, the Other, or the Black Man’s minion. Florens admits: “Sudden it is not like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun’s going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home” (115). So, when seen by Willard and Scully on her journey back, Florens is no longer the same person anymore not only because “she was so blood-spattered and bedraggled [but also] because she passed right by them. Surly a sudden burst of sweating men out of roadside trees would have startled a human, any human, especially a female. But [Florens] neither glanced their way nor altered her pace” (146). When they jump in front of her after escaping a bear, Florens

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does not project the “normal” reaction: to be startled or to run. Florens is not the same person that started the journey. She also initiates her narrative with “do not be afraid” and she promises to “lie quietly in the dark” (1). She embraces the fear she instigates in other human beings who are objects of repulsion and attraction. She wants to be with them in order to belong though she only causes them to be afraid. Thus, Florens’s relation to “the geography of fear” alters the very nature of the road to the female traveler. The road stops to be a terrorizing space. Florens transforms the road into what Wallace Stegner calls a “geography of hope.” It is the hope of reaching the man who would cure her mistress and provide her with the love she needs. However, Florens’s fear turns groundless and her hope is false. So, the road becomes neutral. Its end might be disappointing but it is not a space to be feared at least for Florens.

On the other hand, A Mercy presents an African American woman’s road narrative that redefines fear as an intrinsic convention to the masculine discourse of the American road. Road narratives by male travelers typically highlight the road as the geography of adventure, of escape from the dull routine of life, or of pursuit of new opportunities. They never present fear as a male feeling or a tactic of surviving the journey. On the other hand, women’s road narratives highlight terrorized females and their invented strategies of survival or coping. In other words, the road for the male is presented as “the geography of hope,” while it constitutes “the geography of fear” for women. According to the social standards of masculinity and femininity, men should not show their fears. It is abnormal and unfavorable for men to admit their being afraid, while it is quite natural for women to do so. Therefore, when women’s narratives have the advantage of showing the two sides of the coin, fear and hope, men’s road narratives highlight the hope side, regardless of whether this hope is true or false, effacing their fears. Researchers suggest that “men do not report their level of fear sincerely, as the hegemonic masculinity [. . .] is not compatible with vulnerability violence” (Sandberg, 4). Therefore, men avoid talking about their terror for fear of losing their sense of masculinity or distorting the image of the powerful male who should defy all challenges. In A Mercy, Florens’s journey destabilizes such gendered social and psychological doctrines. Florens’s transformation of the road’s geography exposes fear as an
intrinsic phase in the male’s travel experience. In Morrison’s narrative, fear is not alien to the male psychology. In particular, Vaark’s journey exposes the male’s effaced fear on the road. When Vaark enters the Lenape trail, he slows down his horse down because “in this territory he could not be sure of friend or foe” (Morrison, 10), especially after the Bacon’s rebellion:

Even with the relative safety of his skin, solitary traveling required prudence. He knew he might ride for hours with no company but geese flying over inland waterways, and suddenly, from behind felled trees a starving deserter with a pistol might emerge, or in a hollow a family of runaways might cower, or an armed felon might threaten. Carrying several kinds of specie and a single knife, he was a juicy target. Eager to be out of this colony into a less precarious but personally more repellent one, Jacob urged the mare to a faster pace (11).

As of any white road traveler, Vaark’s color guarantees a certain amount of safety. However, Vaark admits that it is not enough to be white back in the 17th century America. It is the fact that he is alone on the road that makes him a target for thieves, runaways, or starving people, a reasonable reason to be afraid. Thus, he starts to ride in a faster manner that exposes his insecurity and fear of the unexpected. However, like in any male road narrative, Vaark “took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him […] In fact it was hardship, adventure, that attracted him” (12). Vaark’s narrative is quite similar to other male road narratives. It focuses on the temptation to discover this new land which recalls the contribution of the road genre to uncovering the traveler’s need to discover his national identity. Vaark also “relished never knowing what lay in his path, who might approach with what intention” (12). Using the verb “relish” is quite significant. Vaark does not show fear. Rather, he relishes it with anticipation, which foregrounds his heroic masculinity. However, he does not bring boon to his home. He is just out there for profitable reasons. On the other hand, Florens is on a saving mission. She is the
heroine who is supposed to bring the Blacksmith to heal Rebekka regardless of the situation in the farm after Rebekka’s health is restored. Despite her fears which she projects in more than one occasion through the journey, Florens bravely “chose to go her own route once the others had crept way” (66). Hence, men are subjected to the geography of insecurity as much as women are. However, they are not allowed to express it in order to maintain their heroic image. Yet, men are not the only heroes. Once more, Florens defies her femininity and darkness and breaks the stereotypical image of women as vulnerable and sessile to be a new model of agency that heals the road from the infliction of fear.

Florens’s journey also exposes the effaced fear of other male travelers. Scully and Willard, the two indentured slaves, also come to experience a terrifying incident with a bear in the wilderness. Willard and Scully are attacked after Willard has decided to rest and smoke his pipe. They both know that the smoke in the air would attract the attention of some wild animals. Though they hold this expected knowledge, their trust in their masculinity is unwavering. As they are attacked, they strike back and run. Scully uses the anticipated masculine weapon that is the knife and stabs the bear in the eye. Unlike Willard and Scully, Florens does not bring the unexpected animal’s attack on herself. As she feels the approach of the animal, she chooses to stand still and applies the tactics of survival she has learned. Thus, fear is projected by both men and women. And their responses to fear may destabilize the gendered notions of male/reason and female/physicality that dictate their reactions. In A Mercy, men ironically invest in physicality to face their fears while women invest in the communal knowledge they accumulate and even present more rational tactics of survival.

A Mercy reveals how, to venture on a public space and embark on a road journey, women create unique tactics to guarantee their safety. Most females draw mental maps of places they are not familiar with. According to geographer Valentine, when women find themselves forced to take the road, they will develop mental maps of places where they fear attack (18). In A Mercy, Florens attempts to draw her own mental map and resorts to the interpretation of geographical signs as a means of surviving her own journey.
At the beginning of her journey, Florens talks about the map drawn by Rebekka:

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. I am to board the Ney brothers’ wagon in the morning as it travels north on the post road. After one stop at a tavern, the wagon will arrive at a place she calls Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on the Abenaki trail which I will know by the sapling bent into the earth with one sprout growing skyward (39-40).

So, at this point, Florens has a map to follow. She is to leave the wagon as it travels north. She should reach the Abenaki trail that is marked by one sapling going upward in the mid of others looking down then she, like in many women’s road narratives, will go West. To follow this map, Florens’s perception of the things around her is heightened. She has a path to walk in. She has a clear road drawn for her because she fears "pathless nights" (5). Nevertheless, she loses the road and her ability to read nature weakens. On the other hand, her fear rises and her senses are heightened. She becomes aware of footprints on snow, the color of the sky, and the sound of the running brook which to her disappointment turns out to be the sound of pines dripping. The interesting thing about Florens is that she takes the cause of her fear and transforms into a motive of survival. In other words, she manipulates her fear of sexual assault by engaging thoughts of her sexual encounters with the blacksmith. Consequently, sexuality is turned into a coping strategy that would help her move on. Florens says, “I am watchful for snakes that ease down trees and over ground … I lie still and try not to think of water. Thinking instead of another night, another place of wet ground” (67). Diverting her thoughts helps her survive the night and other nights. By so doing, Florens successfully defies the enforced fear using the concept’s same weapon. Given the African reliance on communal survival, Florens’s attachment to the people who have helped her reshapes her identity.

Florens is raised in a family of a heterogeneous nature where every character is of a different background. For instance, Rebekka comes from the
old world while Lina is a Native American. Florens uses this advantage to cope with the road. Though their warnings intensify her fear, they also help her endure this journey. For example, Florens always recalls what Lina has taught her about snakes and how to accommodate nature so that she could spend the night peacefully. Moreover, the blacksmith has told her what to do when facing a bear, how not to look at him in the eye and the importance of standing still, which she follows when she is overtaken by a bear behind her. Furthermore, the ancestral roots exist, though in a new land, through her need to bond with other females. Researcher Jill Lynn Talbot’s “This is not an Exit: The Road Narrative in Contemporary American Literature and Film” highlights how the “female road narratives also emphasize bonding and in turn, exclude the male from this bond” (190). African American women emphasize the need to create a bond with other females, whether it is a sisterhood or motherhood relationship. On the road, Florens manages to establish a bond with Daughter Jane who helps her get rid of the Presbyterians who accuse her of being the Blackman’s minion and resume her journey. Daughter Jane also appears in one of Florens’s dreams where she is on the edge of a lake trying to find the reflection of her face in water. After she is ceased with panic, Daughter Jane comes to calm her down, and assures her that she will find it (Morrison, 138). Rebekka also experiences this sisterhood bond when she is on the ship that will carry her to Vaark. She meets with several women who are supposed to be prostitutes exiled from their homeland but they provide her with the serenity she does not expect to have during her rough journey. She admits that

If she had feared her own female vulnerability, traveling alone to a foreign country to wed a stranger, these women corrected her misgivings. If ever night moths fluttered in her chest at the recollection of her mother’s predictions, the company of these exiled, thrown-away women eliminated them (82-83).

So, having a female company on the road soothes one’s fears as those of Rebekka. These women help alleviate the fear her mother anticipated. As such,
these two examples of sisterhood reveal how ethnic boundaries, which are created by men, limit other people’s agency, and cause fear, are fragile and apt to be broken by the solidarity that women create on the road. Nevertheless, when sisterhood proves helpful, motherhood is definitely not. Florens’s relationship with her mother is quite problematic and instead of being a source of endurance and survival, it becomes a state of constant fear of the abandonment and loneliness that are both heightened when on the road.

In *A Mercy*, we encounter a mother making her daughter bleed physically and psychologically. Yet, these acts are not done in menace but out of love that satisfies the motherly instinct of protection. These acts of cruelty such as wounding your child, killing him/her, or giving him/her up are recurrent tropes in Morrison’s narratology. However, they are gestures of kindness that have been misinterpreted as devilish. So, Florens’s abandonment that hovers in her mind becomes a source of permanent fear of rejection and of loneliness.

While on the road, the dreams she has about her mother trying to tell her something important but she is unable to understand, affects her badly. Her inability to understand her mother’s words makes her unable to read signs around her and clouds her judgment. She cannot read her blackness or Maliak’s relation to the Blacksmith. Consequently, she loses her path and her happy ending. Men, on the other hand, invest in their masculinity and use of arms to ensure their survival on the road. As such, their tactics are pretty much summarized in “physical strength,” “knife,” and “pistol.” These tools provide for them a clearer map of the road where they can enter taverns with a certain amount of confidence. Nevertheless, while the pattern of a solitary male traveler is common, forming a bond on the road with a male-buddy does exist. For instance, in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Sal attempts to preserve the ties that link him to Dean. However, these ties are broken as Dean is accustomed to leaving Sal alone on the road. Hence, the male traveler is mainly the lonely individual with a quest, who considers himself to constitute one entity or the centre of the journey. In *A Mercy*, Jacob travels alone and he does not consider establishing a bond with other travelers, which justifies his heightened awareness and fear. Consequently, in the novel, community doesn’t contribute to the male tactics of survival as it does with Florens. Moreover, Jacob violates
the conventional hero who aims at recording his adventure for Rebekka admits that her husband’s tales get fewer with time (Morrison, 88). Some would argue that Vaark’s legacy is the home he leaves behind. However, it is Florens’s story that is written to immortalize her. Florens’s story actually becomes another coping strategy that she uses to guarantee her survival in the journey of life. Hence, survival on the road for the female traveler is related to many factors such as the social background, coping strategies, and mental maps. Florens succeeds in eliminating her fears by controlling her thoughts and creating a bond with others. Hence, she frees herself from the subjected geography of fear created by patriarchal social norms.

In conclusion, the mythical narratives mapped by the male travelers have led to the formation of the geography of fear that aims to restrict women’s movement. However, women, venturing on the road in an attempt to get rid of their fears, turn such a space into a geography of hope at times while neutralize it at others, eventually healing it from the fear stigma. Florens is a unique example of a female defying her fear of the danger associated with the road in order to reach her goal. She creates her own survival strategies and revolutionizes the norms of the road genre. As such, sexuality becomes an attraction not repulsion. Instead of escaping the male’s confinement, she willingly pursues it. Her racial identity becomes a source of power not of fear. Thus, she problematizes the concepts of fear, slavery, and freedom. Most importantly, she manages to subvert the social and spatial standards that shape masculinity and femininity in its own roots through choosing her own route.
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