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Reviews

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REVIEWS

Review Essay: Area Studies Revitalised

Madhu Krishnan

Oxford Street Accra: City Life and Itineraries of the Transnational

Ato Quayson

Duke University Press, Durham, 2014, pb
312pp ISBN 0 8223 5747 6 $25.95
www.dukeupress.edu

Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite

Terri Ochiagha

James Currey, Oxford, 2015, hb
216pp ISBN 1 8470 1109 1 £45.00
www.jamescurrey.com

Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction

Daria Tunca

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014, hb
203pp ISBN 1 1372 6441 1
www.palgrave.com

The question of area studies and its relationship to postcolonial studies, as a discipline, has been a pernicious one since the institutional consecration of the latter in the late 1970s. Where area studies can be characterised by its rootedness in social scientific precepts and its indelible ties to the imperialist project, postcolonial studies, by contrast, has come to be known for its oppositional rendering of the colonial experience, more closely aligned with the humanities and often engendered through a series of theoretical constructs centred on concepts such as hybridity, liminality and ambivalence. Indeed, the seemingly foundational discrepancy between the two loosely-defined fields has only grown more urgent in recent years with a turn towards transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalism in literary studies of, from and around the postcolonial world. In this context, the tension surrounding the relationship between area studies and postcolonial studies appears at heart to be predicated around questions of scope and aim in critical thought: specificity in expertise versus comparative sweep; methodological orthodoxies versus contrapuntal intellectual wanderings; positivist thinking versus subjective exploration.

Yet, there is a sense in which the projects of area and postcolonial studies remain fundamentally of a kind. In both cases critical inquiry seeks to explore and expand our intellectual horizons beyond the limited boundaries of Europe and North America in order to better understand the legacies through which imperialism and colonialism continue to percolate in our contemporary world. More broadly, both fields are, in their own ways, fundamentally geographical at their core. From Edward W Said's ground-breaking work on the 'imaginative geographies' of imperialism to more recent studies of diaspora, tourism and what we may broadly conceive of as an eco-critical turn in postcolonial studies, conceptions of geography have long held a central place in the study of empire and its afterlives. Moreover, both fields stand to gain tremendously from one another: for postcolonial studies, the linguistic, historical and socio-political depth of area studies might provoke something of a redress to charges of monolingualism and Anglophone bias, as well as provide the fine-grained contextual details through which literary texts come into being. For area studies, on the other hand, the open horizons of the postcolonial could stand as a means of combating its ongoing imperial heritage and rigid disciplinary orthodoxies. In an institutional context increasingly driven by metrics and a unilateral focus on 'productivity', the project of an area studies-inflected postcolonialism stands as something of a rebellion, insisting on the value and worth of critical inquiry brought into being over the longue durée of intellectual creation.

The three studies under review in this essay provide a set of models for what a postcolonial studies filtered through the lens of area studies – or vice versa – could be. Each is tightly aligned to a specific geography — a single street in Accra, in Quayson's case; a prestigious school, in Ochiagha's; and a nation-state often dismissed as being little more than a geographical expression in Tunca's. Retaining a specificity which is equally material and textual, these three studies demonstrate the continued co-productive relationship between geography and culture, a perspective made more pertinent than ever in this era of liquid, or late, modernity.

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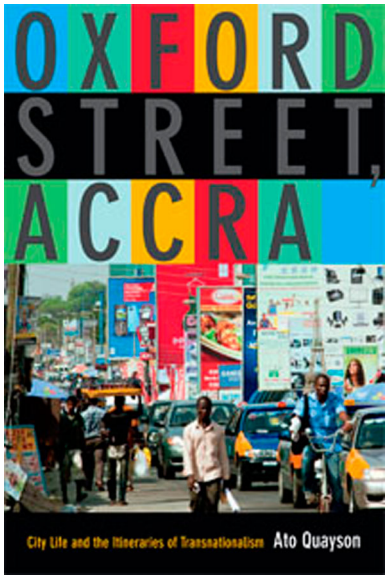
Equally, each of these works demonstrates the extent to which an area studies focus or geographically rooted expertise is in no way a rejection of the transnational or the cosmopolitan. Rather, each study shows the ways in which specific places, locales and regions become intertwined with – both as altered by and productive of – globalisms more broadly.



Oxford Street, as a long section of Cantonments Road is colloquially known, is the social and commercial hub of Accra's Osu district and the subject of Ato Quayson's *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and Itineraries of the Transnational*. Depending on one's perspective, the decision to focus solely on one segment of one street in one city in order to develop larger readings of transnationalism, globalisation and the production of culture in contemporary Africa is either inspired or doomed before it starts. Happily, for readers of *Oxford Street*, it is the former which reigns in this case. Quayson describes his intentions in writing this book as follows:

> I hope to trace the history of this lively commercial district and to link it to different spatial ecologies that were generated by colonial and postindependence town and urban planning for the city, alongside the transformations that have been wrought by the processes of transnationalism and globalization. (4)

In meeting this aim, Quayson draws upon extensive archival research, carried out over the course of several years, intermingled with ethnographic fieldwork, semiotic analyses of the ephemera of city life, psychogeographical explorations and literary critical readings in order to produce what is sure to be a foundational text in the study of postcolonial space and urban geography. *Oxford Street* is in many ways a highly personal work of criticism; as Quayson describes it, his desire to engage in the work that would become the book began from a sense of anxiety about his own relationship to the street and the vision of contemporary African life that it forges. A native of Accra now resident in North America, Quayson's position in this regard is instructive, allowing for a sense of intimacy with a subject matter that nonetheless maintains a certain critical distance. Throughout his case studies and reflections, Quayson remains frank about his own role, considering his personal discoveries in a familiar city and introducing the reader to the world of Oxford Street through a range of often-unexpected perspectives. Quayson's work is clearly influenced by what has been termed the 'spatial turn' in postcolonial studies, exemplified in works including Sara Upstone and Andrew Teverson's edited volume, *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture*. Grounded in the Marxian spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey, amongst others, Quayson's framework for analysis foregrounds the productive role of space, as neither passive container nor mere backdrop for action, in the configuration of social life and the sociality. Both regulatory and creative, urban space functions through a dual aspect, its material realities undergirding its administrative mechanisms in myriad ways which are consistently shown throughout *Oxford Street*'s pages.

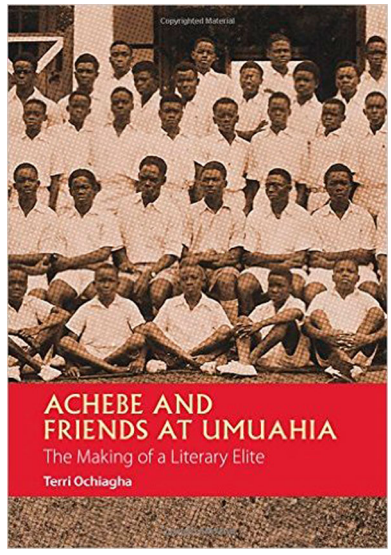
The study begins with a comprehensive introduction to the precepts of spatial theory outlined above, weaving through personal reflections on the changing and often-incongruous space of Oxford Street and dense theoretical concepts derived from human geography. For the purely literary scholar, this opening gambit may prove alienating. It is, however, precisely this material – and indeed, materialist – setting of terms which lends *Oxford Street* its originality and its interest as an academic study. Though largely known as a literary critic, Quayson, in this work, is not afraid to expand his horizons of inquiry, examining in turn a bewildering array of subjects spanning mobile phone adverts and salsa dancing; gym culture and late colonial land tenure policy; Euro-African relations and trotro slogans; and more. A clue to this dizzying range of reference is provided in *Oxford Street*'s opening tour, where Quayson highlights the recurrent tropes of improvisation and multiplicity that define everyday life on the street. Juxtaposing informal traders with high-end retailers, multinationals with cultural institutions, Oxford Street encapsulates the often-contradictory but always-performative imperatives of (post)colonial space, producing a terrain which is continually re-written and revised by the surprising and unscripted uses to which it is put by its denizens. In a similar manner, too, unfurls *Oxford Street* itself, joining together a broad historical view of the street and city with a range of seemingly incongruent case studies which put Quayson's theoretical frameworks into action.

Oxford Street is organised in two parts, 'Horizontal Archaeologies' and 'Morphologies of Everyday Life'. Where the first half is largely historical in its perspective, developing a comprehensive reading of the socio-spatial shifts which have made

Oxford Street and its Osu district what they are today, the second half is more firmly rooted in the present day, putting theory into action through a range of case studies. Of particular interest in the first section of the book is a chapter on the Tabon of Accra. Irrespective of over 150 years of settlement and cultural hybridity – a process of becoming and maintaining – the Tabon, an Afro-Brazilian group, retain a collective identity which sets them apart from the dominant Ga, despite their superficial absorption by the latter. Exemplifying the distinction between the forms of multi-ethnicity fostered under imperial rule and a multiculturalism still frustrated in the wake of independence, the case of the Tabon and Ga illustrates the complexities through which, by migration, assimilation and difference, varying waves of collectivities enter, shape and become African. Through this case study, Quayson develops a nuanced reading of the inherent heterogeneity of African identities and cultural practices, a message which is driven across the study as he demonstrates how 'the heady transnationalism and globalization of [the Osu district] has [had] long and tangled roots and is not just the magical product of the late twentieth-century' as critics of globalisation may attempt to claim (125).

The second half of *Oxford Street*, as its heading suggests, narrows in to focus upon specific subsets of city life in the district. Youth culture takes a centre position here, with long chapters devoted to Accra's vibrant salsa dancing scene and its subculture of 'gymmers'. There is much of interest here, particularly in the range of interviews with key participants in each scene, which enlivens what might otherwise feel like somewhat stale reflections of an older generation upon the youth of today. If there is one criticism to be made of these chapters, indeed, it is that of a potential myopia around the transnational circulation of cultural norms amongst younger people. In this context, the general absence of mention of the internet in Quayson's explorations is instructive, lending a sense of insularity to its insights. Yet, these potential detractions are more than made up for by the nuance with which Quayson treats his subjects and the extent to which his long-term observations of these subcultures lends itself to a certain depth of humanity. Perhaps what is most insightful about these chapters is how they allow Quayson to introduce the notion of free time on which the study ends, a phenomenon which is described as distinctively African and discrete from the bourgeois notion of leisure time. For Quayson, free time functions in a relationship with 'the necessity for recycling or reinvention of the self that is in inescapable product of the informal economy' in which many of Accra's youth function (245). The product of an 'incoherent economy', free time is engendered by the impossibility of giving a single, authoritative account of oneself, the phenomenological dimension of an economic situation amplified under twenty-first-century globalisation. And yet, free time is also the site of potential, clearing out the space for the possibility of mobilisation and the possibility of alternative futures.

Where Quayson ends his study in this moment of the future anterior, Terri Ochiagha's *Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite*, turns its gaze wholly to the past. Part work of literary criticism and part cultural history, *Achebe and Friends* centres on Government College, Umuahia, in the decades of the 1930s, '40s and '50s, a period in which the College served as host to a number of students who would go on to become pioneers of Anglophone African writing — Achebe, naturally, but also Elechi Amadi, Chike Momah, Chukwuemeka Ike, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara, Ken Saro-Wiwa and I N C Aniebo, amongst others. What, Ochiagha asks, could possibly account for the incredible creative fertility of the College during this period? What lines of influence and networks of correspondence emerged among and across these writers in their most formative educational years and how did these coalesce in this singular place? In answering these questions, Ochiagha demonstrates the deft sensitivity of an experienced archival historian, drawing equally on documentary evidence from the College's archives and personal reminiscences through author interviews, along with readings of rarely seen juvenilia as well as mature texts by the core authors. By maintaining a broad view on the institution as the locus of investigation, *Achebe and Friends* sheds light on the complicated and often agonistic processes of creative development and emancipatory thinking which characterised the late colonial era while simultaneously shedding new light on the grand founding myths of Nigerian literature.



The early chapters of the study set the context in which this first generation of literary pioneers developed, tracing the history, mission and curricular preoccupations of the College from the interwar years to the wake of World War Two in the larger context of late colonial education. Drawing on Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, these chapters deftly

explicate the intricate connections formed across socio-cultural, political and economic objectives in the colonial context. Describing the tension at the heart of colonial education – both a necessity for the development of colonised regions and a threat in its potential to foster anti-colonial sentiment – *Achebe and Friends* traces the slow emergence of a literary sensibility in these centres of learning. While the majority of the book's first half focuses on the vibrant magazine culture which arose at Government College, as well as the role of mandated reading periods in the development of a critical consciousness amongst its students, it also explores the importance of extracurricular inculcation on the development of Nigeria's first generation of writers in a chapter on cricket, no doubt indebted to C L R James. The extent of archival research which informs Ochiagha's project is commendable, as is the level of access which she attains with respect to her primary authors. Yet, there is something slightly disappointing about the ultimate realisation of *Achebe and Friends*. Despite its exciting archival and historical promise in investigating the particular confluence of factors which made Government College what it was, the study too often falls back into well-trodden postcolonial orthodoxies of hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence in its explanatory conclusions. This becomes most evident in its final four chapters, as Ochiagha shifts gear from a broad view of the college, as space of tradition, invention and negotiation, to the particular force of its legacies in the literary output of its students. Readings of the later writing of Ike, Momah and Okigbo, in particular, seem to fall into a normative pattern of colonial inculcation, mimicry and opposition leading to mental decolonisation via the development of hybrid cultural visions. While there is nothing inherently problematic about Ochiagha's individual readings, their collective force nonetheless feels somewhat less than what has been promised, with the originality, complexity and material focus of the early chapters retreating into convention. This is not to say that *Achebe and Friends* is not a fine work of academic criticism; it certainly is. Yet, its strength lies primarily in its depth and force as a work of cultural history rather than its insights as a work of literary criticism.

Daria Tunca's *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction* is something of an outlier in the context of this review essay. Unlike Quayson and Ochiagha, there is no evidence of archival research in Tunca's work; more pertinently, of the three books, *Stylistic Approaches* is by far the most literary in its aims and scope. That this is so is perhaps ironic, given that the study's focus stems from a linguistic, rather than literary critical, tradition. Yet, this is no aberration, and it is precisely through this focus on the linguistic that the more specifically literary insights of the study are borne. As Tunca argues in her first chapter on 'African stylistics', a linguistically oriented approach to Nigerian literature intervenes in critical debates and destabilises critical orthodoxies through a plethora of forms. Situating her study in a larger context of anxiety around language and literariness in African literatures, Tunca convincingly argues that the very focus on the 'literariness' of language fostered by stylistic approaches might serve as a redress to the long-lamented anthropological fallacy in criticism of African writing. Rather than set stylistic criticism in opposition to traditional forms of literary criticism, *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction* deftly demonstrates the ways in which linguistic analysis might lend a complementary – and at times refreshingly empirical – facet to close reading and culturally oriented studies of the text. As Tunca argues, stylistic approaches do not have 'an inherent superiority over non-linguistic methods'; rather, the stylistic method fosters 'a "tool-kit" approach, which encourages readers to pay systematic attention to specific aspects of texts' (21). In an era in which readings of African literatures – even those most sensitive of readings – all too frequently neglect the text's role as an aesthetic artefact, this approach serves as a welcome change in perspective, demanding an attentiveness to the intricacies of language which too often risks erasure under a form of sociopolitical overdetermination.

Throughout its chapters, *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction* demonstrates its own methods through a series of focused readings of texts by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ben Okri, Chris Abani and Uzodinma Iweala. Moving through conceptual metaphor, the cognitive linguistic notion of mindstyle, schema theory and more, the study serves as an accessible introduction both to the notion of a linguistically oriented criticism and to Nigerian literature, as a form of area studies, engaging with the social, political and historical particularity of that territory. Tunca's readings of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are particularly convincing in demonstrating the underlying ideological landscape of each text and the subtle, if crucial, evolutions which occur within. Stylistic analyses of African and postcolonial fiction have become more commonplace in recent years, and Tunca's use of concepts like systemic functional grammar and transitivity are instructive for students and scholars wishing to pursue this line of criticism. Equally important is Tunca's ability to put her linguistic expertise to use in unravelling some of the common misconceptions around language, particularly the use of 'rotten' or 'pigdin' English, in Nigerian literature. In a chapter titled 'Children at War: Language and Representation in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Chris Abani's *Song for Night*', for instance, Tunca is able to deploy a linguistically rigorous method to unpack the concept of linguistic inaccuracy in terms which highlight its

socio-aesthetic objectives rather than any supposed vernacular authenticity. It is precisely this sort of expertise which, along with Quayson's and Ochiagha's, demonstrates the importance of an area studies inflected methodology in opening new avenues for a nuanced, sensitive and specified reading of the postcolonial today.

Chris Campbell

Caribbean Globalizations, 1492 to the Present Day

Eva Sansavior and Richard Scholar, ed

Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2015, *hb*
218pp ISBN 1 7813 8151 9 £75.00
www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk

Cannibal Writes: Eating Others in Caribbean and Indian Ocean Women's Writing

Njeri Githire

University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2014, *hb*
256pp ISBN 0 2520 3878 5 $55.00
www.press.illinois.edu

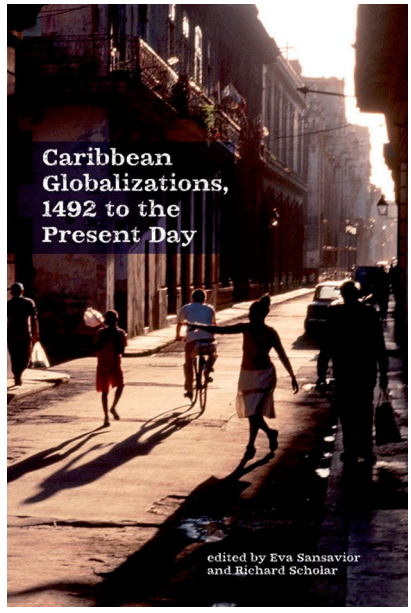
The Martinican author Édouard Glissant, in his seminal collection *Poetics of Relation*, characterises the Caribbean Sea thus:

> This has always been a place of encounter and connivance […]. Compared to the Mediterranean, which is an inner sea surrounded by lands, a sea that concentrates […], the Caribbean is, in contrast, a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. (1997: 33)

For Glissant, then, the Caribbean Sea is best understood as historically a centrifugal space — one that discharges outwards and connects far and wide. His emphatic metaphor of explosion calls out not only to the originary violence that engendered the modern Caribbean but also works to situate the region at the centre of world history and as pivotal to contemporary cultural understandings of globalisation.

Sansavior and Scholar's and Njeri Githire's studies mark two important scholarly contributions to recent understandings of the regionally specific 'globalism' to which Glissant had gestured. Indeed, Glissant, principally through his notion of 'globality' (*mondialité*), serves as something of an animating force for both books which offer differently inflected pan-Caribbean perspectives that move us profitably beyond an area studies model of cultural inquiry without sacrificing historical specificity. The collection *Caribbean Globalizations* offers a broad interdisciplinary approach, bringing together critics from different language areas and fields of scholarship in fruitful dialogue over the historical sweep of globalising forces constituting Caribbean reality since 1492. The monograph, *Cannibal Writes*, provides for readers a fine-grained comparative analysis of texts from the Caribbean and Indian Ocean islands read through the lens of metaphors and modes of consumption and rejection — bodily, gendered and political.

Caribbean Globalizations divides its essays into two sections – 'Globalizations in the Making' and 'The Complex Present' – which combine to explain how 'a region of apparently little importance in global geopolitical terms today' can rightly be considered the 'laboratory of globalization' (21). Starting with a lyrically powerful call-to-arms by Patrick Chamoiseau, it offers a range of significant contributions from eminent scholars in the fields of history, sociology, geography and literary studies, but is, moreover, strong across the board with all chapters contributing to a book which is field-defining in its analytical depth and scope. While the editors are correct to point out that they envisaged staging a 'resolutely

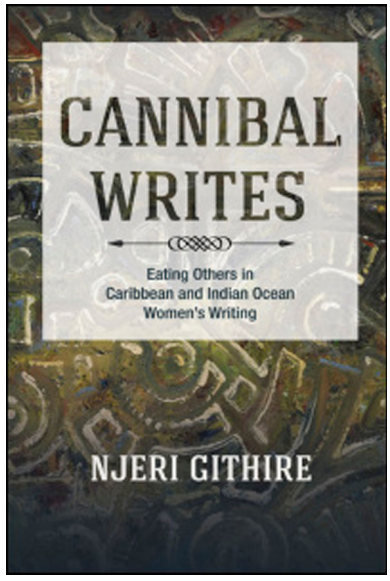


pluralist' conversation and have eschewed the imposition of an editorial line, there are multiple threads here that tightly draw together the divergent focus of many of the essays. The cultural politics of the Amaranth crop (Misrahi-Barak) connects readily with a perceptive articulation of the mutually constitutive formation of 'race' and 'modernity' in the Dominican Republic (Howard) and with consideration of Caribbean apocalyptic discourse and pernicious forms of economic development (Munro) to offer a multi-vocal but coherent view on the long course of 'globality' in the region. There is, too, a noteworthy subplot, which draws out a discussion of literary form across the collection. The close reading of Montaigne and Maryse Condé focusing on the particular qualities of the essay as mode of cultural production (Sansavior) resonates clearly with Charles Forsdick's careful consideration and re-assessment of Glissant's later career and the manifesto as an important literary form.

However, the collection really turns around the key axis of the notion of the production of commodities for global trade. The Caribbean region, integral to the rise of capitalist modernity, has been, since 1492, cross-cut by an extensive network of

commodity frontiers which have served to radically re-shape its peoples and environments — we might think most obviously of the role of sugar and plantation monocultures, but equally of zones of mineral extraction across the Caribbean basin. That Sansavior and Scholar grasp this multi-faceted and formative aspect of Caribbean reality and provide space for erudite considerations of several of these key commodities is especially valuable. Of particular importance here is Patricia Seed's examination of gold mining and the way the region's forcible integration into the world-economy went hand-in-hand with the emergence of systems of racial categorisation of indigenous people. Further, she argues, such imperial expropriation and epistemological violence was foundational in establishing the theory of market value. In a similar vein, Guillaume Pigeard de Gurbert offers a perceptive and elegant reading of the commodification of the region through the tobacco crop, linking a long history of cultivation to the mechanisms of neoliberal power in the contemporary world. Mimi Sheller's cutting edge work on bauxite mining and her analysis of the aluminium commodity chain takes in issues of class-formation, labour migration, economic underdevelopment and ecological degradation as she throws light on wider notions of Caribbean 'mobilities' and the inherent unevenness of processes of globalisation.

In this respect, despite the judicious introductory statement foregoing a 'top down' editorial line, it seems to me that through its composite parts the collection does indeed take up a position that moves beyond merely a conversation on different understandings of gobalisation — and it is none the weaker for that. What emerges is a clear commitment to tracing, across disciplinary boundaries, the structural inequalities engendered by global capitalism, and the multiplicity of ways in which these have been manifested, experienced and resisted over the long dureé.



The processes of cash-crop food production and the images of consuming that feature throughout *Caribbean Globalizations* are pulled into fuller focus in Njeri Githire's *Cannibal Writes*: a rigorous and expansive study, which offers highly sophisticated analyses of a range of literary texts. It elucidates how texts have reworked and deployed conceptions of the phagic and the emetic — and how they paradoxically engage with and then challenge these notions as ways of mapping a history of imperialism across Caribbean and Indian Ocean islands. Starting with the conception of *creolité*, Githire's book explodes outwards from the Caribbean attending to how islands such as Reunion and Mauritius have been subjected to similar yet specific (neo) colonial pressures, and exploring how writers have worked these through by marshalling the metaphors of cannibalism and bodily ingestions/ rejections. Githire guides us skilfully through nuanced readings of works by Andrea Levy, Maryse Condé, Edwidge Danticat, Gisèle Pineau, Lindsey Collen and Jamaica Kincaid (amongst others) as the book moves across francophone and anglophone registers. In this way, it strikes up an illuminating dialogue with another recent study, Valérie Loichot's excellent *Tropics Bite Back* (2013), which also takes as its focus the 'mouth-works' of Caribbean literature. Githire's contribution to this conversation is highly engaging, transgressing not just linguistic boundaries but also oceanic ones. In gesturing out to global linkages (both convergences and divergences) *Cannibal Writes* offers a new and welcome comparative focus.

Particularly effective here are the subtle associations which are mapped out in a multi-scalar approach — working from the somatic to the archipelagic, the study provides searching explorations of literary registrations of gendered and racialised forms of dominance, and highlights the organising metaphors and formal considerations that can both enable and resist oppressive practices. Extensively researched, expertly contexualised and carefully argued this book easily succeeds and certainly surpasses its ambition of bringing together 'select texts in ways that open up new research directions' (201). Rather, it marks a highly significant volume for scholars of Caribbean, 'global' and comparative literatures alike.

With Glissant's explosive sea signalling the Caribbean as a key locus for thinking through paradigms of globalisation, these two books follow that lead, providing excellent examples of new scholarship that reaches beyond boundaries of discipline and region to offer finessed and articulate examinations of how notions of commodification and consumption illuminate historical and contemporary circuits of global power.

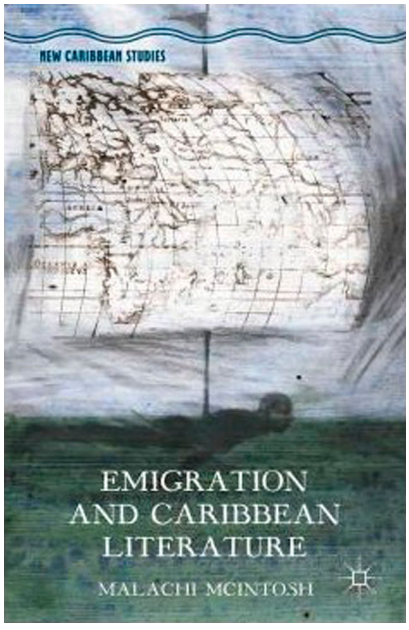
Janelle Rodriques

Emigration and Caribbean Literature

Malachi McIntosh

Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, *hb*
244pp ISBN 1 1375 5589 2 £58.00
www.palgrave.com

Malachi McIntosh's *Emigration and Caribbean Literature* builds on established discourses surrounding



the 'pioneering authors' of the former British West Indian tradition, and compares these with the experiences, aesthetics, politics and writing of post-war authors from the French-speaking Caribbean who have, in turn, defined the Francophone Caribbean canon. These literary traditions are not always in conversation – given, among other things, barriers of language – but McIntosh bridges this divide through his exploration of these authors' common experiences of emigration. He argues that the 'necessity of escape from stifling island homes' (139), experienced by all of these authors, transcended their divergent languages, locations and career paths to significantly shape their fiction.

This monograph takes as its primary material the early, post-migration works of Mayotte Capécia, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, George Lamming, V S Naipaul and Samuel Selvon, and reads these works as products of these authors' shared status as émigrés. While these writers have traditionally been seen as straightforward representatives of 'their people', McIntosh applies Gramsci's theory of the organic intellectual, Bourdieu's theories of habitus and literary fields and Casanova's theory of symbolic capital to complicate these assumptions of 'authenticity', and of proximity to the reality of Caribbean life 'as it really was'. McIntosh mixes close reading with a more archival approach, to consider the politics of presentation and self-representation inherent in the production of the Caribbean as an 'exotic' literary-cultural trope, for largely metropolitan consumption. He demonstrates the ways in which these authors positioned themselves, and were in turn positioned, by publishers, agents and patrons as spokespeople for their respective colonies, highlighting that, even as they were called upon to represent it, many of these writers had strained relationships with a 'home' that was changing as quickly as they were. In focusing on Caribbean intellectual flight, many of these works fetishised the migrant intellectual figure, while underplaying both the privilege of their position as detached observers and their less than complimentary relationships with the 'masses' they left behind.

Success, for migrant intellectual writers, was predicated on the perceived veracity of their portrayals of Caribbean life — otherwise known as their 'local colour'. Simultaneously, they had to prove themselves different-but-not-too-different from their metropolitan readership. These 'conceptual loci', as McIntosh calls 'figurative site[s] in time and mind from which these writers saw their world' (14), were constrained by their own elitism, as well as the demands of their patrons and publishers. Upon arrival in the post-war European metropole, Caribbean émigrés, confronted with the lack of an established collective identity and profound ignorance of the West Indies among Europeans, found themselves reconsidering their own self-conceptions, as well as their relationships with their respective islands. Authors *had* to address Caribbean identity, but, because of the cultural deracination engendered even before their physical migration, could only provide answers that betrayed their own isolation and alienation, and undermined their claims of 'realistic portrayal'. McIntosh re-reads these early works not as careful recollections of West Indian life, but as testaments to the privilege, yet impoverishment, of the seeing middle-class intellectual.

While *Emigration and Caribbean Literature* makes much of the similarities among these emigrant authors, a key difference between the Anglophone writers and their Francophone counterparts, which McIntosh emphasises, is that the British West Indian writers were part of a mass migration of 'subjects', while the French writers were considered '*évolués*' who, under French colonialism, were taught to see themselves as fellow Frenchmen. Both types of writers experienced severe culture shock upon arrival in the metropole, but while the 'French' authors were conscious intellectuals who were forced to reinvent themselves, their English-speaking counterparts came of age in their new, unfamiliar, social positions. As a result the Francophone authors, McIntosh suggests, produced works that were even more fraught with the contradictions between 'assertions of kinship with Africa, the Caribbean and France; works where the Caribbean, though always centre frame, is nonetheless explicitly criticised in terms that recall the writings of continental intellectuals' (113). The French authors, in short, appear more conflicted between allegiance to European aesthetic and social paradigms, and identification with the culture(s) of their island homes.

For the bulk of his close reading, McIntosh compares Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Naipaul's *Miguel Street* (1959) and Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* (1952) and *An Island is a World* (1955). He demonstrates how these texts, and their authors, are vying for dominance within their field, a dominance centred on closeness (or not) to 'the people'. Taking these authors' own declarations of themselves and their work, McIntosh concludes that none of them, at this stage in their careers, explicitly aimed to represent emigration or emigrants.

However, although productions are always influenced by their environments, it cannot be determined with certainty that these authors were not actively invested in privileging their own positions as marginalised, yet particularly sensitive, migrant observers.

Next, McIntosh reads Cesaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), Glissant's *La Lézarde* (1958) and Capécia's *Je Suis Martiniquaise* (1948). Comparing these works, which are not traditionally placed together, closes some of the gaps among their respective critical receptions and situates them, and their authors, within the unique history of French Caribbean intellectualism. As responses to France's obsession with assumed differences between blacks and whites (107), these works display an overdetermined relationship with (and search for) Africa, which is characterised by the same misrepresentations featured in metropolitan writing at the time. In addition, these characters' searches for self are more explicitly expressed in tropes of flight, exile and exploration.

Whether French- or English-speaking, all of these emigrant authors' compulsions to flee were coupled with 'a conflicted superiority over those they left behind, and an attraction-repulsion to the place left and the place where they arrived' (91). They were at once insiders and outsiders, for whom the metropole was the gateway to their establishment as writers, through their positioning as 'voices of the people'. Yet the 'masses' they represent are indistinguishable as individuals, while the emigrant narrator is vaunted, simultaneously, for his insight and lack of sight. Capécia provides an important exception to this rule, however — one that could be explored in further detail. The fictional Mayotte is far from a heroine, and distinctly does not assert herself as a uniquely omniscient saviour charged with speaking for any imagined nation or people. For Capécia as well as Selvon, migration is an ambivalent process, one whose promise is often frustrated by their insurmountable lack of power.

Despite their differences, all of these texts feature narrators who *must* detach themselves from their homes in order to fulfil themselves — and whose language conflicts with or erases the very homes from which they derive this identity they seek to find. Their privileged perspectives are deeply equivocal, and McIntosh himself positions this uncertainty as essential to the construction of the Caribbean Migrant, a figure who must constantly renegotiate his or her feelings about 'home', and about self.

Keith Jardim

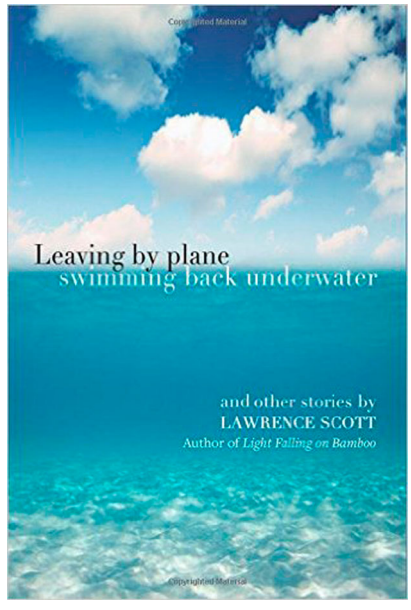
Leaving by Plane Swimming Back Underwater and Other Stories

Lawrence Scott

Papillote Press, London and Trafalgar, Dominica, 2015, *pb*
195pp ISBN 0 9571 1878 2 £9.99
www.papillotepress.co.uk

This collection of fifteen stories is Lawrence Scott's second, and his sixth published book-length work of fiction. Scott's favourite themes – religion, politics and sexuality – are woven throughout. His first collection and second book, the much-lauded *Ballad for the New World*, gave us a writer earnestly committed to the short story form (which, thankfully, is still very evident here, 'A 1930s Tale: Coco's Last Christmas', 'Faith's Pilgrimage' and 'Tales Told under the San Fernando Hill' being among the highlights); and that book, including Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw's *Four Taxis Facing North*, Raymond Ramcharitar's *The Island Quintet* and, recently, Sharon Millar's *The Whale House and Other Stories*, are easily among the best first story-collections to appear in the English-speaking Caribbean in a long while, certainly since Olive Senior's excellent *Summer Lightning*, Earl Lovelace's unforgettable *A Brief Conversion* and Pauline Melville's mesmeric *Shape-shifter*.

Scott adjusts the lens in his latest book, revealing the cultural atavism of contemporary Trinidad, where the sea breeze is scented with rotting flesh. But let me put the stench of Trinidad on hold for a bit. The first story, 'A Little Something', is classic Scott. Two Trinidadian men meet on a London street. One, the narrator, has a more fortunate background than the other, Jai, who is washing a car when they meet. These two are exactly the sort of people who have to travel beyond Trinidad in order to connect as human beings. In Trinidad, near Penal, this connection could not have happened, the story suggests. But their expatriate status washes away much of the class/cultural restraints of the island. The men talk, they learn about one another, reflect cautiously on the island's history, the history of cane; and they learn that they lived not far from one another on the island, just as in London. It is a familiar theme in Caribbean literature in English, and Scott knows it, and so the story succeeds – beautifully so – because of an unexpected and, for this reader, most welcome move at the end. Jai and the narrator interact in an important way, facing the past, not shying away from it: 'I felt that Jai and



I could go on like this. But I wondered what we were skirting around, what was it we were not talking about?' They do talk. And yes, there is nostalgia, and also regret. But they *connect* — as understanding, seeing beings. The end is a masterly composed light touch, memorably sad. No more sweet, Trini paradise of people meeting abroad and trying to outdo each other in their devotion to the island of their origin: *Who more Trini to de bone? Who could out wine who? Bitch, t'row yuh waist an lemme see sumting!* The story goes nowhere near that repetitive cliché, amusing as it often is (and not).

'A Dog Is Buried' is strong, dark, tropic-gothic to the core and mysteriously atmospheric. Think Poe and Bowles — and Naipaul unwound. The narrator arrives in Trinidad late at night, accompanied only by a too quiet, too helpful taxi driver. The prose is well modulated, the story well paced and you really feel the lurking horror:

> Who would cut a dog's throat? I stepped over the corpse into the kitchen and turned on the light. The illumination lit up the dead thing in all its wondrous, enigmatic horror. As I stepped over it, I almost felt irreverent now, like crossing over the corpse of a person. I went into the house turning on lights and opening doors with my bunch of keys. Nothing appeared to be disturbed, but the house smelt musty, with mildew, dust and cobwebs and the furniture was sticky with the residue of sea blast. (11)

Consider our narrator, a version of the one from the first story, if you like: he said he was returning, and he has. So the collection as a whole convincingly produces another work, a sixteenth, due to each of the fifteen stories enhancing each other. 'A Dog Is Buried' is about a man grappling with his personal and historic past, during an extremely unsettling night. It is very much a story of Trinidad now, with the rotting dead-dog stink like the stench of history, but it is not just that which makes it intriguing: you have to read it carefully, for Scott makes bold moves in plot and structure.

The stories span Trinidad, England and even Sweden's landscape appears in the strange and beguiling 'The Last Glimpse of the Sun'. 'That Touch of Blue' is gorgeous, its prose superb, and the play between Trinidad and English countryside exquisite. It is a short-short story almost (one of two in the collection) and the closest to poetry than any story in the book. And the confession on religion by the narrator, 'I am no believer, but the old myths can still settle upon the landscape and open the mind to reflection on the mystery of life' is one of the dominant credos of the book.

In 'Mercy', yet another really strong piece, Jonathan returns home from playing, and cannot find his mother, she is too busy fussing and worrying about the devil in the yard fighting with her husband. The old maid, Mercy, with her two unbendable legs, is the true saviour when Jonathan has an accident — indirectly a result of his mother being too distracted by the devil fighting with her husband. I admire the subtle broadside religion receives in this story. Only in literature, these days, does there seem to be genuine justice.

Other finely accomplished stories, 'Prophet', 'The Penalty of Death', 'Leaving by Plane Swimming Back Underwater' (it should be mandatory reading throughout the Caribbean, especially in high schools), 'Ash on Guavas' and the marvellous 'The Wedding Photograph', which closes the book, often show Trinidad and the wider Caribbean cast in a blue-bruised light alongside the region's history; an island now replete with brutality and corruption. But that history does not excuse the problems it has today. Scott subtly illustrates; he does not pardon the past criminal industries of slavery and indentureship in Trinidad, nor the failures of independence that have led to the island being recognised as an international criminal haven. The book shows, for this reader, that the forces of Caribbean atavism lie in our inability to care enough; and if we do, maybe we care about the wrong things, for reasons that, maybe too late now, are obvious for anyone who cares to read and see.

Madeline Clements

Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction: Beyond 9/11

Aroosa Kanwal

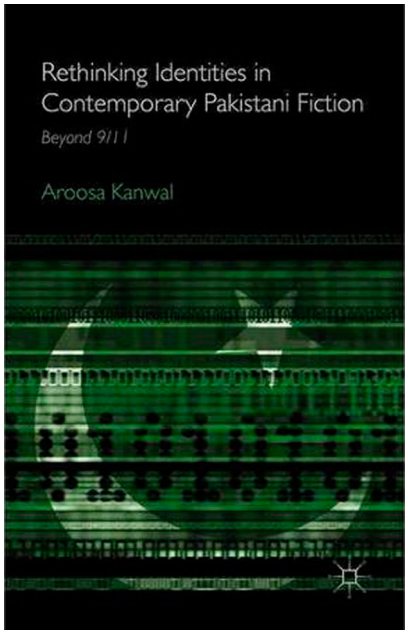
Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015, *hb*
223pp ISBN 1 1374 7843 5 £45.00
www.palgrave.com

Troubled Pilgrimage: Passage to Pakistan

Balwant Bhaneja

TSAR Publishing, Toronto, 2013, *pb*
140pp ISBN 1 9274 9426 4
$24.95CAD
www.mawenzihouse.com

Until quite recently, few book-length studies had been written on postcolonial Pakistani literature in English. Tariq Rahman's monograph *A History of Pakistani Literature in English 1947–1988,* originally published in 1990 and reissued in 2015 by Oxford University Press Pakistan, was the first to offer a historical and critical perspective. Since that time Cara Cilano's *Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English: Idea, Nation, State* (2013) has explored how a broad range of novels engage with historical events and developments, including India's Partition, Pakistan's 1971 war with Bangladesh, General Zia's military regime in the 1980s, and the 2001 attacks on New York, dwelling on the implications of literary representations for an imagined sense of 'collective belonging' (front pages).



Subsequent critics – David Waterman in *Where Worlds Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millennium* (2015), myself in *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective: Rushdie, Hamid, Aslam, Shamsie* (2015) and, crucially, Kanwal in *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction: Beyond 9/11* – have been preoccupied with the complex identificatory connections that late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Pakistani fiction maps, particularly in geopolitical contexts sensitive to Islamic affiliations. Given the focus of these new critical works, it is interesting to reflect for a moment on Rahman's frustration with the creative outputs of Anglophone writers in the years prior to 1990. He criticised Pakistani authors' seeming failure to produce literature in English which was less 'artificial' and more than 'pseudo-intellectual', and longed for the advent of an 'efflorescence' of 'politically sophisticated' work (Rahman 1990/2015: 288–90); now some critics might lament the fact that international readers are inundated with it, to the detriment of other types of story or modes of writing.

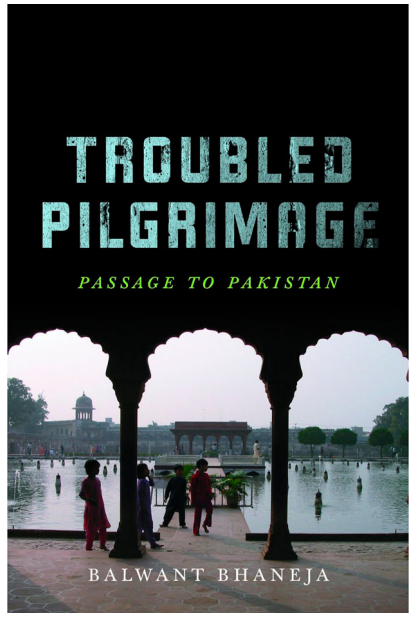
Aroosa Kanwal's *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction* is a rigorous and extensive enquiry into literary 'representations of and by Pakistani Muslims' published in English in the third millennium (1). However, what makes Kanwal's account particularly distinctive is her determination to emphasise how 'second-generation' novelists, such as Uzma Aslam Khan, Kamila Shamsie and Nadeem Aslam, respond to Western discourses which marginalise and stereotype Islam and Muslims by situating the 9/11 attacks, 'religion, extremism and US realpolitik', both in the diaspora and on the Indian subcontinent, in their intricate historical contexts (2).

To begin with, *Rethinking Identities* surveys the shifting themes with which novels produced by 'first-' and 'second-generation' writers of Pakistani origin have engaged in the post-1947 period. Kanwal uses narratives which reflect on Partition and the establishment and consolidation of the new Pakistani nation as an Islamic Republic to provide a grounding in earlier writers' preoccupations, for example with questions of religious affiliation, displacement, gender, history and patriarchy, discussing texts by Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri and Salman Rushdie. As she points out, a prevailing concern both in these earlier novels and in those of the generation that has followed, such as those by Mohammed Hanif and Ali Sethi, has been the Islamisation programme of General Zia.

This aspect of Pakistan's history remains significant, Kanwal argues, for the geopolitically engaged contemporary authors upon whose novels and non-fiction commentary she focuses in detail with a view to discerning how they 're-frame … Pakistani identities in the aftermath of 9/11' (7). For, as she shrewdly notes: 'indigenous contexts and national history can affect [the] diasporic communities' whose uncomfortable positions the fictions of Khan, Shamsie and Aslam map, as well as underpin the experiences of the characters these authors depict 'at home', in a Pakistan shaken by the 'repercussions of … September 11' (21).

Some readers might find Kanwal's overall approach to the fiction discussed in *Rethinking Identities* a little disconcerting — in making claims about what her book achieves she seems, rhetorically at least, to place her political/historical project (exposing how pre-9/11 events shape post-9/11 perceptions of Pakistani Muslims) and arguments above her literary case about the representational problematics with which the novels engage. As a 'consummate reader of both texts and theories' (Claire Chambers, back cover), Kanwal is also at times at risk of overloading the reader. Postcolonial and gender theorists such as Sara Ahmed (*Strange Encounters*), Arjun Appadurai (*Fear of Small Numbers*), Judith Butler (*Precarious Life*) and Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin (*Framing Muslims*) feature strongly; the ideas of others (for example Freud, Chomsky, Nussbaum, Brah) too numerous to detail here, are also brought rapidly to bear in her readings of transnational novelists' portrayals of Subcontinental, diasporic and global Pakistani Muslim identities.

Yet *Rethinking Identities*' variety is also refreshing as Kanwal grapples not just with 'big-name' authors but also with lesser-known texts which invite more sustained analysis. Brief discussions of how, in novels such as Feryal Ali Gauhar's *No Space for Further Burials* (2007), published in the same



year as Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 'the whole notion of "otherness" or "strangerness" crumbles' and an 'internal critique of US policy' is offered through the American protagonist's eyes (in stark contrast to Hamid's novel), may pique critical interest (63, 65). However, some of the most stimulating passages of Kanwal's book are where she offers a discerning critique of certain novelists' perspectives of aspects of Islam (such as *ahadith*) which, 'oversimplified' and 'decontextualised', may in fact 'contribute to an Islamophobic climate' (177–78). Such an awareness of how understandings of Islam can be reduced by contemporary Pakistani fiction in English, as well as expanded, is vital to a consideration of this literature's role in Muslim identities' global 'rethinking'.

Balwant Bhaneja's *Troubled Pilgrimage: Passage to Pakistan*, a gentle, reflective travel memoir presented to readers as an exilic Sindhi Hindu's 'search for his ancestral roots in post-911 Pakistan' (James Lonely: back cover), offers an interesting counterpoint both to Kanwal's political preoccupations in *Rethinking Identities*, and to the type of transnational Pakistani narrative fiction she marshals in her study.

Born in Lahore, raised in New Delhi and long-resident in Canada, Bhaneja is interested in questions of identity. He recalls at the start of his narrative the moment when, as a child living in Delhi in 1947, 'a sense of religious communal conscious began to shape in my mind, where others were Muslims and my folks … were Hindus' (3). Yet he also remarks on this being a time when refuge-seeking Sindhi relatives 'in the same breath would use the Hindu name Bhagwan and the Muslim name Allah for God' (13). This openness to experiences that might negate thinking in terms of stereotypes – 'of the two communities … hating each other' which living 'across the border' (whether in India or in Canada) may reinforce – informs Bhaneja's account of his return visit to Lahore, Islamabad, and Sukkur after the attacks of 9/11 (15).

One particular incident in *Troubled Pilgrimage* perhaps typifies Bhaneja's unobtrusive approach to exploring his rediscovered Pakistani birthplace. On visiting his father's hometown of Rohiri, predominantly Hindu in pre-Partition times, and being welcomed into a Hindu shopkeeper's family home, Bhaneja observes: 'there were many questions I wanted to raise about the politics of living as a minority but I resisted. This was not a journalist's trip, rather it was a journey about paying homage to my roots, my ancestors, and my parents. The day spent with the family had, in many ways answered most of the questions in my mind' (102). Recounted conversations from present-day Pakistan, as opposed to intrusive interrogation, may expose the potential for 'pluralism' and a commitment to 'find[ing] ways to prevent' intercommunal violence within communities (94, 100).

Bhaneja's memoir demonstrates how non-fictive literary accounts, when written with a consciousness of how 'national and religious prejudices' continue to inform interfaith encounters, can contribute to the post-9/11 dispelling of myths of Islamic intolerance to other religious identities in lands such as Pakistan (132).

Emma Bird

I Dreamt A Horse Fell From the Sky

Adil Jussawalla

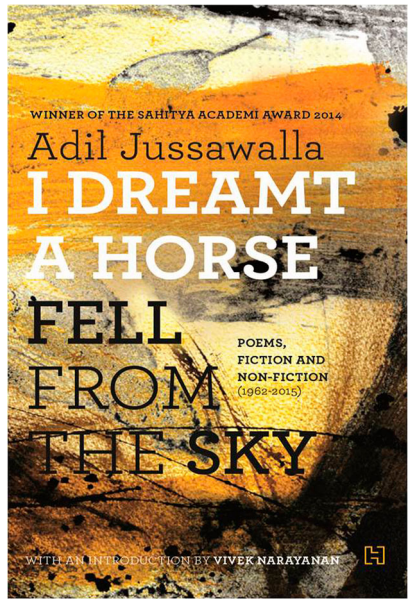
Hachette India, Delhi, 2015, *hb*
347pp ISBN 9 3500 9854 7 INR599/ USD$ 20.00
www.hachetteindia.com

The Way Things Were

Aatish Taseer

Picador, London, 2015, *hb*
565pp ISBN 1 4472 7245 8 £16.99
www.picador.com

In Vivek Narayanan's introduction to *I Dreamt A Horse Fell From the Sky* – a remarkable volume bringing together



selections from Adil Jussawalla's published and unpublished poetry, an unfinished novel, short pieces of fiction and a range of essays – he notes that Jussawalla was for a long time a marginal figure, well known within a relatively small literary circle: his writing was challenging and difficult to find, 'half-myth, half forgotten', while Jussawalla himself 'had always moved through Indian letters partly invisible' (xiii). In the last few years, however, critical interest in Jussawalla's work has grown, prompted in part by his recent publications of poetry, *Trying to Say Goodbye* (2011) and *The Right Kind of Dog* (2013), as well as a selection of essays, *Maps For A Mortal Moon* (2014). This latest book will appeal to even more new readers, as well as those long familiar with Jussawalla's distinctive writing.

The poems in *I Dreamt* span Jussawalla's entire career, and give an indication of the range of his formal style and critical interests. What marks all of Jussawalla's poetry, though, is the precision of its imagery and empathy of tone — its playfulness and wit, on the one hand, and its unflinching commitment to critique, on the other. Furthermore, he is concerned with articulating the ephemeral, the transient and with what the poet refers to as the 'things not in

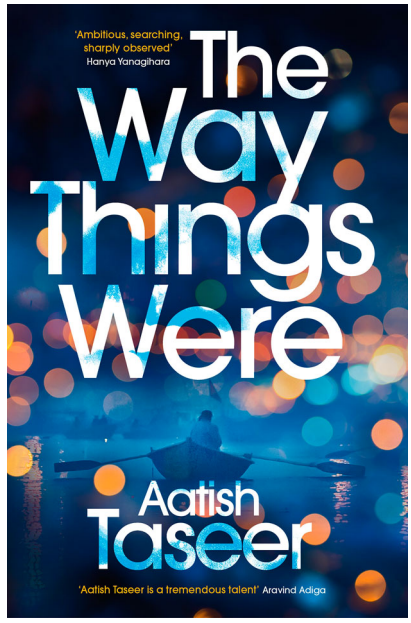
the picture' (50). The most recent poems explore boundaries and borders, horizons and shorelines, contemplating the precarious moment of passing through, across, or beyond them. Each scene or object is charged with the potential for movement or transformation: writing of kites discarded after a fight, Jussawalla likens them to 'nervous divers on the rim of wells' (8); elsewhere he notes that 'Sails on the horizon point to vanishing skytrails' (6); and after evoking various shorelines – 'buttressed with shanties' or 'decked out with sails' – the poet looks out beyond them, concluding with the expansive image of 'fjords and galaxies' (5).

The poems avoid sentimentality, but are profoundly moving: in 'Old Men On A Bench', Jussawalla evokes the smallest gestures that mark longstanding friendships and details the vulnerability of ageing: 'pressing another's hands should the need arise,/counseling patience, as though drawing up plans for a building/we're certain, one day, to share' (17). In the final lines, as the friends head home, their physical frailty is momentarily transcended: 'we imagined/we'd lift off the bench without effort/and sail home as steady as herons' (17).

Jussawalla's fiction shares the precision and compassion of his poems. In 'Strays', the unfinished novel begun in London in the 1960s, Jussawalla details the arrival of a young man in postwar London. The city is cold and strange, and is conjured up in intensely realised scenes of deserted streets, drab rented rooms and snippets of rock 'n' roll music heard through the walls. The vulnerability of this main character – a vulnerability shared by many figures in Jussawalla's work – is compounded by this claustrophobic setting, in which the smallest of details assumes unsettling undertones.

The essays cover a range of subjects, indicating the breadth of Jussawalla's interests — from gun crime in America to more personal subjects, including moving sketches of friends and a thoughtful essay on his father. Whatever his subject, Jussawalla typically focuses on its alternative trajectories, taking the reader in surprising new directions. 'Edifice', for instance, is a review of a temporary art exhibition held inside Bombay's Victoria Terminus in 1989. It opens, however, as Jussawalla contemplates the human cost of building the station: standing before the grand 'pinnacle of progress', he imagines the labour and suffering behind it, feeling 'The heat and the glare', recognising the danger of 'Hammer and chisel and the slipped stone crushing the foot', and chronicling the monotony of 'Daywork, nightwork', the 'Stonework, stonedust' (294). Inside, he forces the reader to face the uncomfortable contemporary reality of life in the city for its destitute, observing the 'future citizens of India' sliding along the floor on gunnysacks, the sex-workers making use of empty carriages, and the crowds of people in transit, bewildered on the platform (294).

Language, for Jussawalla, is elastic, capable of critique and revelation, critical inquiry and intimate understanding. It is also the source of much joy, and these essays give a sense of the pleasure Jussawalla takes in the creative act. 'Confessions of a Street-Writing Man' chronicles his 'casual reading' and various 'encounters with the literature of the street', reflecting on the snippets of print he has chanced upon (326). He takes 'delight' in the random acquisition of text from newspapers and advertisements: 'I read litter as an ancient Aztec might have read human entrails, and I read what literature litter brings me' (327). This somewhat whimsical tone cannot hide the truth of his words, for Jussawalla is a collector of words, a craftsman of language, for whom writing requires integrity and compassion, but also produces a deep sense of joy.



Language – and its distortions – is a major theme in Aatish Taseer's latest novel, *The Way Things Were*. Taseer has been heralded as one of the most promising young Indian writers, and this is his most historically and formally ambitious work, chronicling a momentous period in India's history from 1975 to the present.

The novel has two intertwined narratives. In the present, it tells the story of Skanda – a linguist and Sanskrit scholar based in New York – who returns to India after his father dies. Toby Ketu, a linguistics professor who passed on his passion for Sanskrit to his son, has been estranged from the country for years; his final wish, though, is for his body to be returned to India, so Skanda must return, confronting the troubled past of his family and of modern India. Skanda meets a young woman, and it is to Gauri that he narrates the parallel story of his parents' relationship — set against the Emergency, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992. The novel carefully explores the connections between the macro-level of these events and the micro-level of the family, tracing the repercussions of history on individual lives.

Taseer is an astute observer, with particular skill in depicting the social

microcosm of Delhi's high society. The novel also offers an insightful portrayal of the political and economic forces shaping contemporary India. Its presentation of Skanda's stepfather Maniraja is especially compelling: the bullish businessman epitomises the transformations of the country, and 'represented everything that is terrifying about this new axis between Temple and Corporation' (427).

The Way Things Were is a significant novel in terms of the issues it confronts, a timely book that challenges straightforward, feel-good narratives about contemporary India. However, it fails to draw the reader in, primarily because of its polemical tone and the stylised erudition of its characters. Toby and Skanda in particular often speak as though delivering a lecture; in their most intimate exchanges with Uma or Gauri, there is a tension between the setting of their conversation and the oratory tone of their address. The result is disconcerting for a reader, who is intrigued by this novel, interested in the critical space it opens up — but ultimately unmoved by the events as they unfold.

Sohomjit Ray

Sleeping on Jupiter

Anuradha Roy

Maclehose Press, London, 2015, *hb*
256pp ISBN 0 8570 5346 6 £16.99
www.maclehosepress.com

Consumable Texts in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology

Suman Gupta

Palgrave, London, 2015, *hb*
204pp ISBN 1 1374 8928 9 £58.00
www.palgrave.com

Sleeping on Jupiter is Anuradha Roy's third novel and has already garnered some considerable attention in the awards circuit. It was longlisted for the 2015 Man Booker prize, and won the 2016 DSC prize for South Asian literature. The setting is Jarmuli, a fictional pilgrimage town by the sea that will immediately remind the readers of Puri, especially when descriptions of a sun temple in a nearby town are added later in the narrative. Roy gathers an unlikely cast of characters whose lives come together for five days. The narrative follows Nomi Frederiksen, an orphan with a violent past who has come back from Oslo on a quest to find the place where she was abused as a child by a godman. Like all quests, Nomi's journey is really a sustained metaphor for self-discovery, but it is also a painful attempt at achieving closure. The other characters go in and out of focus as Nomi's story unfolds. There are three elderly women from Calcutta who end up being Nomi's travel companions on the train: the spiritual and forgetful Gouri; the practical retired bureaucrat Vidya; and the exuberant Latika. The old women find a temple guide in Badal, a devout young man who takes his vocation seriously. Badal nurses a secret passion for Raghu, a young boy who works at a tea stall by the beach run by a man who is given to singing melancholy tunes and is known locally as Johnny Topo. The last character of note is Suraj, who turns out to be Vidya's son and is part of the same documentary film crew as Nomi.

Memory is at the centre of Roy's novel; all the characters struggle with recovering it, recreating it, escaping it, or abandoning it. As if to remind us that what has been is truly inescapable, the narrative lurches back and forth between the present and the past. This is especially true for Nomi, whose life is narrated in snatches of dream-like flashbacks that are situated somewhere between reality and a child's imperfect impressionistic recollection of that reality which veers on the unreal. This would be a tall order for any writer to capture, but Roy's prose, which has

received much praise, is up to the task. This is a novel in which unexpected violence tears at the fabric of the humdrum and the ordinary, in which even beauty is steeped with a potential to bare its fangs at any time. Roy's prose is at its strongest when capturing this quality through her lyrical descriptions of nature. The following lines appear towards the very beginning, when we learn how Nomi is orphaned and ends up at the orphanage headed by the predatory godman:

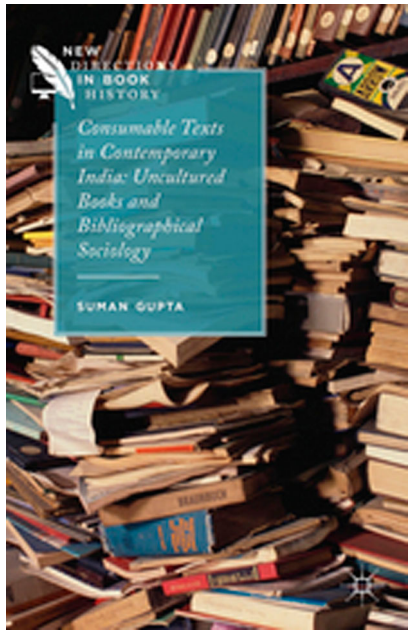
> The sun hung over the sea, looking as if it would fall into it anytime. The water was high, there was too much of it. Waves came like white-toothed monsters and bit off the sand. They came closer and closer. I kept looking at the place where my mother had stood with the man. (11)

This tone of fabular simplicity is earned at a high cost: none of the characters seem life-like, and there is little or no plot. A lack of plot or believable characters is not a problem in a novel that does not rely on these aspects, but this is not such a novel. The gradual unfolding of

coincidences that turn out to be thematic junctures of plot convergence build the expectation of clear answers which are then simply not offered. The violence is sometimes extraneous and spectacular, as in the brief episode of Suraj's outburst against a street dog. The ending feels abrupt and more than a little arbitrary.

In the last brief chapter of *Consumable Texts in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology*, in what is really a further explication of his methodology, Suman Gupta observes that 'bibliography as a mode of awareness of material and abstract processes, of economic and intellectual social environments, is a neglected aspect of all sociology' (175). Gupta aims to fill this gap, and the result is a breathtakingly original book history of what the author calls 'uncultured books', or books that often escape academic attention because they remain unseen by even cultural studies specialists. Gupta's archive consists of five specific kinds of English-language publications in India: commercial fiction, typified by the very popular books of Chetan Bhagat; English translations of vernacular pulp fiction, especially from Hindi; English translations of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*; group discussion guidebooks or *kunjis* that prepare jobseekers for a particular aspect of interviews in the public and private sectors; and the so-called 'value education' publications in the public sector that range from government policy documents, research volumes published by governmental bodies like the Archaeological Survey of India and Lalit Kala Akademy, school textbooks and National Council of Educational Research and Training and University Grants Commission policies among others.

Gupta's aim is not to undertake a textual study of his archive, but to read these books as 'social symptoms'. As he clarifies, the focus 'is on the *presence* of these books in



the contemporary Indian context – that is, their availability and readerships – to understand what that indicates about the social forces at work within that context' (14) (original emphasis). This kind of analysis requires a lot of explication and commentary on methodology, if only because this is untravelled terrain, and although Gupta's disdain for certain normative academic practices is made clear repeatedly in this brief volume, he takes up this very academic pursuit with an enthusiasm and eye for nuance that is nothing if not academic. At times, setting and explaining the terms of the conversation, or changing these terms to include hitherto unexplored possibilities become so important to Gupta that he freely admits to not having any concrete conclusions to offer (as at the end of the chapter on vernacular pulp fiction). Some conclusions, when offered, seem logically unsustainable, as in the chapter on commercial fiction when he claims that since this kind of fiction is 'unlinked to a regional place within India … they are simply expressions of India per se; their success symptomizes India as a whole; their authors embody their Indian identities over their regional identities by dint of writing in English' (32–33). I am sure there are more charitable explanations for this comment, but to any postcolonial literary scholar who works on South Asia this will sound suspiciously similar to the claim made by Salman Rushdie in 1997 that writers of Indo-Anglian fiction are producing stronger and more important work than those writing in the vernacular languages. If to be 'Indian' presupposes a systematic lack of any 'regional' characteristics, something that by definition is possible only in English, then we are in very problematic essentialist territory indeed.

However, this kind of logical faux pas are not at all indicative of the generally nuanced observations to be found in the book, specifically in the chapter on *Mein Kampf*. Gupta's reading of the reason for *Mein Kampf*'s popularity in India yields surprising results, as he explores the 'possibility that business and management studies [in India] might be encouraging a top-down dissociation of the leadership and management principles of the Nazi regime from [its] ideological vision' (69). This observation comes in order to explain its surprising popularity among Indian readers, something which Gupta says need not be because of an 'ideologically aware' reading of the text (64). But if this dissociation becomes or has become normative through motivated business models of pedagogy, the potential for reification to become representation is always present, especially given how openly sympathetic Hindu supremacy has been with fascist principles. This is the kind of astute analysis that resonates throughout this important book, and it is of interest to anyone concerned with neoliberalism, public culture, postcolonial literary and cultural studies, the politics of language and translation, and governmentality in the contemporary Indian context.

Ranka Primorac

The Book of Memory

Petina Gappah

Faber & Faber, London, 2015, *pb*
274pp ISBN 0 5712 4962 6 £7.99
www.faber.co.uk

Sweet Medicine

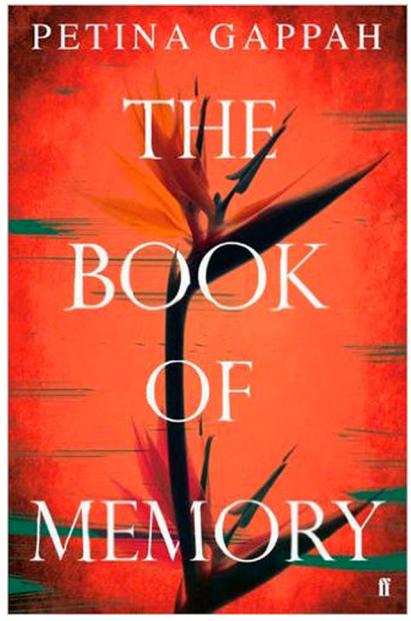
Panashe Chigumadzi

Blackbird Books, Johannesburg, 2015, *pb*
201pp ISBN 1 9283 3712 6 £4.00
www.jacana.co.za/blackbird-books

The very existence of Zimbabwe's literature in English is predicated on displacement. In the colonial era, a group of elite black male authors (among them Stanlake Samkange, Charles Mungoshi and Dambudzo Marechera) published their books outside the country in order to avoid state censorship. Today, the nature of the inside/outside dynamic has changed. Following the sharp economic downturn in the early years of this century (and as the nation's publishing sector went into a decline), large numbers of Zimbabweans left the country and settled all over the world — many of them in South Africa, the UK and North America. It is no accident that the current wave of up-and-coming Zimbabwean writers of fiction is made up mostly of diaspora-based authors. In the last decade, Brian Chikwava, Tendai Huchu, Novuyo Rosa Tshuma and NoViolet Bulawayo have all published critically acclaimed fictions about Zimbabwe-related lives. The year 2015 saw the publication of two additional noteworthy texts: *The Book of Memory* by Petina Gappah (currently based in Switzerland) and *Sweet Memory* by Panashe Chigumadzi, who lives in South Africa. These vibrant and memorable novels both engage with women's lives in the present-day, dollarised, ruling party-dominated Zimbabwe, plagued by all kinds of shortages. Gappah's narrator wryly remarks that it is a country with 'no doctors, no nurses, no teachers, no books, no democracy, no sense' (61). And yet, in both of these stories by and about women, new kinds of relationships and identities become imaginable.

Gappah's long-awaited novel follows her 2009 prize-winning collection of short stories, *An Elegy for Easterly*. The stories' knack for underscoring the bizarre and ludicrous, as well as poignant and tragic aspects of life in twenty-first-century Zimbabwe, recurs here. Memory, the novel's protagonist and narrator, has been sentenced to death for murder. She writes her life story from Harare's Chikurubi prison, for the benefit of an American journalist and in the hope of obtaining a retrial.

The Book of Memory aspires to a certain kind of post-modernist playfulness and self-reflexivity, and tells its readers so in no uncertain terms — partly via its title and the opening epigraph (a quote from Vladimir Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory*), and partly through references to its own construction and its preferred modes of reading. It is not – as the narrator repeatedly points out – a conventional, chronological life story, nor a prison movie, nor a self-help book, nor an adventure narrative. 'Take my friendship, such as it is, with [fellow prisoners] Jimmy and with Verity Gutu', Memory writes in a typical aside. 'It did not emerge from heroic exploits, as it would have done were my life a film' (88). Central to the novel's narrative backbone is the mystery of the crime for which Memory has been sentenced. But there are also other deaths and other secrets. All are interconnected, and their existence is communicated to readers via a series of analepses and prolepses — incomplete hints pointing at events yet to be fully explained. Memory, it finally turns out, has been writing her own life without possessing a reliable understanding of it. 'How do you begin your life again after you find out that everything you thought was true about



yourself is wrong?' (245), she asks in a late chapter, as the answers to the novel's pile-up of mysteries are finally revealed.

As a character, Memory is exceptional in several respects. She is an albino; that is to say, possessed of a ghostly mock-whiteness that has the capacity to interrogate local understandings of race. Her life trajectory spans social milieus often thought of as incompatible: at age nine, she moves from a township (a colonial-era black ghetto) to an elite, 'white' part of Harare under mysterious circumstances. As her story alternates between memories of her township childhood, descriptions of her life in prison and recollections of life in the white suburbs, Memory acquires a kind of social omniscience: her recollections defamiliarise and illuminate (often through witty, incisive anecdotes which are fast becoming Gappah's writerly trademark) the cultural logic of life in the Zimbabwean postcolony.

Ultimately, individual readers' final impressions of this ambitiously conceived novel may well depend on whether they enjoy its narrative strategy, and whether they find feasible a central figure that emerges in the novel's second half: the character of a saintly, self-sacrificing, fault-free white man who becomes (in

literary terms, yet again) the saviour of African lives.

Panashe Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine* resembles *The Book of Memory* in that it is also centred on a kind of rebirth. Tsitsi, *Sweet Medicine*'s heroine and main focaliser, resembles Memory in that she, too, passes swiftly from (relative) impoverishment to affluent life in an elite part of Harare. In this novel too, there is a central male figure on whom, in plot terms, everything depends. But Zvobgo, the object of Tsitsi's desire, could not be more different from Lloyd, Memory's mentor and substitute father. Zvobgo is a black Zimbabwean 'big man' — a ruling party Politbureau member whose traditional marriage to Tsitsi, his former secretary, has yet to be consecrated in church. The genre convention that this culturally and politically savvy first novel appropriates is that of chick lit. Tsitsi is an avid consumer (a newly-minted wearer of Ferragamo heels and a twelve-inch weave) with a bold and sassy best friend who advises on best ways to overcome a lovers' crisis and the kind of dress to wear to a party. Yet *Sweet Medicine* endows the narrative formula of a woman's quest for emotional and financial security with the capacity to probe received ideas of gendered identities and query the current workings of Zimbabwe's patriarchy. For this reader's taste, the novel's boldest textual and political move, which enables its hard-hitting social critique, is its choice of the 'love interest'.

Despite being a scheming and apparently ruthless politician with a murderous intent towards the opposition (all of which the book presents as an ugly but, by now, unremarkable part of Zimbabwe's everyday life), Zvobgo has a personal integrity and physical attraction that allows him to become the genuine object of a locally specific kind of romantic love, borne out of economic necessity as well as emotional attachment. While Gappah deliberately defers the untying of her novel's tangled plot threads until very late in the day, Chugumadzi establishes a set of key character relationships early on, then narrates details of Tsitsi's past life through waves of flashback. This life amounts to a thwarted *Bildung* related to the current version of Zimbabwean modernity and its disappointments.

Unlike Memory, Tsitsi is anything but exceptional: her own memories explain why she is finally compelled to turn to a traditional healer's medicine to secure Zvobgo's love. The child of a devout Christian mother accused of witchcraft on the death of her husband, Tsitsi has high hopes for a professional career after university (where her life is made difficult by the sexist taunts of male colleagues). Yet Zimbabwe's economic collapse consigns her to a dead-end secretarial job, from which marriage to Zvobgo becomes the only means of escape. Zimbabwe has, it seems, in some senses come full circle: at one point, in her desperation, Tsitsi draws a spurious but suggestive parallel between her own sacrifices for the sake of her family's economic wellbeing and male labourers' hardship in the mines of Johannesburg in the colonial era. Ironically, it is the unexpected and principled *divorceability* of Zvobgo's first wife – '*Ms* Rudo Tingamira', the novel pointedly calls her (126) – that enables this novel's romance-style happy ending.

Both books acknowledge Shona novels among their own literary precursors. Both also clearly owe an indirect textual debt to the pioneering national allegory and tale of class mobility that is Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. In both, central characters' past experience is recalled as bitter-sweet medicine: unable to configure the future, it nevertheless makes the present historical moment more bearable.

Shalini Nadaswaran

Satans and Shaitans

Obinna Udenwe

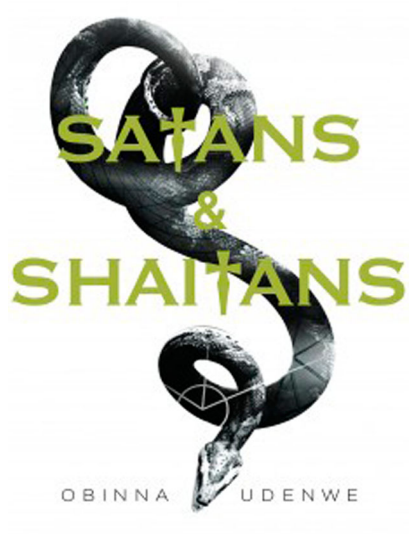
Jacaranda, London, 2014, *pb*
368pp ISBN 1 9097 6205 3 £8.99
www.jacarandabooksartmusic.co.uk

Ada: A Victim of Fate and Cultural Circumstance

Barclays N Amadi

Book Guild, Hove, 2014, *hp*
176pp ISBN 1 9099 8469 1 £16.99
www.bookguild.co.uk

Obinna Udenwe's first novel *Satans and Shaitans* will thrill its readers. Fast-paced, energetically moving from one plot to the next, this novel covers an epic range of ideas. While not always seamless, Udenwe addresses terrorism, jihad, morality, love, choice and consequence convincingly through an exciting style of writing that diversifies the genre of crime fiction and echoes a similar, gripping narrative — Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I do not come to you by chance*. Whereas Nwaubani focused on the world of cyber crime, Udenwe's conspiracy thriller is preoccupied with detailing the criminality of wealthy and powerful figures in Nigeria. These



individuals known as The Sacred Order of the Universal Forces exploit the country to their advantage, plotting to solidify their positions as Nigeria's elite leadership.

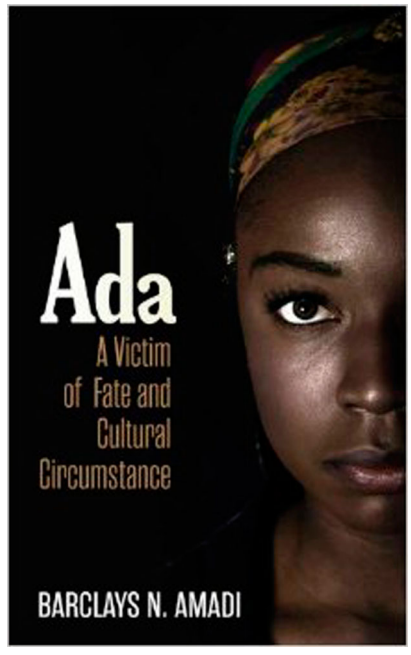
In Udenwe's book, secret meetings are held by well-connected, ambitious individuals who belong to a large international organisation, with branches all over the world, whose singular quest is to dominate Nigeria. In these, discussions and decisions serve as facades, masking and forwarding the goals of those who want to gain advantage and wealth through influential positions. Similarly, Udenwe also provides a space to reconsider the many layers of our assumptions regarding 'oppositional' voices in Nigerian society. Various religious leaders come under equal scrutiny, revealing their own greed. They stray from their spiritual calling by promoting false religious teachings and give wayward spiritual guidance to advance their personal objectives. This novel in essence exposes the many ways in which power operates, via a sobering narrative of deceit which propels the reader into a state of anxiety and anticipation.

Satans and Shaitans is set across Nigeria and focuses on two main plots, alternating between the activities of members of the Sacred Order, namely Chief Donald Amechi, Evangelist Chris Chuba and Sheikh Mohamed Seko, and the secret love affair between Chief Amechi's son Donaldo and Evangelist Chuba's daughter Adeline. The disappearance of Adeline introduces ambiguity and suspense in the story, with the Chuba household in upheaval. Donald Amechi double-crosses his own friend Chris Chuba when he finds out about the relationship. He secretly arranges for Adeline's life to be Chuba's annual sacrifice for the Sacred Order as a means of effectively removing Adeline from Donaldo's life. The ruthless, sociopathic behaviour Chief Amechi displays is also evident in his son, making Donaldo's illicit relationship with Adeline intense and chaotic. Adeline demonstrates a naïve determination to carry on with her pregnancy, hoping to receive Donaldo's full support. Yet she fails to recognise that he truly is his father's son, capable of murder when things do not go his way.

Although, there are weaknesses in the writing, particularly the ending, this plot's constant unpredictability is what makes it exciting and memorable. I am sure that this will be a novel that will be inscribed upon the minds of its readers indelibly.

Ada: A Victim of Fate and Cultural Circumstance by Barclays N Amadi is a contrastingly simple read, unburdened by complicated plot twists. Although Amadi explores well-trodden themes, this book is not without its merits as he presents a moving story of victimisation at the hands of patriarchal practices and cultural ruptures in postcolonial Nigeria and compellingly depicts the oppressive plight still faced by many women. This book is not just a story of Ada's suffering but also that of her four daughters, Amina, Ayesha, Halima and Zennab. All of these women are discriminated against and reminded at different junctures that their gender relegates them to being second-class citizens. Instead of just simply celebrating female presence, Amadi presents the troubling reality experienced by women who are trapped in male-dominated traditions; their abject conditions further heightened by the contemporary plagues of neo-colonial mismanagement and poverty.

The absence of a male child in her marriage exposes Ada and her daughters to polygamy. Hannah, Bello's second wife, is able to constantly abuse and bully Ada because she has sons unlike Ada who has a string of daughters. Tensions culminate when Bello has problems with his job and resources become scarce, causing Hannah to be more hostile and violent, ensuring her children receive more than Amina, Ayesha, Halima and Zennab. Unable to tolerate the violence and oppression at home anymore, Ada leaves for the city hoping to make a better future for herself and her girls. Yet, the city holds more dangerous prospects for a woman with daughters than life in an abusive polygamous marriage. Ada's innocence makes her vulnerable, unwittingly exposing herself and her children to the dangers of urban living. The story that follows is heartbreaking and ends in a downward spiral, involving scams, rape, abortion, death, prostitution, drugs and trafficking. The acute suffering Amadi imagines for Ada and her daughters presents a complex and multi-dimensional vision of the



dangers women risk in the criminal underbelly of the city.

The most haunting aspect about this book is the loneliness it captures. Ada and her daughters' stories showcase the strength and resilience women possess despite being forced to endure extreme hardship. Amina, Ada's eldest daughter who eventually dies of AIDS and drug abuse at the age of twenty-eight, attributes her emaciated state to systems and individuals that engineer the use and abuse of women like her for their gain, discarding her when she no longer serves a useful purpose.

Barclays Amadi's *Ada* is indeed a poignant book which makes us grieve for women living in a failing nation state. Indeed both Udenwe's and Amadi's texts are uncompromising in their portrayal of Nigerian politics and society, exploring its many cracks and fractures, and deftly charting the on-going effects of postcolonial corruption which remains tragic and shocking.

Janet Wilson

A World Elsewhere

Shanta Acharya

iUniverse, Bloominton, 2015, *pb* 360pp ISBN 1 4917 4364
www.iuniverse.com

At the heart of Shanta Acharya's engaging first novel, *A World Elsewhere*, are issues which she has explored in her poetry: the instability of language, the elusiveness of 'truth', the capriciousness of fate. These stem from problems that beset the novel's talented heroine, Asha, when she mistakes the existence of romantic love upon first meeting a young man; the emotion that usually springs from the heart is in her case based on only the flimsiest of acquaintances and a misjudgement of character. Her will to independence and determination to pursue her own course in life, leads to the fatal decision to marry him.

This troubling story of a young woman's unfortunate (but not irreversible) mistake can be read as a comment upon the tradition of arranged marriages, for Asha's disastrous choice seems to suggest that youthful rebellion is not necessarily the most successful pathway to personal happiness. The heroine's overturning of her parents' wish that she should enter into an arranged marriage and dismissal of the dowry backfires and causes her to question the very meaning of her existence.

Set in India in the 1960s and 1970s when Indira Gandhi held ministerial posts and later became prime minister, the novel shines a light onto the problems caused by the strict moral and behavioural codes which governed Indian (mainly Hindu) society and the frustrations and tensions that many, especially young women, felt in that era. Stepping out of their preordained roles was an experience as momentous as going to the moon. When Asha comes to write a story about a heroine who decides to wed someone of her own choice she crystallises the moment of independence with: 'That's one small step for a woman, one giant leap for womankind', adapting Neil Armstrong's words just one day after they appeared in the newspaper.

Acharya's novel is written from an insider's view and registers the contradictions of coming from a loving, middle-class family which, nevertheless, experiences grief, due to the parents' unhappiness, and unsuccessful marriages of Asha and one of her brothers. The problems of communication between the generations, the barriers in getting to know someone of the opposite sex, the taboos on sex before marriage, violence within marriage, the dishonesties and subterfuges that come with career ambition when motivated by jealousy or revenge, as when Asha's university exam results are deliberately marked down: these are at the core of the novel's psychological tensions and swirling emotions. But there are uplifting moments too, for another destiny awaits Asha. Despite her youthful idealism in affairs of the heart, she is gifted enough to carve out a vocational path, by first taking up a lectureship in her own state, then winning a scholarship to Oxford, even though it means a painful parting of another sort, from her beloved parents and brothers, and in fact from India itself. Acharya's heroine reaches beyond the limitations of her upbringing and society and forges her way to academic success, something she did not originally aspire to do.

This debut novel has been described as 'having the feel of a classic coming of age novel and marriage plot'. To this I would add that it asks questions about a key issue in Indian society, even today when more people exercise free will in marriage. Are arranged marriages a good thing? This is the theme of the great Bollywood blockbuster of 1995, *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* ('the one with a true heart will win the bride'), one of the longest-running Hindi films. Like the film, where parental opposition is also overruled (but the freely chosen marriage succeeds), *A World Elsewhere* gives insight into intergenerational conflict. It also offers moments of self-discovery such as the heroine's words at the end: 'All my life I've been waiting. All the things that happen to me and those that do not, all the people I meet and those I don't, keep defining me inexplicably. Life is what happens to us while we wait for things to happen.' Asha's need for love, and the confusion, unhappiness and suffering that come from her misjudgement of life are conveyed with tact and honesty. And there are fascinating images of the Indian domestic and social life of the heroine and her extended family: births, deaths, funerals, Hindu religious festivals, and the minutiae of marriage negotiations are all deftly woven into

the background to this tale of romantic love gone wrong.

Jocelyn Watson

Loop of Jade

Sarah Howe

Chatto, London, 2015, *pb*
64pp ISBN 0 7011 8869 6 £10.00
www.vintage-books.co.uk

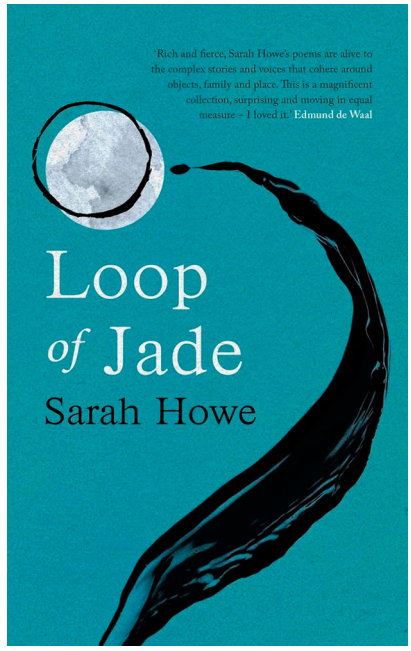
Sarah Howe was born in Hong Kong to an English father and a Chinese mother and moved to England as a child. Drawing upon this mixed racial heritage in this, her first published poetry collection, which won the T S Eliot Prize in 2015, Howe insightfully and vividly explores how memory, heritage and home are complicated by distance, loss and the things we do, or hold on to, to keep them alive. *Loop of Jade* opens with 'Mother's Jewellery Box':

> *the twin lids*
> *of the black lacquer box*
> *open away* – (1)

This image conjures an object as exquisitely crafted as Howe's poetry; simply wrought yet replete with myriad reflections and representations, of a duality that is obvious and yet furtive, both concealed and easily released. Indeed, from the beginning of this collection, we are alerted to the need to look beyond and to explore the complexities that lie behind what ostensibly appears simple throughout. Every image is reflected, refracted, something else — 'language revolves like a ream of stars' (46).

Throughout the collection, Howe explores the tension between what we cannot know about what has gone before and what we must know in order to exist as sentient beings. *Loop of Jade*, therefore, is also about the invention, creation and fabrication of our knowledge about things, how we learn about and order our world, how it is reified, how we pass that knowledge on and what happens to us when we receive it. The collection's epigraph is a quotation from Jorge Luis Borges which reads, these 'ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies … attributed by Dr Franz Kuhn to a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*'. Franz Kuhn was a German lawyer who spoke Chinese and was assigned to a delegation to Peking as an interpreter in the early 1900s. Whether the encyclopedia existed has been the subject of much debate. But Borges's 'citation' was cited by Foucault — perhaps the truth of its existence is not really what matters. In *Loop of Jade*, the categories 'attributed by … Kuhn' ('that animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs' and so on) punctuate the collection as titles of Howe's own poems, as she plays upon their uncertain origin yet fills each one with meaning — these 'categorised' works reveal the cultural genealogies (folk tales, legends) that both divide and connect her own more 'personal' pieces such as 'Crossing from Guangdong', 'Loop of Jade' and 'Islands'.

What is personal, however, is an interesting question that is probed by Howe as her work explores the intricate, miniscule grains on the surface of things, and roughens the texture of familiar memories. What do we keep for ourselves and how do we live in the world while constantly accommodating the alienation that accompanies our everyday negotiations between the milieu that exists inside our minds and the one that we experience around us? In 'Crossing from Guangdong', the 'humid strains of Frank/Sinatra' are 'unexpectedly strange', while despite being 'back', the over-sauced 'anaemic/bamboo shoots' are 'not like you would make at home' (2–3). Do we draw strength from our own menagerie, forge a sense of identity and belonging, or become trapped within it? This duality always threatens to differentiate us, and to remind us that once upon a time we left.



As someone who was also born in Hong Kong, also with a mixed racial heritage, the opening words of 'Crossing from Guangdong' resonate vividly:

> Something sets us looking for a place.
> For many minutes every day we lose
> Ourselves to somewhere else (2)

Howe awakens the sense that our journeys to discover somewhere we long to call home, are the projects of our own imaginations and desires, blended together with precious memories about what we once knew and took for granted. In speaking of her own experience, Howe captures how we hold tight to what we know; because it resonates and makes us feel closer to things that are no longer there, and makes us feel more 'at home'. But for Howe home is a complicated idea. Not only because she left Hong Kong, where her mother was born, as a child. But, more importantly for this collection, because for her mother the idea of home was as precarious (and permanent) as the 'street of four-storey plaster buildings' she lived in. The universal, human need for a place to call home, that

safety it suggests, is therefore, in Howe's case, also a reminder of painful incidents, of a regrettable fate that her mother had to endure. The title poem, largely her mother's story interrupted here and there with the tragic legend of Zhu Yingtai, ends with the image of a loop of jade, a baby's bracelet which is said to shatter in her place if she should fall. It serves as a reminder that the things we hold on to to define who we are exist to mask or stand in place of a painful absence. Things are the scraps we are left with, when we have nothing else. Again, in 'Crossing from Guangdong':

> I counted out the change in Cantonese.
> *Yut, ye, sam, sei*. Like a baby. The numbers
> are the scraps that stay with me. (3)

To be able to count in Cantonese might seem helpful, particularly if returning from abroad, but here instead these scraps of knowledge attest to a feeling of helplessness, the paucity of knowledge, like someone who still has much to learn.

Still scraps remain, which is better than nothing, surely. These are the scraps Howe builds upon, in 'Islands', to facilitate her journey around Hong Kong, revisiting, though memories belonging originally perhaps to her mother, landmarks of an identity — New Year, the typhoons, the mooncakes, the paper lanterns. In the beginning, memory is sparse and faltering:

> At the boarding school we used to chant them
> *Ping Chau, Cheung Chau, Lantau, Lamma* …
> I rolled their sounds around my mouth
> Till they were strange again, like savouring
> Those New Year candies – small translucent moons
> Waning on the tongue. Wrapped in packages
> From home that never came. This was called
> 'geography', for knowing where we are and names
> of fixed and distant things. The words came back to me
> like dreams (55)

As the poem progresses, memories are fleshed out. There is a growing confidence in the details presented, until Howe is finally able to exploit all the senses ('the sickly/pungency of camphor') to reflect upon a sweltering summer when her mother, then three or four years old, would fan her own mother — only to discover later that she was 'a Guangdong cobbler's foundling daughter. She/said she saved me from the refuse heap, from/being eaten by the dogs with other scraps' (58).

'Islands' speaks delicately of loss — the loss of home, the loss of a relative, of belonging to a geographical place with a personal history and heritage. Like many of the poems in *Loop of Jade*, Howe composes with a brilliance of detail that is at times heart-wrenching and always sensitive. This is a powerful and unique collection.