WRITING FROM THE SHADOWLANDS:

HOW CROSS-CULTURAL LITERATURE NEGOTIATES THE LEGACY OF EDWARD SAID

Tangea Tansley

B.A. (First Class Hons.)
University of Western Australia

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Tangea Tansley
This thesis examines the impact of Edward Said’s influential work *Orientalism* and its legacy in respect of contemporary reading and writing across cultures. It also questions the legitimacy of Said’s retrospective stereotyping of early examples of cross-cultural representation in literature as uncompromisingly “orientalist”.

It is well known that the release of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978 was responsible for the rise of a range of cultural and critical theories from multiculturalism to postcolonialism. It was a study that not only polarized critics and forced scholars to re-examine orientalist archives, but persuaded creative writers to re-think their ethnographic positions when it came to the literary representations of cultures other than their own. Without detracting from the enormous impact of Said, this thesis isolates gaps and silences in Said that need correcting. Furthermore, there is an element of intransigence, an uncompromising refusal to fine-tune what is essentially a binary discourse of the West and its other in Said’s work, that encourages the continued interrogation of power relations but which, because of its very boldness, paradoxically disallows the extent to which the conflict of cultures indeed produced new, hybrid social and cultural formations.
In an attempt to challenge the severity of Said’s claim that “every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric”, the thesis examines a number of different discursive contexts in which such a presumption is challenged. Thus while the second chapter discusses the ‘traditional’ profession-based orientalism of nineteenth-century E. G. Browne, the third considers the anti-imperialism of colonial administrator Leonard Woolf. The fourth chapter provides a reflection on the difficulties of diasporic “orientalism” through the works of Michael Ondaatje while chapter five demonstrates the effects of the dialogism used by Amitav Ghosh as a defence against “orientalism”. The thesis concludes with an examination of contemporary writing by Andrea Levy that appositely illustrates the legacy of Said’s influence.

While the restrictive parameters of Said’s work make it difficult to mount a thorough-going critique of Said, this thesis shows that, indeed, it is within the restraints of these parameters and in the very discourse that Said employs that he traps himself. This study claims that even Said is susceptible to “orientalist” criticism in that he is as much an “orientalist” as those at whom he directs his polemic.
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Introduction

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF BEING OTHER THAN “ORIENTALIST”

An Englishman acts out a boyhood dream when he travels on horseback through Persia in the late-nineteenth century. He writes:

We sat for a while by the seven graves from which the place takes its name, and drank tea, which was brought to us by the kindly inmates. A venerable old dervish entered into conversation with us, and even walked with us as far as the gate of the city. He was one of those dervishes who inspires one with respect for a name which serves but too often to shelter idleness, sloth, and even vice. Too often it is the case that the traveller, judging only by the opium-eating, hashish-smoking mendicant, who, with matted hair, glassy eyes, and harsh, raucous voice, importunes the passers-by for alms, condemns all dervishes as a blemish and a bane to their country. Yet in truth this is far from being a correct view. Nowhere are men to be met with so enlightened, so intelligent, so tolerant, so well-informed, and so simple-minded as amongst the ranks of the dervishes.¹

An English cadet in the Ceylon Civil Service describes his feelings on his promotion to assistant government agent for the district of Hambantota:

I fell in love with the country, the people, and the way of life which were entirely different from everything in London and Cambridge to which I had been born and bred. To understand the people and the way they lived in the villages of West Giruwa Pattu and the jungles of Magampattu became a passion with me. . . . in Hambantota, it is almost true to say, I worked all
day from the moment I got up in the morning until the moment I went to bed at night, for I rarely thought of anything else except the district and the people, to increase their prosperity, diminish the poverty and disease, start irrigation works, open schools. There was no sentimentality about this; I did not idealize or romanticize the people or the country: I just liked them aesthetically and humanly and socially.²

An Indian ethnographer ends a period of field trials in village Egypt in confrontation with Egyptian authority. He describes this incident:

“I didn’t know Sidi Abu-Hasira was a Jewish saint,” I said at last. “In the countryside I heard that everyone went to visit the tomb.”

“You shouldn’t have believed it,” he said. “In the villages, as you must know, there is a lot of ignorance and superstition; the fellahaen talk about miracles for no reason at all. You’re an educated man, you should know better than to believe the fellahaen on questions of religion.”

“But the fellahaen are very religious,” I said. “Many amongst them are very strict in religious matters.”

“Is it religion to believe in saints and miracles?” he said scornfully. “These beliefs have nothing to do with true religion. They are mere superstitions, contrary to Islam and they will disappear with development and progress.”³

An expatriate Sri Lankan living in Canada traces his Sinhalese genealogy. In a “notebook” he captures images gathered in a visit to his homeland:

To jungles and gravestones. . . . Reading torn 100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls. Watched leopards sip slowly, watched the crow sitting restless on his branch peering about with his beak open. Have seen the outline of a large fish caught and thrown in the curl of a wave, been where nobody wears socks, where you wash your feet before you go to bed, where I watch my sister who alternatively reminds me of my father, mother and brother. Driven through rainstorms that flood the streets for an hour and suddenly evaporate, where sweat falls in the path of this ballpoint, where the jak [sic] fruit rolls across your feet in the back of the jeep, where there are eighteen ways of describing the smell of a durian, where bullocks hold up traffic and steam after the rains.⁴

An author in exile contemplates:

The Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles. (I am of course, once more, talking about myself.) I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated . . . and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, post-lapsarian men and women. We are Hindus who have crossed the black
water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result—as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates—we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy.5

An English Orientalist, a British colonial administrator, an Indian ethnographer, writers in the diaspora . . . labels all . . . through and by which we typecast ourselves and each other. But not one of these writers is accurately described by this method of identification. They were born in England, Ceylon and India, but that is the only part of the representation that contains any accuracy at all. Each has travelled, studied, worked or lived in many countries of the world. Beyond a generation or two, their genealogical backgrounds are not of their countries of birth. Nor is it any more satisfactory to hunt for their identity in other categories—as ‘world citizens’ or ‘transnationals’, for example—neither grouping is particularly useful in offering a greater insight into the people themselves. Rather it encourages a further generic lapse into an equally superficial homogeneity. On the other hand, how useful is nationality anyway in describing or ascribing identity? In searching for a way in—a way to describe these writers apart from the now dated modernist terms of nationhood—the term ‘displaced’ comes to mind. That is the one certainty that remains to us in the postcolonial and postmodern environment: the lack of a place to call home is a central experience of many. But aside from the slightly pathetic connotations of homelessness the word ‘displaced’ evokes, is it merely another reductive label? In terms of bestowing identity, how useful is it?

It is these concerns and their relation to the literature that emanates from these ‘shadowlands’—the diaspora, the borderland, the margin—that underlie my thesis. My primary objective is to demonstrate the extent to which issues of culture, identity and
displacement dictate the way in which a writer—specifically a writer from one culture writing on another—reflects, actively constructs or re-presents a certain world view for readers. This gives rise to a number of questions. I need to ask, for example, what sort of agendas operate? How subtle is the distortion that results? How powerful is the effect of that distortion? How fine is the line between misrepresentation and re-presentation. And, finally, I am interested in attempting to determine the extent of the influence of powerful postcolonial scholars like Edward Said on twenty-first-century writing across cultures.

Before I discuss a thesis that is concerned with an exploration of the agencies implicated in writing and reading across cultures and which situates theory alongside social reality, I would like to add a word of explanation with regard to the political position I occupy. The intellectual background from which I come—and for which the responsibility for my argument must lie—is one of critical relativism and of slight detachment in that I was not personally implicated in the issues of empire.6 This means that I occupy a middle ground with regard to the dynamics in the transaction between reader and text. I cannot read a text and make the involuntary assumption that it is politically innocent. Conversely, neither can I read deceit or conscious manipulation into every narrative slippage. But now, even if I claim a distancing from my subject using some literary device—as in Conrad’s use of Marlow as narrator for example—this thesis has declared a background which can be used to locate private sentiments and affiliations hidden in the text and which will, inevitably, have a bearing on the conclusions drawn.

The case of Leonard Woolf is exemplary here. Although he is a well-known opponent of imperialism, Woolf is criticized because the strength of the sentiments expressed in his
autobiographical works can be ‘proven’ by arbitrary selection of detail not to be replicated in his fictional work. And further, that his novel—specifically *The Village in the Jungle*—indicates “an affiliation with a deep-seated and seemingly inherent imperialist ideology and cannot, therefore, be cited as . . . benevolent to the colonized native” (De Silva, 5). In other words, despite all the evidence to the contrary, it is still possible to establish that Woolf had an underlying agenda, which despite its benign and compassionate exterior, had a malignant centre.

While in any literary work, there are bound to be instances where an unconscious view is expressed, it seems to me that something is not quite right with a critical discourse that casts insults where insults are not due. These people are no longer here to defend themselves, their writings or their viewpoints. If part of the work of postcolonial theory is to foreground the wrongs of the colonial past, there are more deserving figures than Woolf or Kipling or Forster on which to concentrate.

While it is simplistic and reductive to suggest that a text is necessarily or only a vehicle for an author’s viewpoint, to state the opposite merely to support a theoretical position becomes equally puerile. Woolf was a political personage and his texts expressed not only his political position, but also a social and cultural awareness that showed as much love as it did compassion for the people he administered. This is as clear in his fictional texts as it is in his autobiographical works and diaries. However, since this thesis concerns itself both with postcolonial critical literature and with the cross-cultural literary works written during the colonial era, in determining the “extralinguistic truth value” of texts, there are certain issues of representation that must be addressed.
Literature inevitably arises from a melee of conflicting interests. It cannot be discussed separately from historical and political movements and events any more than it can be disassociated from the social and cultural milieu and interests of its creator. Inevitably, these ‘events’ shape the literary canon with which we work. And because—whether as writer, reader or critic—we are all participants in the archives we inherit, these are the narratives that shape our thinking, and those that I discuss here.

Thus the position from which I write this thesis is as a critic of postcolonial discourse who is, at the same time, not unsympathetic to the grounds—that is, the issues behind the concerns and resentment—that gave rise to such a discourse in the first place. I therefore attempt to dig beneath the rhetoric to arrive at some sort of actuality or notion of “extralinguistic truth” with regard to those writers who attempt a representation of a culture other than their own. Since postcolonial theory quite clearly and inclusively labels such writers and their works “orientalist”, it is on this branch of theory that I concentrate. Consequently, the focus of my argument is located in the well-known thesis of Edward Said, the gist of which is contained in his first “definition” of “orientalism”: “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism”.

I contend that it is under this political re-inscription of a term traditionally used to describe the profession of a person “versed in oriental languages and literature” that the level of engagement with culture becomes a lot more complicated than Said allows. If this
definition has any currency at all—and Said retreats only marginally from this extreme position—then it becomes almost impossible for any teacher, writer or researcher not to be an “orientalist”. This means that all theorists and researchers pointing retrospective fingers of blame at figures such as Woolf, Kipling and Conrad become themselves “orientalists”, taking on the attendant connotations of racist, imperialist, dominant and chauvinistic behaviours now embedded in the word. As a result, in this particular area of postcolonial theory, every writer in the English language whose subject matter is the “East” is to some extent “orientalist”. All of us who teach, write, travel, promote and attempt to ‘represent’ anywhere other than our own (very often hybrid) culture or country of origin are “orientalists” and, in fact, even if we ‘represent’ our own country of origin, as I show in my discussion of Michael Ondaatje and his literary works, we can still be considered “orientalist”. Depending on the degree of accuracy inherent in Said’s statement we are all—in one way or another, to greater or lesser extents—subject to censure as “orientalists”, Edward Said included.

Thus it follows that the critical works that most concern me here are those of Edward Said, in particular Orientalism, which remains his most-discussed book and provides the inspiration for this thesis. What many scholars have missed in their criticism of Said is that his book was a polemic and, as such, deliberately designed to penetrate to the very core of postcolonial anxiety: namely, the jingoism responsible for the creation of colonies and the way in which they were administered from, and dominated by, the metropolis. The literary texts that I examine will be analysed in content and form in respect to the theories of Said as well as a number of other theoretical disciplines, including post-structuralism, cultural studies, psychoanalytic criticism and Marxism. In particular, leading theorists in some of
these schools who have influenced my reading include Homi Bhabha, Mikhail Bakhtin, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Slavoj Žižek, historian Thomas H. Trautmann and ethnologist James Clifford. An examination of some of their philosophies appears in chapter one along with my critique of Orientalism and at appropriate places throughout the thesis.

This work is designed not so much as a progression of argument but more as a process of refinement that becomes a reiteration of the argument in different discursive contexts. My thesis—the impossibility of being other than “orientalist”—is formulated in the first chapter together with a discussion of Said’s “orientalism” and some of the enquiries I put forward provide for connections between the texts of Bhabha and Said. Each of the subsequent chapters will, while reinforcing the thesis, shed light on a new discursive perspective by discussing the selected works of a particular writer. In a more general sense, the chapters are close readings or practical criticisms of these texts.

Thus while chapter one provides a critical overview of the dynamic structure of “orientalism”, chapter two traces the ‘representations’ of the Orient by the Orientalists themselves. The key figure in this chapter is Edward Granville Browne, a leading nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalist. Browne was an Englishman who became a dedicated scholar and lecturer of Middle Eastern languages as well as a writer and researcher devoted to a culture not his own. In the light of Said’s argument, he is included here for his representation of Persia and the Persian people. Partly because Browne is less well known than the other figures I discuss, but particularly because of his standing among the Orientalists of his day, his biographical details assume greater spatial importance here than those of the other writers.
Chapter three asks how Leonard Woolf negotiates this concept of “orientalism”. Woolf was a colonial administrator in the early twentieth century. His experiences in what was then Ceylon resulted in the publication of a fictional book on his return to England—*The Village in the Jungle*—and several decades later provided the material for the second volume of his five-part autobiography. As conscious an imperialist as Woolf undoubtedly was, he is still a person of one culture writing about the people and customs of another and as such, in Saidian terms, an “orientalist”. Despite his well-known antipathy to imperialism, I show how impossible it is to extricate Woolf from charges of “orientalism”.

Moving to contemporary writers at the other end of the twentieth-century in an endeavour to show a post-*Orientalism* awareness of cultural representation, in chapter four I reflect on a form of diasporic “orientalism” through the works of Michael Ondaatje. In discussing Ondaatje’s “exteriority”, I ask to what extent his *Running in the Family* “re-creates” the Ceylon of the past and how he locates himself with respect to this text. Does his indigenousness give him an intrinsic right to “write the Orient” and, in so doing, excuse the indisputably ‘exotic’ within his writing? One of the key issues I address in this chapter is to what extent Ondaatje’s work presents an example of the ‘other’ as ‘native informant’.

A reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* in chapter five questions whether even the self-reflexive writings of a text that tries very hard to be polyphonic can still be regarded as “orientalist”. In line with the latest ethnographic practices and with awareness of novelistic conventions and Bakhtinian dialogic, Ghosh allows the voices of his characters to be heard alongside his own, and it becomes difficult to see how he can be condemned. However,
invoking the work of James Clifford, the question still remains as to whether, in writing about another culture and in foregrounding what he believes to be the concerns of that culture, he is nevertheless committing a type of cultural pillage.

I conclude this study with an exploration of the postcolonial sentiments foregrounded in Andrea Levy’s latest novel *A Small Island* and strive for an understanding of where someone who describes herself as a “bastard child of Empire” locates herself in terms of an identity and its impact on the notions that arise in her work.13

This thesis locates itself as an exploration of cross-cultural literature in an attempt to assert the impossibility of classifying such writing and its writers as anything other than “orientalist”. If this can be satisfactorily proven, it disassociates the “imperialist” practice of empire from “orientalist” tradition and shifts again the meaning of this slippery word.
Notes

6 Although I grew up in the colonies, I write about colonization without having undergone the lived experience of being colonized and I am mindful that if the situation had been reversed, this thesis would in all probability present quite a different argument. See my discussion of writer Caryl Phillips’ interview with Chinua Achebe in chapter three.
8 For a revisionist view of Kipling’s work and as support for my argument that some of these antagonists of empire were indeed what they said they were, see David Gilmour’s scholarly book The Long Recessional: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling (London: J. Murray, 2002) which quite convincingly absolves Kipling from the racial and other allegations cast at him by writers like Orwell and critics like John Anderson. To quote Anderson from an address he gave to the Literary Society in 1931: “He [Kipling] uses his stories . . . to uphold the tradition of his country and class . . . He is feudalistic and imperialistic, and his ‘pragmatic’ method comes out in all sorts of trickery and lying . . .” Cited here from Art and Reality: John Anderson on Literature and Aesthetics, eds. Janet Anderson, G. Cullum, K. Lycos (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, c. 1982), 163. Compare this approach to Said’s own comments on Kipling’s Kim in Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 159-96, or see my discussion in chapter four.
9 In his introduction to Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, tr. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c. 1982), Paul de Man makes a clear distinction between poetics and hermeneutics, defining hermeneutics as “a process directed toward the determination of meaning; it postulates a transcendental function of understanding, no matter how complex, deferred, or tenuous it might be, and will, in however mediated a way, have to raise questions about the extralinguistic truth value of literary texts” (ix). Or see Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) for an account of the critical appreciation of literature and overview of theoretical approach.
10 I am referring here to Edward Said’s “orientalism” that took shape wholly within the burgeoning years of postcolonialism. Although this thesis concerns itself with some of the issues generated by discourse, I am not particularly comfortable with the binary methodology and alienating tactics of this method of argumentation. But while I applaud the sentiments expressed by John MacKenzie in Orientalism: History, theory and the arts (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995) who claims that “the theorists fall into all the pitfalls the historian constantly warns students, the public and himself to avoid: reading present values into past ages; passing judgements on entire previous generations; failing to discriminate intention from effect; missing the multiple readings emanating from the conflict between authorial intention and audience expectation", neither am I comfortable with the complete dismissal of theory (38).
12 This definition from The OED, 931. In this thesis, I place Said’s re-glossing of the word “orientalism” in quotation marks to distinguish it from the more traditional profession-based meaning. See my discussion of Said in chapter one.
Chapter one

SAID, BHABHA AND THE DYNAMICS OF ORIENTALISM

. . . perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature.

Homi K. Bhabha¹

Culture is a deeply compromised idea
I cannot yet do without.

James Clifford²

A full quarter-century after the publication of Said’s controversial Orientalism, the attention he drew to the inequities of empire has extended beyond the boundaries of academic debate to literature in the public domain, a state of affairs appositely demonstrated by the level of acclaim meted out to Small Island—the latest novel of black British writer Andrea Levy—a pertinent example of the status of non-academic postcolonial discourse. As well-written as it undoubtedly is, the content of Levy’s book raises questions significant to the cultural and political perspectives of what is essentially a literary thesis. Among the questions such a book raises are those that interrogate the very premise of postcolonialism. For example: How insidious is this refusal not only to let go of the past, but to recast it as almost entirely
nefarious? Is it a consequence of personal grievance or is it a victim of the same hegemonic and economic rationalism that accompanied its colonial antecedent? Or, to come at the problem from its opposite perspective: What repercussions for the future lie in wait if the lessons of the past are not absorbed and acted upon? As Simon Gikandi argues, is the neo-colonialism we observe today actually the survival of colonialism within a postcolonial structure? I propose to start my discussion with an overview of Gikandi’s argument since writing as he does from the lived experience of the colonized I consider his opinion critical to my own thesis.

In setting out to write Maps of Englishness, Gikandi’s aim was to trace “a narrative or discursive moment that could be considered to represent the break from colonial to postcolonial narratives” (xiii), but he was to find at the end of his research that in fact there was no rupture but instead a blurring and continuing linkage between the two. In formulating his position, he states: “Colonial culture is as much about the figuration of the metropolis in the imagination of the colonized themselves as it is about the representation of the colonized in the dominant discourses of the imperial center” (20).

I invoke the post to describe a condition in which colonial culture dominates the scene of cultural production but one in which its face has been changed by both its appropriation by the colonized and the theoretical oppositionality it faces in the decolonized polis . . . thus . . . the argument that colonialism has been transcended is patently false; but so is the insistence that, in the former colonies, the culture of colonialism continues to have the same power and presence it had before decolonization. (14)

Hence he suggests that the term “postcolonialism” is instead a “code for the state of undecidability in which the culture of colonialism continues to resonate in what was supposed to be its negation . . . [It is a] term for a state of transition and cultural instability”. He argues that in the state of flux within which culture exists at the present moment
“postcoloniality is a term for a state that does not exist, that postcolonial theory is one way of recognizing how decolonized situations are marked by the trace of the imperial pasts they try to disavow . . .” (14-5).

The thrust of Gikandi’s main argument claims that colonialism as a project was never complete and that it was due to this very lack of closure that the narratives of postcoloniality were produced. He argues that although the colonized writers he cites appeared to

. . . position themselves squarely within colonial Englishness and to affiliate themselves with a set of identities and values that were considered to be the very condition of existence of colonialism itself . . . [at] the same time . . . these writers took their local histories and traditions for granted and assumed that whatever Englishness had brought to the colonized had not supplemented such histories and traditions; indeed, they assumed that what made their cultural moments and identities unique was the simple act of social hybridity. . . . If many of them saw their destiny as a variation on the culture inherited by colonialism, it was because they also assumed that they had been instrumental both in the making of this culture and in its redefinition. (xiv-xv)

To Gikandi, the effect of this “redefinition” was reciprocal. He argues that the character of Britain was so powerfully linked to the areas it administered during its era of empire that the independence of its colonies was not only synonymous with its own decline, but the underlying reason for its subsequent demise and loss of power.

I began to ponder on ways in which cultures produced on the margins of a dominant discourse might actually have the authority not only to subvert the dominant but also to transform its central notions. I wanted to be able to argue that colonial cultures had been central in the transformation of English identities without discarding the claim that colonialism was, as a system of power and authority, responsible for the radical displacement of the colonial world and its narratives. How could a space in which traditional
Out of this conflict and confusion emerged corruptions of the original cultures of both colonized and colonizer of “mutual imbrication and contamination” (xviii). If at first this line of reasoning appears to be opposite to Homi Bhabha’s concepts of hybridity, ostensibly leaning towards notions of homogeneity and integration, in fact the two notions turn out to be not only congruent but mutually supportive. Gikandi’s argument produces a variation on the “interstices” which is neither one of assimilation nor of the superimposition of Englishness over the ‘other’. Instead he asserts the existence of a “colonial space”, maintaining that “the colonized cannot continue to be conceived as victims of a triumphant Englishness imposing its rule and civility on its radical other; on the contrary, the colonial space was to reconstitute itself in response to the imposition of Englishness; in inventing itself, the colonial space would also reinvent the structure and meaning of the core terms of Englishness . . . ” (xviii). This relationship, he claims, has led to a measure of self-reflexivity within the metropolis in that if imperialism is viewed as a battleground for a play of power between the British Empire and its colonies, the English did not come off unchanged or undamaged in the encounter. In other words, “the reconfiguration of identities was not a one-way street” (34).

I return now to my earlier suggestion that while Gikandi’s argument locates itself at the opposite end of the spectrum from that of Said, it has a curious resonance with much of the densely woven theory of Homi Bhabha. What I would first like to consider here is the
criticism leveled at Bhabha from many postcolonialists for “re-presenting the colonial encounter as a process of complicities”, a notion that for many theorists is frankly disturbing (Parry, 17). Benita Parry speaks for more than one critic when she says, “The implications of rewriting a historical project of invasion, expropriation and exploitation in the indeterminate and always deferred terms Bhabha proposes and implements, are immense, and for me immensely troubling, since his elaborations dispense with the notions of conflict” (6). The “always deferred” to which Parry alludes is the space or the moment in which Bhabha locates his discussion of what for Gikandi is postcolonialism, for other critics post-postcolonialism or to invoke writer Toni Morrison, a place “beyond”. Hence, for Bhabha, the “contingent and the liminal become the times and the spaces for the historical representation of the subjects of cultural difference in a postcolonial criticism” (179). Because Bhabha’s well-known aversion to any “binary structure of opposition” disallows the oppositional inference in the term “cultural difference”, this then becomes a “contour of difference [which] is agonistic, shifting, splitting, rather like Freud’s description of the system of consciousness which occupies a position in space lying on the borderline between outside and inside” (my emphasis, 110). It seems to me that what concerns Parry most lies right here in Bhabha’s replacement of an historical antagonism with an agonism located in psychoanalytic theory which he represents as being a space that recalls borderline notions of displacement and diaspora. Thus while Parry acknowledges Bhabha’s re-inflection of the thought processes of colonized and colonizer, it is the presentation, or re-presentation, of those processes as compliance or collusion between cultures—the removal of “notions of conflict”—in what she regards as “radical rewriting of agency” to which she objects (Parry, 17). Since this concern at Bhabha’s “rewriting of agency” appears to be most strongly
directed at his premise that “the effect of colonial power” can be seen as “the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions”, I would like to pause right here and ask what it is that Bhabha means by these words (11). Firstly, I suggest that by not citing the complete sentence, Parry changes the essence, indeed inverts the sense, of what Bhabha is saying here. However, Parry’s essay raises a number of questions. For instance, by locating his discussion in the shadowland of the “liminal” is Bhabha indeed indulging himself in “a theoretical ruse to establish a neutral, ideology-free zone” (Parry, 15)? Is Bhabha denying that the colonies were contested spaces? Is he actually presenting colonialism as “transactional rather than conflictual”? Parry raises some very valid points. These are questions that aptly illustrate the complexity of a situation that cannot be ignored and which emanate from the heart of postcolonial criticism. Instead of attempting to reply on behalf of Homi Bhabha, I propose to acknowledge that the troubling nature of these enquiries should, for a moment, be regarded as rhetorical and that more light can be directed at the issue from a different angle. Accordingly, in all fairness, I believe the first step must be to question the agency that lies at the core of Bhabha’s own rhetoric, to uncover a rationale that underpins a line of reasoning which would appear to run counter to the ideas of Parry et al. An acute understanding of Bhabha’s overarching philosophy is probably best arrived at by the deconstruction of a range of his notions, but space restrictions preclude an in-depth examination of his work. Therefore, I propose to examine those sections of Bhabha’s argument that are critical to my own concerns with regard to cross-cultural representation in literature, an important passage of which reads:

When this [the concept of the world of literature] is placed alongside his [Goethe’s] idea that the cultural life of the nation is “unconsciously” lived, then there may be a sense in which world literature could be an emergent, prefigurative category that is concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation may be established
on the grounds of historical trauma. The study of world literature may be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’ [my emphasis]. Where once the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrain of world literature. The centre of such a study would neither be the ‘sovereignty’ of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on . . . ‘freak social and cultural displacements’ . . . the critical act that attempts to grasp the sleight of hand with which literature conjures with historical specificity, using the medium of psychic uncertainty, aesthetic distancing, or the obscure signs of the spirit-world, the sublime and the subliminal. As literary creatures and political animals we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when something is beyond control, but not beyond accommodation . . . [taking responsibility for] the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present. (12)8

It is clear I think that for a moment Bhabha steps outside the purely theoretical to pursue a vision of a new literature concerned with and constituted by the diaspora.9 He is suggesting that while human actions—those actions that give rise to the colonized, migrants, refugees—cannot always be controlled, they can and indeed “ought” to be adjusted in line with the lessons from the past. Although the passage above signals what some scholars have perceived as anomalies within Bhabha’s work that need clarification, frequently seeming inconsistencies dissolve in comparison with other segments of his work.10 Consider, for example, the strange contradiction to the passage above presented by the language and implications in another of his essays, “Signs taken for wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817” in which the phrase “signs taken for wonders” refers to the “emblem of the English book . . . as an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline”(102). Further, he maintains that the “ideological correlatives” contained in the master discourses “create a revisionary narrative that sustains the discipline of Commonwealth history and its epigone, Commonwealth literature” and reflect that “conflictual moment” when “colonialist intervention is turned into that constitutive discourse of exemplum and imitation”(105). But it is important to
note, he continues, that while the English book “glorifies the permanence of European
dominance”, it concomitantly acts as a symbol of ambivalence from which position the
“colonial text emerges uncertainly” but which actually empowers the colonized subject with
a mode of resistance against imperial oppression and aggression (107). When read alongside
his suggestion that the “study of world literature may be the study of the way in which
cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’” this apparent
ambivalence, or seeming contradiction, within Bhabha’s own argument is only amplified. It
is important to note, however, that the situation changes completely when this area of
ambivalence or contradiction is reinscribed as a third space, a “site of negotiation”. I would
therefore suggest that—although a paradox in itself—the contradiction actually supports
Bhabha’s argument and cannot be read separately from his notions on the negotiability of
space or hybridity. The text, in this case the English book, is “reinscribed and
transvalued”, and becomes now a site of negotiation, of “cultural production”.

There are echoes of Gikandi in Bhabha’s suggestion that a discourse that travels beyond the
boundaries of postcolonialism into this space of “cultural production” contains murmurs
that would suggest that, viewed retrospectively, colonialism was not just “a one-way street”,
that as well as taking it left behind something of value within the cultures from which it also
undoubtedly took, that the resulting “contour of difference”, though unstable was
“agonistic” and not necessarily “antagonistic”. For Bhabha, “the effect of colonial power”
created a situation which was “beyond control, but . . . not beyond accommodation” (12). In
other words, while colonization must assume responsibility for the production of the spirits
that lurk in the dark corners of the past and return to haunt the present, now those spirits
speak their own truths “in a complex on-going negotiation” (2). It seems to me that there is
a healing present in this collapsing of the present into the beyond which opens up a productive political site in this third space, the “interstitial passage . . . that opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4). And this is where I think Homi Bhabha locates much of his argument: in this “reconjugating” and “recontextualising” that allows for a progressive renegotiation of authority that will permit society to release its angers and move forwards.¹⁴

Understandably, Parry, like Arun Mukherjee in my later discussion of her reaction to Michael Ondaatje’s work, fears a glossing of the inequities of the past, the arrival of a point of “forgetfulness”. But I feel that in her otherwise excellent critique of Bhabha’s theory, she tends to overlook the need for a mediating discourse that will take those “unrepresented pasts” and move them beyond a postcolonial perspective trapped in a circular discourse which is fast becoming repetitive. Can colonizer and colonized find some middle ground to celebrate difference in a “reformulation that can provide a language for the slippage of trauma from apocalypse into narrative”?¹⁵ Or is the reality to be found in Said’s premise which implies that the “ontological distinctions” between east and west are rooted in “the violence inherent in the imperial contest—[which] for all its occasional profit or pleasure—is an impoverishment for both sides” (Culture and Imperialism, 348)? Does the statement that “aggression and supremacy are indeed carved into the colonial archive” gain truth in the repeated telling?¹⁶

There is a need for Bhabha’s substitution of the “antagonistic” with the “agonistic” which might propel the discourse forward out of conflict into mediation or sites of negotiation. Once society’s present concept of culture is dislocated, Bhabha’s notions of hybridity may
well reach beyond theory to become actuality. Perhaps this will prove to be the moment at which academics like Simon Gikandi acknowledge a movement into a postcolonial space and time, a space which no longer recognises a “fixed tablet of tradition”; a step outside agency, too, where walls will either crumble or become consciously demolished (Bhabha, 2).

Thus the process of interpretation becomes a matter of crossing the divide—the gap between what Bhabha calls “the I and the You”, between the reader and the writer or between one moment and another—which he designates as a “Third Space”. To quote: “The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. . . . The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other” (36).

This Third Space is the space of articulation that “destroys this mirror or representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open expanding code” effectually displacing the narrative of the Western nation and challenging outdated concepts of cultural representation. Instead culture becomes a moving concept, ambivalent, not linear, and no longer fixed. “The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with a ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation . . . it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent
‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (7). So linear time is collapsed as “the ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” with the beyond, too, having as much immediacy as the present.

For Homi Bhabha culture exists in the “interstices”—those in-between spaces such as bridges, stairwells, the constantly reworked space between sea and shore, the link between one moment and the next, between one boundary and another—a concept that he extends to any “in-between” space previously expressed in the binary terms that he flatly refuses to recognize.17

In fact the only danger to this vision is one that Bhabha would appear to fear most: that this negotiation of cultural identity may result in a mongrelized, homogeneous society, rather than the closely controlled and guarded cultural cells, the “isolate flecks” of William Carlos Williams that become increasingly precious as national boundaries blur.18

The juncture at which we stand is one in which the “negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce[s] a mutual and mutable recognition (or representation) of cultural difference...[in] a ‘liminal’ space or ‘hybrid’ site that witnesses the production—rather than just the reflection of cultural meaning”.19

My suggestion that the theories of Homi Bhabha may turn out to be more practically oriented than those of Said in terms of their applicability to social reality re-surfaces at this point. There is some evidence for the notion that the model of cultural transformation that
Homi Bhabha envisages is already on its way to overcoming the complex process of collective social transformation. Homi Bhabha’s work does not stop with the publication of his books and his reputation transcends his academic milieu. His regular appearances in seminars and workshops the world over lend support to my contention that he has had some success in the translation of his theoretical concept from “the place from which something begins its presencing” (5), from the boundary—or in this case, the discursive space accessible only to academic intellectuals—to a site for consumption on a global basis. One example of particular significance in this respect is the “Re-inventing Britain” project, an initiative of the British Council. Once traditionally conservative bodies like councils and museums start to initiate change, the public sector is never far behind.

Hence I am at a loss to understand why Parry in her essay on Bhabha chooses, quite suddenly in her closing words, to turn from her discussion of Bhabha to invoke Derrida and his “appeal to the principle of hope animating political action in the interest of constructing a different future” (24). It would seem that Bhabha, too, is working towards this end. Neither, however, do I agree with Hardt and Negri who assert that Bhabha continues to fight a battle already won, that he continues to attack the principles of modern sovereignty, seeing that sovereignty as the old enemy, the dominating power—because he remains “fixated on attacking an old form of power and propose[s] a strategy of liberation that could be effective only on that old terrain”, a “terrain” they claim that is already on the wane, completely missing the “novelty of the structures and the logics of power that order the contemporary world” (146).
Cultural studies and its attendant discourse has positioned itself as a powerful discipline in a relatively short time. In a global sense, we have arrived at a point in history where multiculturalism—with its attempts at assimilation and syncretism—has been tried and found wanting and where outdated concepts of nation and culture can no longer describe the cosmopolitan experience of today’s metropolis. As the twenty-first century unfolds, changing cultural definitions, views and value systems will make the “powerful work” Homi Bhabha has produced in “opening up the categories of culture and nation to reveal their inner differentiations and disjunctions” increasingly critical (Parry, 7). What the studies of Bhabha and Simon Gikandi have made me most aware of is the intrinsic instability of culture, the fragility of the term itself and of the space it occupies today. Hence the value of Bhabha’s philosophies to my thesis lies precisely in his disassociation of culture from outdated cultural paradigms:

My aim is to get away from a view of culture as an evaluative activity concerned primarily with the attribution of identity (individual or collective) and the conferral of authenticity (custom, tradition, ritual). This perspective returns to us an increasingly sterile and predictable notion of a core culture and its others, and the debate invariably becomes divided between the majoritarian and the minoritarian perspectives.

Such accounts remain ignorant of the redefinitions of the concepts of culture and community that emerge from the hybrid cosmopolitanism of contemporary metropolitan life. Culture as an authenticating/identity-bestowing function expressive of this past tradition, or that customary belief, is of limited relevance to the cosmopolitan condition.23

**Bakhtin and Clifford**

Before entering into a discussion on Edward Said, in a close-coupled example of the influence of theoretical abstraction on practical application, two other figures whose work has a bearing on the literary texts I propose to analyse are the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin and ethnographer James Clifford.
Celebrated only relatively recently as a major theoretician of the novel and as a cultural historian, Bakhtinian principles are gradually becoming more familiar. Less well-known, however, is that the concept of dialogism was first revealed and published as *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art* in 1929 in a post-revolutionary Russia torn apart by revolutions, wars and famine and that Bakhtin’s enormous output, and ultimate influence, was achieved despite a life in which exile, fire and jealous enmity all played a major part.24 In this seminal work, he cites the contemporary critical exegesis, and upbraids the critics for shortsightedness of their interpretative processes and lack of comprehension of the Russian writer’s “finalizing artistic vision” (*The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 3). He not only credits Dostoevsky with the creation of “the polyphonic novel”, but with producing in the process “an essentially new novelistic genre” (4) thereby “destroying the established forms of the basically monological (homophobic) European novel” (5). Thus, by their failure to understand that the characters are not mere instruments or vehicles for expression of the Dostoevsky’s own ideological perspective, Bakhtin sets out to prove that critics misread the polyphony present in the work by interpreting it as “a single word, a single voice, a single accent” (37) instead of observing it as “the essential plurality of unmerged consciousnesses, a deliberate part of the author’s artistic intention” (6) and accordingly part of the aesthetic whole. He argues that the essence of this polyphony is that Dostoevsky’s characters, or “heroes”, have been constructed as “free people who are capable of standing beside their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even of rebelling against him”, sometimes causing a collision of wills (4). It is Bakhtin’s contention that this particularity of Dostoevsky’s novels allows “a genuine polyphony of full-valued voices” which may, and sometimes does, run counter to the author’s own ideological position to create “a plurality of equal
consciousnesses” which inevitably lend a greater degree of integrity both to the argument and to the work as a whole (4).

Bakhtin called his notion of polyphony “dialogism” which assumes that “languages [from a multitude of differing temporal and socio-economical ideologies and contradictions] do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways” (The Dialogic Imagination, 291). In other words, “whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, [these languages] are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views . . . [which can be] juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically” (292). Thus language is always politically-charged, “overpopulated” with the intentions of others and never neutral or impersonal. By permitting a heteroglot of languages to co-exist, or in other words, by foregrounding a juxtaposition of different opinions, Dostoevsky allows his characters a “freedom and independence vis-à-vis the author . . . in relation to the usual externalizing and finalizing authorial definitions” (9-10). In theory, the hero is introduced “as a free man into the strict and calculated plan of the whole” and the author refrains from a totalizing role.

I suggest that there are two major areas in which this theoretical model works in practice, and in both cases, the principles of dialogism emerge slightly flawed, but in terms of this thesis’s argument for an even playing field, both present a step in the right direction. The first, of course, emerges in literature, the first examples of which Bakhtin perceives in the works of Dostoevsky, but which have implications far beyond what even Bakhtin could have envisaged for the postcolonial environment. The theory suggests that the power that
hitherto lay with the author in a Foucauldian surveillance and control of his or her characters slips sideways to the personalities themselves each of whom are encouraged to speak their truths like the spirits in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Thus, Barthes aside for the moment, the author drops a totalizing control and allows each character a voice. Accordingly a novel could offer a number of differing viewpoints allowing stories to be told or opinions voiced which may be diametrically opposed to each other and placing the responsibility for verdict or interpretation with the reader. No theory is perfect and the problem I perceive here is that the author is still the creator of the work. In other words, although the lights in the panopticon may well be dimmed, the greater freedom of expression the characters possess is still suspect; they are not really free in that they owe their very existence to the author’s imagination and to the book’s end, they are bounded or held captive by the parameters of that vision.\(^{25}\)

The second practical application of dialogism surfaces as a trend in early-twentieth-century ethnography where it became popular in a reversal of the more traditional anthropological practice that was, in essence, a collection and interpretation of data obtained by residing for a period in an indigenous village. The resulting findings were presented as a monologue, almost entirely subjective and constrained by an imperialist mindset, which viewed the dominating strategies and tactics used in the field as ‘for the good of the natives’.\(^{26}\) The application of Bakhtinian dialogic strategies to ethnographic fieldwork stresses the collection of material as dialogue, locating the natives as collaborators and allowing them space in which to tell their own stories in their own voices, a system of “polyvocality” which has been described as a “compelling ethical model for the representation of cultures”.\(^{27}\) Accordingly, dialogism works as it does in literature in that the ethnographer as
the sole authority is removed and instead a range of viewpoints exists alongside each other, a system of representation that ethnographer James Clifford claims has risen in response to “a pervasive crisis of ethnographic authority”, a “predicament” which has assumed “a more than theoretical urgency” (8). Drawing on Bakhtin’s notions of heteroglossia, Clifford claims:

With expanded communication and intercultural influence, people interpret others, and themselves, in a bewildering diversity of idioms—a global condition of what Mikhail Bakhtin (1953) called ‘heteroglossia’. This ambiguous multivocal world makes it increasingly hard to conceive of human diversity as inscribed in bounded, independent cultures. . . . [W]hile ethnographic writing cannot entirely escape the reductionist use of dichotomies and essences, it can at least struggle self-consciously to avoid portraying abstract, ahistorical ‘others’. . . . Participant observation obliges its practitioners to experience, at a bodily as well as an intellectual level, the vicissitudes of translation. (22-4)

While this methodology provides the enormous advantage of allowing a “utopia of plural authorship that accords to collaborators not merely the status of independent enunciators but that of writers [too]”, in practical application this also has its difficulties. In practice, the attempt at a multi-faceted authorship raises questions of authority that prove difficult to resolve. With no clear indicators of leadership, sense of ownership or responsibility, plural authorship has the potential to lead to problems with intellectual property and of professional jealousy. Accordingly, without a leader, projects are liable to falter (51).

This returns me to my earlier suggestion that while the ‘new ethnography’ presents significant progress in terms of a more objective, and thus more balanced, representation over that of methods employed in earlier practice, it is still in need of refinement.

Therefore, although ethnography is becoming increasingly an area in which “authenticity, both personal and cultural, is seen as something constructed vis-à-vis others” and while the
way in which opinions, experience and information is translated and transcribed in the
ethnography of today differs markedly from the practices of twenty years ago, a certain
amount of “indirect style” on the part of the less-visible author is inevitable (274).

Following through on a statement by Clifford that ethnography is “enmeshed in writing”, at
its most fundamental what we understand as writing lies in the process of capturing one or
all of a range of experiences that may include observations, beliefs, feelings or fantasies
within a textual form. But contemporary literary theory holds that the meaning located
within a text is as dependent on the creative consciousness of the reader as it is on the
original intention of the author. Although this theory has its basis in Barthes’ more radical
notion of the death of the author where “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its
destination”, I would like to think that we have moved on from there. While I acknowledge
that there is a multiplicity of ways of reading, approaching or extracting information from a
text, to suggest that a text is not authored in the sense that the responsibility for the content
of that narrative has been summarily withdrawn from the author, is the removal of an
accountability that the creator of the work may not wish to give up.28

What literary theory has made us aware of, however, is that there are more ways than one of
reading a text and that this notion of interpretative reading inevitably disrupts the authority
of the text.29 No longer can either the writer or the reader be considered innocent. Or as
Bakhtin suggests, language is the material from which narrative is constructed and as such
“lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone
else’s” (293). This then leads me to ask: Who then drives this controlling discourse? Who
could be said to control the text?
As the plethora of twentieth-century attempts to define literature attests, the question of ownership of control of a text is not an easy one and perhaps does not have an answer. Even Bakhtin’s theories of the ideal novel being the polyphonic text merely shifts the problem sideways. Although, as Clifford puts it, “the paradigms of experience and interpretation” could be said to have yielded to “discursive paradigms of dialogue and polyphony”, that field of multiple discourses is still subject to a selective process by a prime mover: the person who writes the narrative, who chooses what to put in and what to leave out, and the manner in which, or the degree to which, those discourses will be subordinated or privileged.

The implications this has for literature and just how—or indeed whether—the unruly cultural or cross-cultural experience implicit within a state of “unsettled negotiation” is able to be transformed into an authoritative written account, will be discussed in detail within the individual texts. For now, there is no more pertinent example than that provided by Amitav Ghosh writing in *In an Antique Land* since this book emerged as a direct result of a period of ethnographic fieldwork in a foreign country. In the writing of this text, Ghosh closely followed the principles now emerging in new ethnographic practices by allowing his characters a set of strong discourses juxtaposed with his own which are (presumably) deliberately designed to present weakly by contrast. This use of polyphony is a deliberate construct and from a stylistic perspective it does appear, at times, heavy-handed and awkward. The underlying effect, however, is somewhat more subtle. Thus dialogism succeeds—to a large extent—in what Ghosh sets out to achieve: not simply to “write” the life of village Egypt, but to allow the *fellaheen*—admittedly in a somewhat limited
fashion—to tell their own story. The high degree of self-reflexivity that has gone into this construction is unarguable. But there is still a creator of the work: the choice to present the narrative in this manner rested with Ghosh himself. Thus there is still—dare I say it?—an author and thus an authority.

Perhaps all that can reasonably be agreed at this point is that the novel has evolved over the last century to become a site of negotiation, a site with an overseer capable of a healthy degree of self-reflexivity that rests in one of Bhabha’s spaces between one moment, or one reader, and the next.

**Edward Said**

A critical review of “orientalism” from its beginnings to an assessment of how far its authority has extended to the mainstream literature of today cannot easily be separated from a discussion of its founder Edward Said. Since Said’s thesis plays such a significant role in this work, it is pertinent to ask why in this chapter Said follows the other theorists instead of the other way round. The answer is that the major part of my discussion to this point originated in the argument Said first fashioned in *Orientalism*: the concept of “orientalism” which took place in the early stages of postcolonialism and played a part in shaping—and was in turn shaped by—the colonial discourse analysis that followed. The notions that have existed in postcolonial discourse over the last twenty-five years can be attributed largely to Said’s polemical study. Accordingly, before I discuss the study itself, it is useful to scope the critical atmosphere of the last two decades that has arisen largely as a result of that text. But before attempting to review a portion of the copious literature on and around Said’s work, I propose to pause once again for a glimpse of the nature of a man whose work so influenced world academies. Without falling into the trap of essentialism, I want to suggest
some possible reasons for the point-of-view that he puts forward. In other words, while this is after all a thesis, I believe that I need at least to acknowledge the debt a thesis of this nature owes to such a man.

As is well known, Said carried a dissonance at the core of his being derived from the very real difficulties of a life lived as an American citizen, a Palestinian, an Arab, a Christian and, perhaps both first and last, as “an Oriental”. But, although Said himself reiterated this disharmony often enough, the extent of that internal conflict which existed in a crisis of belonging and the clash of loyalties that it ultimately provoked, is mentioned seldom in the literature on this theorist. To attempt to précis the life and mind of a man like Said is fraught with presumption, but I suggest that small gains can be made by attention to his own protestations. Consequently, I present two short passages which offer totally different, but equally valid, resumés of his life. As can be seen, the sentiments of displacement that flow through both passages give the lie to his avowals to the contrary: his assertions that he belongs both within and without imperialism are clearly false, but why are they false? 30 Significant, too, is his claim of the Orient as his homeland when in fact his association with it was comparatively brief. Further, there is an anomaly between the belonging and the them—a to and a from, a gathering and a distancing within the same sentence—that does not persuade me that Said really believed he belonged anywhere. Why else would he have titled his autobiography, Out of Place? 31 The validity of these descriptions stems from their primary source—Said himself—and each is taken from the introduction of two of his most influential books: Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism respectively. 32

Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an ‘Oriental’ as a child growing up in two British colonies. All of my education, in those colonies (Palestine and Egypt) and in the United States, has been Western, and yet that deep early awareness has persisted. In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the
traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals. . . . [While, in this study] I have tried to maintain a critical consciousness, as well as employing those instruments of historical, humanistic, and cultural research of which my education has made me the fortunate beneficiary. . . . in none of that, however, have I ever lost hold of the cultural reality of, the personal involvement in having been constituted as, “an Oriental”.33

And again:

The last point I want to make is that this book is an exile’s book. For objective reasons that I had no control over, I grew up as an Arab with a Western education. Ever since I can remember I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being completely of either one or the other. During my lifetime, however, the parts of the Arab world that I was most attached to either have been changed utterly by civil upheavals and war, or have simply ceased to exist. And for long periods of time I have been an outsider in the United States, particularly when it went to war against, and was deeply opposed to, the (far from perfect) cultures and societies of the Arab world. Yet when I say ‘exile’ I do not mean something sad or deprived. On the contrary belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily [my emphases].34

In these passages, Said’s angst at not possessing a true homeland is potent and obvious. There is a real pathos that emerges from the absence of conviction in his sentence: Yet when I say “exile” I do not mean something sad or deprived. The lack of control—of power over circumstance—that he evidently experiences in his own life as “an Oriental” becomes a projection of the victim status he projects on to all Orientals. It also goes a long way towards explaining the background and conditioning that led him to produce such a vigorous corpus of work, the set of circumstances that produced the rage which drives his argument across the pages of Orientalism and further into the arguments he raises in defence of that work and beyond. It leads me to question the degree of objectivity within his work and to wonder whether this “dialectic of ‘them and us’” only increases the gap within the “imperial divide” and actually does a further disservice to those he claims he seeks to avenge as well as cementing his stated position as an “outsider”.
The problematic of exile begs the question, too, as to the validity of claims of an outsider. There is a relic of the modernist concept of exile that survives in writing of this nature, a romanticizing of the term that incorporates conflicting suggestions of both privilege and hardship. At the same time, it is reminiscent of claims by both Said and Bhabha that the intrinsic nature of the hybridity created by exile gives privileged insights into other nations and cultures. The danger here is that the hybrid, or displaced person, is allowed to speak for both the dominant race and for the original culture with equal authority and I contend that this is where Said’s argument first runs into trouble. In this respect, parallels can be drawn here between Said and several other major figures within this thesis. I am thinking primarily of two writers: E. G. Browne whose affinity for Persia was such that the single year he spent in that country served to cement a life-long association with the Persian people; and Michael Ondaatje whose mixed Tamil, Sinhalese and Dutch origins and the majority of a life spent in Canada do not prevent him from writing and speaking still with a nostalgia and sense of possessiveness of the land of his birth. In both these cases, as in the case of Said himself, the fact that they no longer reside in the land of which they are writing causes no apparent hesitation in their representation of that land or of its people. Accordingly they are—based on Said’s own definition of “orientalism”—committing “orientalist” actions which I will discuss in some detail throughout this work.

“Orientalism” today

Before the publication of Orientalism, the name Edward Said was little known. Said was a professor of literature, well-published and well-respected, but not widely celebrated outside his own specific academic milieu. Orientalism changed that almost overnight by becoming a set text in history units in universities around the world. In searching for possible
reasons for *Orientalism* attracting the attention it indubitably has, I return again and again to the opportune timing of its publication just as the works of Gikandi and Bhabha I have just discussed benefited from the raising of consciousness that the earlier publication of this study provided. In publishing circles, the state and readiness of the world with regards to the reception of an idea or an argument is always a major consideration and it is my contention that had the book been released either twenty-five years earlier or twenty-five years later, it would not have attracted the attention that it did. While the general public is not always and not necessarily affected by academic issues, the converse is not true. Academia is very much influenced by surrounding circumstances in social, economic and political terms. In this case, it could be argued that world conditions had already opened up a kind of preparedness for the academy to receive the openly race-based argumentation contained within the study. But global readiness was not the only reason for the success of the book. The late 1970s and early 80s brought their own challenges to critical modes of thinking which quickly became less of an individual act and more of a united movement in theories of discourse. Foucault’s formulation, for example, resulted in a major transition from “individuals writing discourse to discourse writing histories”. For the first time, cultural studies was foregrounded as a discipline, gradually forming a discourse of its own with the “orientalist” arguments of Said at its core.

What I want to explore here is a paradox based on the conflicting facts that although Said is a well-respected and acknowledged scholar, the passion and fervour that flows through his study has produced a book that many academics from both East and West dismiss as “unscholarly”. Of his fairly considerable corpus of literary and political work, it is *Orientalism* that has attracted most attention; praised highly by many, it has been variously
called a polemic, an attack, a “perversion of language” by others.\textsuperscript{40} Said’s choice of Foucauldian discourse in which to encase his argument, his apparent disregard for historical fact, his changing premises, the lack of breadth within the examples he chooses, have all played a part in attracting critics. At the same time, the very failings that render him vulnerable to negative criticism produce his most avid supporters. It is not surprising, given the provocative nature of his study, that many of the critics and academics who have responded to Said are themselves polarized in their opinions. While there is nothing to be gained by being drawn into the personal bitterness that this study has unleashed, a brief, although admittedly arbitrary, selection of scholarly opinion will serve to further contextualise his work as well as establish an overview of both his credentials and of what might considered his areas of weakness in relation to my own thesis.

Negative critiques of Said’s study rest predominantly in two distinguishable areas. Firstly, it is claimed that his work lacks scholarship in that: it “reveals a disquieting lack of knowledge of what scholars do and what scholarship is about”; it omits other pertinent schools of scholarship, particularly the Arabic; and that it reflects his idiosyncratic treatment of the facts on which his study seems to be based.\textsuperscript{41} Further criticism claims that his approach is of an arbitrary nature, that his premises lack a logical conclusion, and that he fails to properly justify his own argument. Secondly, historians are plainly contemptuous of his attempt to use the device of discourse as an excuse for ignoring historical fact deploring “his maltreatment of several centuries of intellectual and general history” and the “transmutation of events to fit his thesis”.\textsuperscript{42} His re-arrangement of history is arbitrary and the dates he quotes frequently erroneous. More specifically, John MacKenzie claims that Said is guilty of “ocidentalising the West, by ‘essentialising’ . . . the characteristics of
European powers no less than they ‘essentialised’ the East”.\textsuperscript{43} It would seem that Said’s detractors are unrelenting in their criticism.\textsuperscript{44}

And yet, for each and every critic who disagrees with his sometimes muddled hypotheses, there is one—or more than one—who is equally vocal in not only hailing his work as the seminal study it most obviously is, but in wholeheartedly endorsing both the content and the methodology of his argumentation.\textsuperscript{45} He is praised for contributing “in a major way to the process of decolonisation”, for his study’s potential in “worldwide applicability” and for his “laying bare Orientalism’s persistent belief that there exists a radical ontological difference between the natures of the Orient and the Occident”.\textsuperscript{46}

However, despite the “tornado of protest” \textit{Orientalism} drew from the West in the ten years following its release, as Magdi Wahba\textsuperscript{47} has noted, the Arab world was comparatively silent and the “traditionalist or orthodox Islamic writers barely mentioned him, even when he was translated into Arabic” (187). It is telling, I think, that this particular essay of Wahba’s is itself strangely silent on the subject of Said and “orientalism”, a silence that speaks volumes for Arab opinion. Although Wahba bases his introduction on Said’s study, he concentrates thereafter on a review of the 1987 reprint of Mahmoud Shakir’s \textit{Al-Mutanabbī} (first published in 1936). Thus the “anger observed” in this essay is not the anger of Said but of the deep-seated resentment rife in the Muslim world. An indictment of another kind from the Arab quarter is directed at Said’s research strategy and comes from Nadim al-Bītār\textsuperscript{48} who asks how Said can “generalize and claim that Orientalism as a whole is characterized by hostility (to Islam). How can he use such absolute terms, neither qualified nor relativized, and allege that his generalizations are scientific? Does it mean he read or
perused these sixty thousand books and did not find in them anything running counter to this discovery about the nature of Orientalism with its view of the innate inferiority of the Orient? . . . What makes Said’s claims even more curious is that he drags the writings of earlier centuries also into the bargain (Bītār, 157-8). Like John MacKenzie, Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalāl al-'Azm⁴⁹ is another who has accused Said of essentialism: “He does to (Western) Orientalism what he accuses the latter of doing to the Orient. He dichotomizes and essentializes it. . . . While Orientalism creates according to him a metaphysical—and deliberately distorted—image of the East . . . Said conjures up a metaphysical vision of Orientalism. (East and West), which are nothing but geographical and relativist types, are transformed into absolute and primordial propositions” (8-9).

But it is his use of Foucauldian discourse as the most desirable device within which to present his views that remains most often questioned by Arabic and Western reviewers alike and it is this I return to in my conclusion. It is claimed by many scholars that this methodology only exacerbates the weaknesses in his study, the argument of which—namely the political advantage gained in West’s misrepresentation of the Orient—would have attracted less contempt and condemnation had he presented his findings in a scholarly fashion backed up by well-researched historical fact, but refrained from enclosing them within such strict temporal and geographical parameters. Discourse by its very nature distorts truth and plays havoc with historical ‘reality’. Aijaz Ahmad presents as clear a definition of Said’s use of discourse as any I have come across.

In the Foucaultian definitions, representations cannot be referred back to any truth outside or beyond themselves, nor to the intentionality of the representer, because the structure of the representation is already inscribed in and always regulated by the Power of discourse. Representation corresponds thus not to an external object, a truth, a subjectivity, a purpose, a project, but to the discursive regularity only . . . This is very convenient for Said, for the following reason.
The archive of Western knowledge can now be treated as an autonomous archive *constituted* by the Orientalist discourse, with the consequences that (a) any statement within this archive which is not an Orientalist statement can be breezily consigned to irrelevance, and (b) the autonomous archive thus constructed would now be studied in terms of its own properties and regularities, for a better representation of this very archive for Western readers, with scant scrutiny of that which is represented in it or of the extremely complex meanings and significances that this archive has had for audiences and intelligentsias in Asia and Africa. This is what Said relentlessly does. His ideal reader is the Western reader . . . The non-Western reader is simply not addressed . . . Thus, this high modernism of discursive theories, which speaks only of the representation but never of the objects represented, serves to conceal what cultural nationalism would like to conceal and leaves the door open for an examined indigenous rage against foreigners *because* they are foreigners. (Macfie, 292-3)

James Clifford is somewhat less harsh: “Said’s general attempt to extend Foucault’s conception of a discourse into the area of cultural constructions of the exotic is a promising one . . . [but] Foucault is not easily imitated. His writing has been a series of experiments and tactical interventions rather than a methodological program” (*Predicament of Culture*, 264-5).

In questioning the way in which Said uses Foucault, Sivan asks whether “instead of Foucault’s structuralism we have here an example of the old-time and now justifiably discredited *Ideengeschichte* with its vague impressionism and concentration upon a few ‘landmark authors’ (in this case, a couple of dozen Orientalists), supposedly somehow representative of the totality of this intellectual endeavour” (13). Although Aijaz Ahmad criticizes Said for the contradiction in the theoretical positions he tries to occupy in saying, “Much of the book’s theoretical, methodological and political incoherences come from this effort to simultaneously uphold the absolutely contrary traditions of Auerbachian High Humanism and Nietzschean anti-Humanism”, he grudgingly admits that it is the use of this approach that lends the work its “striking novelty” (Macfie, 286). In a similar vein, James
Clifford condemns Said’s approach on the grounds that in line with Foucault’s anti-humanist theories “a wide range of Western humanist assumptions escape Said’s oppositional analysis, as do the discursive alliances of knowledge and power produced by anticolonial and particularly nationalist movements” (266). But there is a further danger in this notion of colonial discourse analysis in that, as Ahmad suggests, it “radically transforms the status of the research archive assembled during the colonial period under British administration and mostly by English writers. . . . What is lost sight of in this kind of reading is that that archive is a collection neither of truths nor untruths, that it is simply a vast historical resource for helping us understand our own past, and that we need to approach that archive now with . . . skepticism, respect and scholarly care . . .” (Macfie, 295). More recently Fred Halliday has argued for a less discourse-oriented and more methodological way of understanding the Middle East. But while on the one hand he criticises Said for his focus on “discourses about the region, not the societies or politics themselves”, on the other he does admit that part of the success of Orientalism lay in Said’s choice of approach (“Orientalism and its Critics”, 150). In attaching my own observations to those I have parsed above, I suggest that the tremendous interest generated by Said’s argument—the Arab world notwithstanding—proves that his thesis was fresh enough, timely and worthy of being presented in its own right. In other words, I contend that he did not need a frame of discourse in which to present his case, a claim I will pursue further in my conclusion.

There is, however, one other point often missed in all this censure of the way in which Said tackled Orientalism, but which answers some of the criticism and settles some of my own literary concerns with the study, and this is that the book was conceived and written in the
nature of a “response”. It was envisaged by Said in the period following the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 and produced as a reaction to the poor quality of both the academic and media covering of those wars, the writing of which “intellectually and politically as well as from a literary standpoint, struck me as incredibly impoverished and backward”.  
As such, it constituted a politically- and ideologically-charged response “to the challenge of the West” and was never intended as an example of great literature (32). My point here is not to mount a defense of Said’s argument, but to contextualize the spirit in which it was written, to suggest that it arose out of a desire to be heard, that it was written in an attempt rise above the sentiment of victimisation that Said plainly felt, and that it presented an opportunity “to act as an interlocutor rather than as a silent and inert Other” (“Orientalism Revisited”, 32). In this respect, it is telling, I think, that it was written so spontaneously that its author did not even have a specific target audience in mind, this fairly fundamental oversight providing in itself some of the confusion critics have picked up. This goes, I think, some way towards explaining the paradox with which I began this exploration of the reviews of Said’s book.

**Historical Orientalism**

Retreating yet further into the past, I come now to an historical evaluation of Orientalism which I see as a necessary antithesis to theoretical evolution and surrounding debate I have touched on above. The questions that occupy me in this section are closely tied to Said’s reinscription of “orientalism”: namely, before Said, what did *orientalism* mean and where did it originate? As a starting point, I present the very definite geographical sense ascribed to its derivations by *The Oxford English Dictionary* in which *orientalism* is defined as possessing “the characteristics, modes of thought or expression, fashions, etc. of Eastern
nations”; oriental scholarship becomes a “knowledge of Eastern languages; and an orientalist is either “a member of the Eastern or Greek church” or “one versed in oriental languages and literature” (931).\textsuperscript{55}

The men—and they were almost exclusively male—who were known as Orientalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were those skilled in oriental languages, culture and literature and who frequently worked or travelled within the East arriving back in the West to write about their experiences or impart their knowledge to others less travelled.\textsuperscript{56} They were an assorted bunch of teachers, writers, painters, public servants, officials, military personnel and missionaries, for the most part totally innocent of the part they were to play in colonial discourse analysis and the politics of power.\textsuperscript{57} The first, and most important, point of all to make about historical Orientalism is that it was a product of its time. The reading back of contemporary attitudes and prejudices into historical periods is a dangerous act in that the conclusions it produces are frequently false and always misleading. Although it was inevitable that this Orientalist teaching or writing or painting should emanate from a Western viewpoint—and it is a truism that both religion and officialdom were more intrusive than useful in most cases and downright dangerous and antagonistic in others—this does not in itself mean, or even imply that “orientalism” was used only as an imperialistic vehicle for power. Neither does it mean that “orientalism” and colonialism are necessarily “mutually entailed” as colonial discourse analysis would suggest (Trautmann, 22).\textsuperscript{58} Thus Said’s argument can most gainfully be used to provoke our interest in understanding Orientalism “. . . through the language and cultural contexts of its [own] times and not ours” (MacKenzie, 215). The discourse needs balancing against the
contributions of the Orientalists: those ideas, modernizations, education and infrastructure that surely were not all driven by a desire for power and glory. As John MacKenzie claims: “...to suggest that they [the West] ... failed to produce any preservation of lasting value is surely a counsel of despair” (214).

There are almost as many opinions on how Orientalism as a profession came about as there are reviews on Said and so, for the sake of clarity, I propose to examine only those most recognized sources. In this respect, there is probably a no more unbiased and universally acknowledged source from both sides of the debate than that of Maxime Rodinson. Not only is Rodinson one of the few scholars to gain Edward Said’s approbation, but as well the Islamic perspective he applies to his discussion of Orientalism provides a sound basis for comparison with Browne’s late nineteenth-century views of Islam, of significance in my discussion of A Year Amongst the Persians in chapter two. Other important sources of historical information are, however, those of Bernard Lewis and Thomas Trautmann each of whom approach Orientalism differently yet again.

In his celebrated Europe and the Mystique of Islam, Rodinson claims that the two hundred years from the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth that it took for the West “to move toward a more objective understanding of the Middle East... [was due to] a number of changing factors: geographical proximity, close political relations, increasing economic interactions, the growing number of travelers and missionaries who journeyed to the East, and the passing of a unified Christianity in Europe” (37). Of most interest to me here is the clear path that the intellectual and religious liberation that arose directly from the European Enlightenment in the late seventeenth
century provided in terms of a fertile ground for Orientalist specialization. Concurrent with this, during the eighteenth century, the decline of the Ottoman Empire left large portions of the East as little more than British protectorates and thus vulnerable to colonization. If to these factors of burgeoning Orientalist specialization and vulnerable territories is added the rapidly increasing sophistication of all forms of infrastructure including transport and communications that arose from the Industrial Revolution, it becomes clear just how the framework for greater familiarity between East and West was laid.

Paradoxically, this increasing pressure to specialize led directly to the problems voiced by Said and echoed by Rodinson in that “what amounted to the entire study of Eastern civilizations was left to the philologists . . . [who] lacking a theoretical framework of their own . . . could only reflect the common opinions of their own society in their appreciation of the social and historical factors” (Rodinson, 62). Thus the construction of the Orient through Western eyes began.

However, tracing this path to “objective understanding” on the part of the West suggests that post-Renaissance “curiosity about the East had not yet turned into exoticism, that is, the thrill of ‘escape,’ that sense of being transported through art or lifestyle without ever leaving one’s own culture . . . [and that while the few works that existed] of pure fantasy may have thrilled the literary public, no one took them seriously as a source of information about the history or character of the Muslim East” (38). But this changed with the arrival of first-hand accounts of travellers, diplomats and explorers. “Exoticism broke into art in the seventeenth century and swamped it in the eighteenth. Even accurate data about Eastern
civilizations . . . became distorted” (39). This growing “fascination with the idea of local
color” and the accompanying distortion of “fact” is something which is often overlooked
when discussing exoticism, namely that these facts, this “local color” undergoes distortion
because of the attempt to integrate it into “an altogether different world vision”. As a result,
what is considered normative in one culture or civilization becomes curious or extraordinary
or exotic—and thus striking or interesting—when viewed from the perspective of another
culture, or when represented from the viewpoint of that other culture. As Said would readily
agree, an “integration of exotic facts into wholes . . . free of all ethnocentricism . . . [is a
process that] has not even been achieved in our time”. But if it were the travellers and
explorers who returned to their home lands with fantastic stories of the East, the actuality of
the “distortion” or assimilation of the exotic “began with the erosion of the privileged
position of Christianity in European civilization”. Rodinson claims that the schism that
appeared in the traditional structure of the Roman Church left room for questioning and
experiment, a softening of attitudes towards the Muslim East and a growing curiosity about
Islam. In other words, it allowed for a more objective study of other religions and other
world views, the Muslim world key among them, and Islam began to be seen as a “rational
religion, quite remote from those Christian tenets that most opposed reason” (46).66
“Objectivity” gradually gave way to admiration as fear of the unknown was replaced by an
increasing erudition and if Rodinson’s claim that the “eighteenth century saw the Muslim
East through fraternal and understanding eyes” seems just a little implausible or overly
optimistic,67 the liberating effect of scholarly research ensured that there was certainly a
great deal more acceptance of Islam than previously (48).
Accounts in both Said’s and Rodinson’s works concur in suggesting that it was the Arabist Antoine Galland’s preface to Barthélemy d’Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque orientale* published in 1697 that led to the beginning of this European fascination with “the exotic, enchanting Muslim East” (Rodinson, 50), an attitude which remained in place until less fanciful works began to challenge the viewpoint. But while Said continues by derogating d’Herbelot by asserting that it was in “such efforts as d’Herbelot’s [that] Europe discovered its capacities for encompassing and Orientalizing the Orient” (Said, 65)—Rodinson moves on by describing the path to a broader and more objective understanding brought about by men like the Comte de Volney in his claim that Volney’s *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* (1787) is a masterpiece of meticulous research” (Rodinson, 51).

This is where I believe the sentiments implicit in Rodinson’s phrase “objective understanding” start to falter. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, aided and abetted by the Enlightenment, the three specific concerns Said addresses in *Orientalism* are also identified by Rodinson: “... a sense of Western superiority ... a romantic exoticism mesmerized by a magical East ... and a specialized erudition focused on the great ages of the past” (52). Accordingly, no longer can romantic exoticism be regarded as innocent fantasy, but instead a fantasy fashioned around, or grafted onto, a known ‘reality’. Knowledge begets awareness which, in turn, leads to responsibility. Hence it is inevitable that “objective structure” and “subjective restructure” gradually become, as Said asserts, “interchangeable” (129).

But moving from the hypothetical to the evidential, clearly writing about the East did not exist in a vacuum but as part of the literary trend of the West. At this point in the early
1800s, literature was moving away from the classical tradition exemplified in the poetry of Milton and Pope to an era that foreshadowed the works of the Romantics. Notwithstanding the later works of Goethe and riding on one of the first waves of nationalist fervour, “the reaction against classicism” in some parts of Europe had been extreme. In Germany, by 1800, for example, Friedrich Schlegel had insisted: “It is to the East . . . that we must turn to find the ultimate romanticism . . . and following his own advice, he began to study Indian civilization” (Rodinson, 54).

It was at this point that Oriental studies in Europe—specifically in France—became formalized, which led inevitably to the gradual popularity of Orientalism as a vocation. Among a number of Orientalists of questionable merit, it is the French Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) who stands out. Although he is highly respected in Rodinson’s account for his scholarly approach and meticulous research, ironically—but with a certain amount of justification—it is these qualities that lead to his ultimate condemnation in Said’s version of events. Said states: “Sacy claims simply to have exerted himself on behalf of his students, to make it unnecessary for them to purchase (or read) a grotesquely large library of Oriental stuff. In time, the reader forgets the Orientalist’s effort and takes the restructuring of the Orient signified by a chrestomathy as the Orient tout court. Objective structure (designation of Orient) and subjective restructure (representation of Orient by Orientalist) become interchangeable. . . . Sacy’s anthologies not only supplement the Orient; they supply it as Oriental presence to the West. Sacy’s work canonizes the Orient; it begets a canon of textual objects passed on from one generation of students to the next” (Orientalism, 129).

Although he is criticized for his doctrinal approach, Sacy is nonetheless a vital link in the early growth phase of Orientalism as a new discipline. Through Sacy’s work, the École des
Langues orientales in Paris became the model Orientalist institution; Oriental societies were formed in Europe, Britain and America; Russian universities began offering Islamic languages; journals soon followed. As a result, Orientalism as a discipline, the particular focus of which was the study of the Orient, was born. So far, the path is comparatively uncomplicated.

Of course, co-existing with this scholarly focus on the East was the artistic and literary and, as already mentioned, this is the point at which Orientalism becomes less objective and more subjective. Gradually, artistic licence moved towards Romantic exoticism and the resulting characterization of “... fierce and lavish scenes ... harems ... turquoise domes and white minarets ... springs under palm trees ... captive women forced into submission by their lustful captors ...”, all of which resulted in an easy gratification of Western fantasies and presented colourful and not necessarily accurate opportunities for written and artistic works (Rodinson, 59). And, so, along with Said’s criticism of Sacy and scholars of his ilk, it is this type of “orientalism”, this fantastical and often lascivious construction on the part of Westerners describing the East that adds grist to Said’s polemic. In Thomas Trautmann’s phrase, this viewpoint—frequently inseparable from authority and implicitly imbued with Foucault’s theories of knowledge and power—of the East has come be to known as “Said’s Orientalism”. Thus

... for Said—and this is a crucial move—Orientalism is not limited to the intellectual product of Orientalists. Said’s Orientalism includes as well (as we could expect from a literary critic) the Orientalism of poets, and painters, and more. Orientalism is the “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having an authority over it” (1978:3). In the end, for Said, Orientalism is any European pronouncement about the Orient that is made with a show of authority. [Thus] the Saidian expansionary redefinition of Orientalism
unites the productions of Orientalists and non-Orientalists, both of the colonial past and of the postcolonial present. (20)72

This, of course, is the crux of the argument: that Said’s “expansionary redefinition” extends to the point where “any pronouncement about the Orient that is made with a show of authority” is labelled “orientalist”.73 Scholars claim this is confusing and clearly has nothing to do with the objective principles on which Orientalism as a discipline was based. While it could, of course, be argued that this authoritarian positioning on the part of the imperialist powers started with Sacy’s philological efforts in terms of a scholarly and language-based focus, and gained its absolute power in backing from the arts, this is too simplistic.74 Such an argument would suggest that a handful of scholars and philologists, assisted by their literary and artistic peers, effectively created an entire continent. Since this is patently not the case, how much closer can we come to re-constructing a ‘reality’?

Let me start with claims by Said’s antagonist Bernard Lewis. Lewis’s academic specialization of the Near East leads to his claim that the first uses of the word Orientalism were two-fold: that, historically, it was applied both to a school of painting and, more usually, a branch of scholarship.75 In line with its dictionary definition, Lewis claims that the word applied to Eastern Europe, the eastern Mediterranean or what we now know as the Middle East because at that time “for most Europeans. . . [t]his was the East, and no more specific definition was needed, since no other East was known” (Macfie, 252). Along with Rodinson, Lewis dates the beginnings of the discipline from the expansion of scholarship which took place from the time of the Renaissance onwards. Since these early scholars were concerned with the “recovery, study, publication, and interpretation of texts . . . the first and most essential task that had to be undertaken [was the study of language before] the serious study of such other matters as philosophy, theology, literature, and history became possible”
and consequently, he maintains, Schwab’s study of the Orient, this second renaissance, was made possible by the philologists who became the first Orientalists. So far, Said and Lewis are in agreement: that the philologists were the first Orientalists.

However, David Kopf and others hold that a third more specific use of the word came about in the late-eighteenth century as “an ideology, a movement . . . a set of social institutions” known as “modern Orientalism” or in some accounts, the “new Orientalism” (Macfie, 196). This movement began in Calcutta in 1784 as a cultural policy conducted by a civil service elite known as the British Orientalists led by British General Warren Hastings and ended with Governor-General Bentinck’s support of Macaulay’s anti-Orientalist policies some fifty years later. Hastings’ aim was to “combat the cultural arrogance and general incompetence of Company officials who had served in India from the time of Clive (1750s) by inculcating a new set of values . . . [within an] elite competent in Indian languages and responsive to Indian traditions” (199-200). An excerpt from the introduction of Charles Wilkins’ translation of the Bhagavad-Gita (1785) shows something of Hastings’ nature:

I have seen an extract from a foreign work of great literary credit, in which my name is mentioned, with very undeserved applause, for an attempt to introduce the knowledge of Hindoo literature into the European world, by forcing or corrupting the religious consciences of the Pundits, or professors of their sacred doctrines. This reflexion was produced by the publication of Mr. Halhed’s translation of the Poottee, or code of Hindoo laws; and is totally devoid of foundation. . . . I can declare truly, that if the acquisition could not have been obtained but by such means as have been supposed, I should never have sought it. It was contributed both cheerfully and gratuitously, by men of the most respectable characters for sanctity and learning in Bengal . . . (Warren Hastings, Banaris, 4th October, 1784).
In that he was more concerned with—and inevitably from his high-governmental position manipulated—the social and cultural factors in India, it could well be argued that it was Hastings and not Sacy who was the father of modern Orientalism and that, as such, Hastings is deserving of more than the hasty mention he gets in *Orientalism*.

To this point, it is safe to assume that the discipline started with the teaching and learning of Oriental languages in order to better understand the texts of the East, and that the societies and language schools that erupted all played a part in extending the new discipline beyond its incubatory period. If, however, contiguous with all this, some use was made of Orientalists in the administrative positions as they became available and those positions were positions of power, it cannot be denied that historical Orientalism has moved into an area that becomes political. Again, there is agreement with Said in Kopf’s statement that “no one would deny Said’s contention that Orientalism was politically motivated and was an outgrowth of the British colonialist experience” (199-200), and for that matter, the French and German, too. But caution is needed in that this does not in itself mean that *all* Orientalists were politically motivated. The administrative procedures that resulted did indeed use Orientalists, but the opposite corollary—that Orientalists used the process for their own collective ends—is not automatically entailed. It is however pertinent to question whether it was the disjunction that occurred at this point that provoked a debate that began by its agreement in first principles before becoming so radically, and sometimes bitterly, polarized?

Part of the answer reflects back to the comments made at an earlier stage of this discussion which suggest that it is the methodology Said has used to present his argument: the artificial
construct of discourse that is responsible for distorting what is generally regarded as historical reality. For example, Kopf asserts: “Orientalism as history exists and has existed outside of Said’s personal conception of it. Historical Orientalism has a concrete reality, was complex, internally diverse, changed over time, and was never monolithic. It was quite independent of Said’s “discourse”; its focus and expression varied with time and with place. It was certainly not a unified set of propositions, universally accepted by all Westerners involved in Oriental administration and scholarship, whose progressive refinement was inseparable from the Western powers’ gradual acquisition of much of the world’s real estate” (199).

Instead, Kopf argues, it was anti-Orientalist and anti-\textit{Oriental} individuals such as James Mill and, later, Thomas B. Macaulay at whom Said should have directed the brunt of his criticism, but Said barely mentions these two men. Macaulay was a leading figure among the proto-imperialists of the 1830s who were known as Anglicists because they repudiated all Oriental languages in favour of English and openly professed an “intolerance for all things Oriental”. Indeed, Kopf maintains, James Mill’s \textit{History of British India} played a major role in “shaping precisely those images of the Orient Said writes about” (203-4). But this was not Orientalism. It was \textit{anti}-Orientalism or Said’s “orientalism”.

Support for Kopf’s historical approach is to be found with Trautmann who concurs in two significant respects: firstly, in contending that it was on the Anglicists that Said should have focused the ire of his study and, secondly, with regard to the origins of the new Orientalism. He maintains that the “formation of the Asiatic Society in 1784 . . . [ensured] that an overlapping roster of persons, British and Indian, were jointly engaged in the advancement
of Orientalist knowledge, the teaching of Indian languages to servants of the East India Company, the operation of the courts administering Hindu and Muslim law, and the construction and execution of government policy”. But he goes further than Kopf in making the point that the scope of this policy inevitably led to a commitment of “developing and controlling knowledge of . . . [the Indians] through knowledge of Indian languages” and suggests that “Said would have made his case better by putting India [rather than the Middle East] at the center” of his argument (22).79

Although, semantically, the word Orientalism worked well for nearly two hundred years, it became increasingly imprecise. It was formally abolished at the First International Congress of Orientalists in Paris in 1973 because, according to Lewis, delegates expressed an increasing dissatisfaction with “a term that indicated neither the discipline in which they were engaged nor the region with which they were concerned. . . . [a rationale reinforced] by scholars from Asian countries who pointed to the absurdity of applying such a term as ‘Orientalist’ to an Indian studying the history or culture of India” (Macfie, 254). Instead, in a wordy but perhaps more politically and geographically-conscious move, the congress restyled itself the “International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa”.

It would appear that even before Said came along, the word orientation had outgrown its historical origins. Outside academia, from World War II onwards, there would have been few people who would have understood its original meaning.80 After Said reinscription, the meaning of Orientalism changed completely so that it now stands as analogous to imperialistic practice overlaid with strong racist allusions. Encasing his argument within the (theoretically) unassailable boundaries of discourse, and despite other definitions, briefly
stated and largely dismissed, Said [re]defined “orientalism” as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (*Orientalism*, 3). Thus the meaning of the term “orientalism” was distorted from the essentially positive where it was “the polar opposite of Eurocentric imperialism as viewed by the Asians themselves” to one synonymous with abuse and arrogance (Macfie, 205-6). Trautmann returns the debate to Said’s choice of terminology:

There is nothing inherently wrong with such inflationary redefinition of a familiar word, which happens all the time. But it creates the problem that new and older senses of this word trip up one another in discussions of India. Let us tag these two meanings so that we can distinguish them in discussion; call them Orientalism 1 (knowledge produced by Orientalists, scholars who know Asian languages) and Orientalism 2 (European representations of the Orient, whether by Orientalists or others). In India the British Orientalists were by no means a unitary group, but Orientalists constituted the core of a distinct policy group who . . . had been dominant since the time of Hastings and who had devised the Orientalizing policy. This group constituted a faction promoting education in the vernacular languages; these “Orientalists” were in opposition to the “Anglicists”, Evangelicals, and others who promoted English as a medium of instruction. The Anglicists were also involved in the production of knowledge of a kind Said calls Orientalism. In this case Orientalism 1 was one party to a dispute with Orientalism 2, and Saidian expansion of Orientalism, applied in this context, tends to sow confusion where there once was clarity. (23)

Somewhat predictably, Lewis puts it in stronger terms: “To find a precedent for such high-handed treatment of language, one must go back to Humpty Dumpty, who, it will be recalled, when challenged on his use of ‘glory’ to mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’ replied: ‘When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.’ The use of the term Orientalism is clearly a perversion of language. It is, however, sadly accurate, since it reflects a by-now wide spread perversion of truth” (Macfie, 251).

It would appear, then, that there is general agreement that it was a poor choice of term on Said’s part and that it reflects badly on his understanding of Orientalist history. Rather
ironically, his anti-Orientalist stance places him squarely within a band of radical nineteenth-century Westerners who were known as anti-Orientalists, but for the opposite reason since they were unquestionably anti-Oriental at the same time. Trautmann is right: it certainly creates confusion where there once was clarity.

The interesting component of all this negative criticism of Said is that it is so focussed on the two aspects I mentioned earlier—the lack of scholarship in Orientalism and his choice of methodology—and so little on the main intent of his study which was, after all, to “raise questions” about the representation of the East by outsiders. As Trautmann rightly points out, Said’s use of the Middle East for the geographical focus of his study was, certainly in retrospect, ill-advised. Given the difficulties inherent in defining the parameters of that area—the real internal dissention between the Arab states as well as that between that region and the West—Said’s use of this area for his analysis complicates an already problematic paradigm. In addition, as I mentioned earlier, the problem is further compounded by his own self-admitted “outsider” status. Although Said may consider his part-Arab status enough to base his study on the Middle East, the Muslim world does not appear to agree. Does this not render Said’s work as “orientalist” as those he condemns?

But what does not appear to be acknowledged by his critics is that Said traps himself more than once. While there is little doubt that both the terminology he uses and the discourse that encloses his argument exacerbates the division between his opponents and disciples, discourse for Said becomes a two-edged sword. It could be argued that on the one hand it has had the opposite effect to that which was intended in that it has created an unnecessary distraction from the effectiveness of the study. His main purpose, after all, in invoking
Foucault was to equate his own innate sense of colonial injustice with theories of power and domination. In Said’s words:

> What I was doing [in *Orientalism*]—this is something that I learned from Foucault—was producing things that become a box of utensils for other people to use. In anthropology in particular, it raised the question of what it means when an entire science is based upon unequal power between two cultures. In sociology, in political science, it also raised the question of how you talk about areas of the world that are seen not neutrally but as part of some political configuration. I wasn’t trying to resolve the question of what the Orient is, or what the real Islamic world is, but rather to raise questions. (“Orientalism Revisited”, 33)

Does this mean that outside a discourse of this nature the realities of power and domination evaporate?

There is another area, too, in which his argument becomes trapped. Any discourse is weakened by the number of exceptions it admits. It works by virtue of its block to other forms or argument and owes its existence—certainly its success—to its inflexibility in this respect. Accordingly, because he is bound to the confines of a postcolonial discourse that he himself has largely fashioned, Said’s thesis is restricted by those boundaries. He recognizes only two exceptions to his “orientalist” allegations for writers or artists depicting the East, namely, a measure of “self-reflexivity”, a pausing to reflect and evaluate one’s actions, and later in *Culture and Imperialism*, the value of the aesthetic in literature becomes an allowable trait for “orientalist” writing. As I have shown, it is Said’s adherence to discourse that so infuriates his critics because, finally, within the parameters of this form of argumentation, his thesis is defensible. But, paradoxically, his difficulties are also
exacerbated by the very methodology on which he depends for his argument since—as I will show in the following discussions of Orientalists, Indian, Australian and black writers—it is this very device that finally renders his theory impossible.

On the other hand, it could also be argued that Said’s book would have not had the impact it undoubtedly has had—and continues to have—without the selective use of the stratagems inherent within discourse. Because the device of discourse obviates the necessity of including any truth that does not directly serve the purpose of that discourse, the argument necessarily becomes more concentrated. And while an argument of a less intense and provocative nature necessarily provokes less controversy, it also attracts less interest. One only has to read Said’s later works in which this device is not used to see the same argument presented with less effect.82 And Orientalism certainly produced a lasting effect.83

Thus it is my contention that the use of discourse made “orientalism”, both as a book and as a late-twentieth-century notion, rupturing all previous uses of the term. Although it is true Said did attempt to dilute his strong and selective views in following works like Culture and Imperialism and in a number of essays and lectures, Orientalism is the book critics return to time and time again. It played a major role in shaping a discourse ripe for the launching and it is obvious that Said’s contribution to raising twenty-first-century awareness in the escalating discipline of cross-cultural criticism has provided a much-needed stage for discussion and constructive debate. It certainly opened channels of communication for men such as Homi Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Amitav Ghosh by stressing the promotion of cultural exchange and healing by releasing, and not cementing or hiding, bitterness. Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic discussed earlier in this chapterforegrounds the importance
of allowing voice and for all Said’s cited lack of scholarship and alleged misrepresentation of factual information, the study raises many issues that will not now be allowed to die.

In summary, it is clear that while the work of Said produces much to be admired, it goes too far in some directions and not far enough in others.\textsuperscript{84} It makes a valuable statement within the postcolonial framework now inhabited by theorists like Bhabha and younger academics like Gikandi, and offers a position against which the writers and works I have chosen to examine will be deconstructed.\textsuperscript{85} But there is a danger, too, that it promotes a discourse of victimization. In this respect, I quote, for example, from Ernest Wilson:

Orientalism, after all is said and done, is ‘fundamentally a political doctrine’ ([\textit{Orientalism}], 204). It facilitates the daily business of one group dominating another. The Orientalist then mixes the fact of domination with the fact of differences and concludes that all aspects of the culture are inferior. . . . The Black community [of America] has been subjected to a kind of \textit{internal} Orientalism. Its members too have been defined as ‘The Other,’ to be feared and controlled; the dark, exotic native son viewed as the near mirror image of civilized and respectable white people. (243)\textsuperscript{86}

The perspective from which Wilson writes returns me to the concerns with which I started this chapter, namely, the legitimacy of postcolonialism’s re-presentation of the colonial past as almost entirely nefarious. A greater anxiety emerges here, however, in an extension of this argument which continues to polarize white and black and, as identified by John MacKenzie, the problem now becomes that the discourse itself has taken precedence over any reality of “social change or outcomes” (32). It is at this juncture that I see the greatest divide—and utmost social danger—between the more practically-oriented theory of Bhabha.
and the discursive position of Said. Despite the respect these two intellectuals hold for one
another, it should be noted that Said’s primary hypothesis—that of the we/other—is so
dependent on notions of dichotomy that it collapses under Homi Bhabha’s lack of regard for
the binary.
Notes

1 The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.
4 I find Gikandi’s study particularly interesting not only for his contextualisation of colonial culture in a book that sets out to discuss the relationship between writing, identity and culture within the colonies, but also because we both spent a large proportion of our respective childhoods delimited by barbed-wire fences during the years of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. Gikandi was brought up in Kenya at a time when colonialism was represented by “insignias of colonial rule at its most dramatic moment of crisis and power: images of barbed wire fences, watchtowers, the Royal Scottish Fusiliers in red berets, and guard dogs” dominated every facet of his life. Alongside these images, however, is juxtaposed the other side of colonial rule “represented by the hospital, the school, and the church at the Church of Scotland Mission at Tumutumu, where I grew up” (xix). He was educated at the University of Nairobi, obtaining his postgraduate degree at the University of Edinburgh when the common practice was to separate the “Great Tradition” of English literature from the “new body of writing produced in the former colonies” (xi).
5 Not all critics would agree that there is an essential difference between the arguments of Said and Bhabha. As an example, in her discussion of Bhabha’s The Location of Culture in “Signs of Our Times”, Third Text, ed. Jean Fisher, 28/29 (1994): 5-24, Benita Parry claims Bhabha “provide[s] a form of writing cultural difference that is inimical to binary boundaries, and effect the relocation of western modernity . . . an undertaking [which] appears to have affinities with Edward Said’s ‘contrapuntal’ readings of the colonial archives which, in mapping the overlapping territories and intertwined histories of metropolis and colony, and noting the mixtures of cultures and identities on a global scale consolidated by imperialism, restore to the history of modernism ‘the massive infusions of non-European cultures into the metropolitan heartland’” (6). It should be noted, however, that Parry is quoting from Said’s Culture and Imperialism (292) and that Said’s view here is a modification of his original, somewhat stronger, argument. Bhabha himself credits “Edward Said’s work . . . [with] suggesting a whole transdisciplinary terrain—as I say in my book, Said’s perspective caused the flash of recognition in which I first apprehended my own project”. See Bhabha’s discussion with W. J. T. Mitchell, “Translator translated”, Artforum 33.7 (1995): 80-4. This version retrieved from file://C:\WINDOWS\TEMP\Interview with Homi Bhabha.html on 9.5.2002. And in Said’s opinion, Homi Bhabha is a “theorist of uncommon power. His work is a landmark in the exchange between ages, genres and cultures; the colonial, postcolonial, modernist and postmodern”. Quoted by Nick Wadham-Smith, “Re-inventing Britain” and retrieved from the British Council website at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/studies/reinventing_britain/manifesto.htm on 24.4.2002.
6 It is precisely because of the strength and clarity of Parry’s argument that I use it here to open my discussion of Homi Bhabha.
7 The complete quotation should read: “If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs [this last phrase, my emphasis]. The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention” (112).
8 In writing of “unspoken, unrepresented pasts”, Homi Bhabha is referring specifically to contemporary American writer Toni’s Morrison’s Beloved, the story of the slave from the past who returns to haunt the present. But this concept is equally valid when applied to a number of texts, one of which is Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost.
9 Since it is in the literary implications of these processes of cultural negotiation that my interest lies, a snug fit for this liminal space is modern literature itself. Literature works both on an articulative and performative basis. It mediates between one space and another or between one moment and another. Recalling Bhabha: It is the “stairwell” between levels that link writer and audience and critic. But it is more too. It is a juncture at which the temporal is collapsed into the space of reading, watching or listening. It is that adjacent site where power relations can be taken apart and renegotiated. It is the crossing of the binary divide where the me and the you—the self:other—are allowed to dissolve and re-form again and again like amoeba, in a state of “unsettled negotiation”.
10 For a comprehensive list of Bhabha’s critics, see Parry, “Signs of Our Times”, n. 4. But see also my discussion of Arun Mukherjee in chapter four. See also the web-posted articles by Graves on Bhabha.
Synonymous with the name of Bhabha are terms like “unsettled negotiation”, “liminal”, “interstices” and “hybridity”. It seems to me, however, that in a bid to comprehend its necessary complexities, much of the criticism of Bhabha’s theory tends to reduce rather than expand the sense of what he is saying. In so doing, many of his critics overlook the difficulties inherent in the entire issue of cross-cultural representation. See, for example, this description of “hybridization” in the second part of a paper titled “Minority Culture and Creative Anxiety” given by Bhabha at the Re-inventing Britain workshop, Berlin, 1997, and retrieved from the British Council website on 24.4.2002: “Hybridisation is not just out there, to be found in an object or some mythic ‘hybrid’ identity—it is a way of knowledge, a process of understanding or perceiving the ambiguous, anxious movement of transit or transition that necessarily accompanies any mode of social transformation without the promise of celebratory closure, or a transcendence of the complex, even conflictual conditions that attend upon the act of cultural translation”.

Mitchell interview.

See Parry, 17.

Mitchell interview.


Parry paraphrasing Said, 18.

This refusal to acknowledge binary divisions is linked firmly to his notions on hybridity where hegemonic or hierarchical systems function by imposing binary structures on societies resulting in a homogenization of social identities and repressing the very differences that Bhabha seeks to privilege.

Quotation from William Carlos Williams’ famous poem “To Elsie” cited here from Clifford, 3.

Graves paraphrasing Bhabha in “Homi K. Bhabha: the Liminal Negotiation of Cultural Difference”.

“The focus is on making the linkages through the unstable elements of literature and life—the dangerous tryst with the ‘untranslatable’—rather than arriving at ready-made names” (The Location of Culture, 227).

See also Michael Hart and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2000): “Bhabha’s . . . attack on binary divisions . . . is both a sociological claim about the real nature of societies and a political project aimed at social change. The former is in fact a condition of possibility of the latter . . . The postcolonial political project . . . is to affirm the multiplicity of differences so as to subvert the power of the ruling binary structures” (144-5).

Homi Bhabha was keynote speaker at the inaugural workshop-seminar-conference held in London in March 1997.

See Bhabha’s proposal, “Re-inventing Britain”.


Invoking Bhabha: The characters may well exist “beyond” the final pages if their voices are strong enough to live on in the reader’s mind. See too James Clifford’s discussion of Williams’ “Elsie’, The Predicament of Culture, chapter one, but in particular 6-7.

For more on the development of ethnographic practices from traditional anthropology, see Clifford, 21-54.


See my discussion of reading theory in chapter four.

There is a difficulty in establishing exactly what we mean when we speak of “modernist” texts. While the postmodern is easy enough to establish in that it must obviously be “post”, or set against, another style or body of work, and while modernist forms can clearly be seen in art and architecture, in literature there is less clarity. A full investigation is not entirely relevant to this thesis, and I propose only to suggest a timeframe for the modern, starting with Eliot’s “Prufrock” in 1917 and extending to the 1970s. I suggest that postmodern literature embodies a greater degree of self-reflexivity, authorial intervention and less formality than that of the modern.

His distaste for imperialism comes across with great clarity I believe.

This issue of displacement and exile exists so frequently with writers, it becomes a condition, cathartic or exploitative, of writing for many. See my discussions of Ondaatje, Ghosh and Levy. See also my references to Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul in chapter four.

The impact that Said made with Orientalism which was, admittedly, somewhat mitigated by a dilution of his argument in Culture and Imperialism has resulted in a scholarly concentration on these two books which almost entirely overlooks the fact that he was the sole author of at least another ten full-length works.

While I respect Fred Halliday’s claim that the ‘the critique of ‘Orientalism’ long pre-dates the publication of Said’s work . . . [which] can be seen as coming at the end of and to a considerable degree negating an earlier body of debate and work, much of it stimulated by the war in Vietnam and the broader upheavals of the Third World at the time’ and his citations of Maxime Rodinson (1972), Bryan Turner (1978) and Anouar Abdel-Malek (1963) in this respect, this does not change my opinion that it is Said alone who is responsible for the re-fashioning of “orientalism” and the force of the subsequent debate (148). See Halliday’s essay “‘Orientalism’ and its Critics”, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 20.2 (1993): 145-63.

For that matter, the world war climate in which Bakhtin’s work was released produced an opposite set of conditions which resulted in a considerable delay in its attracting the critical approbation it deserved.

Thomas R. Trautmann offers another considered reason for the success of Said’s book. In Aryans and British India, Berkeley, Los Angeles (London: University of California Press, 1997), he says: “What constituted the success of Said’s book was that it exploded the comforting sense of ‘that was then and this is now’ and implanted in its place a sense that ‘all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact’ (1978:11). Since the appearance of Said’s book, we cannot discuss current knowledge of Asia without a far more acute sense of the relevance to it of the colonial conditions under which such knowledge came into being than that which we have held” (19). See Said’s interview in New York in 1987 published as “Orientalism Revisited”, Middle East Report (January/February 1988): 32-6 for an interesting confirmation of this viewpoint.

Said attributes the “force” with which this work was written to “the emergence of the Palestinian movement” in the wake of the Arab-Israeli wars, specifically the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars respectively (“Orientalism Revisited”, 32).

However, a Derridean deconstruction of his work leads me to ask to what extent Said’s study is deliberately provocative and how much more results simply from a sincere desire to ‘set the record straight’ as it were. Said is himself convincing when he claims that all he was attempting to do in Orientalism was to produce “a box of utensils for other people to use . . . to raise questions” (“Orientalism Revisited”, 33).

This quotation from “The Question of Orientalism” by professor of Near Eastern Studies, Bernard Lewis (Macfie, 258). In yet another critique, David Kopf suggests somewhat scathingly—and I would suggest that, in this case anyway, somewhat inaccurately—that, “Sooner or later, many writers from subordinated cultures or groups sublimate their rage into ideologies of restructuring or revitalizing their own ignored cultures” (Macfie, 195). It is only fair to add in respect of Said and Lewis that the ongoing argument between the two scholars is fairly deep-seated. They debated this question of “orientalism” in a public forum sponsored by the Middle East Studies Association of North America in 1986. See the Journal of Palestine Studies (Winter 1987) for a transcription of the debate (Middle East Report, 33).

See in particular the works of Bernard Lewis, Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm and Michael Richardson in Macfie’s collection of critical material.


As well, there are those critics who partially agree with the thrust of Said’s argument, but who do not agree with the way in which it is presented. Take, for example, this statement by David Kopf: “If we can somehow overlook his unfortunate choice of the term ‘Orientalism’ to represent a sewer category for all the intellectual rubbish Westerners have exercised in the global marketplace of ideas, then surely the book has considerable merit” (Macfie, 198).

While most of Said’s reviewers tend to be academics, among his critics there is also a strong core of Middle Eastern and Islamic-affairs specialists who “have been jolted into soul-searching” (11). See first Emmanuel Sivan’s essay, “Edward Said and his Arab Reviewers”, The Jerusalem Quarterly 35 (Spring 1985): 11-23 and then my discussion in the next paragraph for the difficulties specific to the Middle East.

In particular, see Al-‘Azm’s essay, “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse” (Macfie, 217-38).

Writing as he is for the Arabic world rather than the West, the insights Wahba provides into the “anger and suspicion” the Muslim world continues to hold for the West is particularly sobering. See “An Anger Observed”, Journal of Arabic Literature 20 (1989): 187-99. See also Sivan, “Edward Said and his Arab Reviewers” and Rodinson on Islam.

From The Boundaries of National Identity (Beirut, 1982). Quoted here from Sivan’s essay.

From al-istikhrāq wa-l-istikhrāq Ma’kūsan (Beirut, 1981). Qtd. from Sivan.
It should be noted that there is yet another band of critics for whom the airing of Said’s concerns appears to give permission to voice their own allied polemic, but these do not constructively add to the argument one way or another at this point. See in particular the essays of Stuart Schaar and Ernest J. Wilson III in Macfie’s collection.

Halliday claims that both Said and Lewis fall into the same trap since for “neither of them does the analysis of what actually happens in these societies, as distinct from what people say and write about them, let alone the difficulties and choices of emancipatory projects, constitute the primary concern”. In particular, “to a considerable degree both fail us in what I have defined as the central intellectual task, namely the analysis of the societies in question” (149). Said does try to rectify this by insisting in a later interview, “We are dealing with human, and therefore historical, modes of production . . . it is absolutely necessary to be aware that if you are dealing with knowledge, and certainly knowledge about the Middle East, you are dealing with it in the world”, but his argument presents weakly against the discursive evidence to the contrary (“Orientalism Revisited”, 36).

Clifford, in praising Raymond Schwab’s Renaissance orientale (1950) as “the classic history of this ensemble”, criticizes Said in the process by claiming: “Said does not attempt to revise or extend Schwab’s work, for his approach is not historicist or empirical but deductive and constructivist”, 257.

“My own sense of my history as an Arab and as a Palestinian didn’t seem to bear any relationship to what I was reading” (“Orientalism Revisited”, 32).

Although rather a broad category, it could of course be argued as Ahmad and others do that Said’s audience was “the West”.

Specifically, The OED cites “1769 Holdsworth, On Virgil 265 ‘There are frequent instances of the very same orientalism in Homer’ as an instance of the first use of the word orientalism” (931).

Not only is Said’s “orientalist” discourse largely male-oriented, but the fact that the early Orientalists were predominantly of the male sex is indisputable. This does not mean, however, that there were not a significant number of women of note who were deserving of the description. I am thinking of women such as the novelists Flora Annie Steel and Doris Lessing, travel writers like Isabella Bird and Karen Blixen, and social reformers and critics like B. E. Baughan and Oliver Schreiner. See Kumari Jayawardena, The White Woman’s Other Burden (Routledge, 1995), Lisa Lowe, Critical Terrains (Cornell University Press, 1991) or Elleke Boehmer’s introduction, Empire Writing (Oxford University Press, 1998). See, too, John MacKenzie’s discussion of female writer Billie Melman who “roots her writers more clearly in their social context than any other scholar of Orientalism and argues that the female discourse reflects pluralities of class, gender and period much more than ideological conformity” (23).

It should be noted that this definition does not take into account the new Orientalism, more about which will be said later.

In dismissing the Saidian thesis as “vague”, “underdetermined” and “prejudiced” and as more of an attempt to prove “that colonialism and Orientalism are mutually entailed”, Trautmann suggests that it becomes a circular argument and singularly unhelpful (22).

However, for a painstakingly well-researched documentation of Orientalism in literature, see Husain Haddawy, English Arabesque: Orientalism and the Oriental Mode in Eighteenth Century English Literature serialized in Ur, 1983-4.

However diverse their angles of approach, scholars are unanimous on one point: that the Western view of the Orient in the late-nineteenth century was vastly different from that of the late-seventeenth century. Of the major events that occurred in Europe during this period, three in particular—the Enlightenment, the declining years of the Ottoman Empire, and the Industrial Revolution—left their own special stamp on this changing viewpoint.

Not only the geographical space, but the term ‘Middle East’ is itself loaded with academic, ideological and political assumptions. See in particular Fawaz A. Gerges, “The Study of Middle East International Relations: A Critique”, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 18 (1991): 206-20.

Of all Middle East specialists Maxime Rodinson reaps the most consistent accolades. I quote here from Europe and the Mystique of Islam, tr. Roger Veinus (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1988). Halliday cites his critique of European writing on the Middle East “as the most measured and erudite of them all” (148). He remains one of the few Europeans of whom Said speaks highly in Orientalism, but this praise fades to disappointment at Rodinson’s reaction to his own premise: “His [Rodinson’s] view of my critique has been very, to put it mildly, mixed. He supports a lot of what I say on political grounds, but he wants to defend Orientalist knowledge . . . Why does he do this? In the name of knowledge” (“Orientalism Revisited”, 36).

My own concern with Rodinson’s account is that the phrase “began to move towards a more objective understanding” suggests a linearity and thus an objectivity in relation to the West’s portrayal of the East, and
this was not quite the case. While there is no doubt that a broader understanding encouraged a less fantastical and reactionary method of relating to the East in which objectivity played a role, European subjectivity in regard to the East over the two hundred years in question was rife. And, for that matter, still is.

Asia had its own internal troubles which would prove to be instrumental in opening the way for colonialism. For example, the decline of the Ottoman Empire was cemented by the Greek War of Independence (1821-27) when Britain, France and Russia intervened on the side of the Greeks defeating the Turkish-Egyptian fleet in 1827 which led in turn to the proclamation of an independent Greek state. The following decades were plagued with anarchy and uprisings in all their various forms and gradually the two formerly great civilizations began to crumble. Rodinson claims that it was at this point that European colonization began in earnest.

There were a surprising number of travel books written about the Near and Far East in the nineteenth century. Although this list is by no means comprehensive, Percy Sykes’s “List of Authorities” comprises over 120 texts written primarily from the late-eighteenth century to the early-twentieth century with the vast majority being written from the early 1800s to the publication of his own History of Persia, Vol. II, in 1915. It was also a religion that “approximated the Deism of most Enlightenment philosophers” (47).

I refer back to my mention of the Muslim reaction to Western literature about the East in Wahba’s “An Anger Observed”.

Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) is better known as a pioneer of the Romantic Movement in Germany, but in that he combined a study of Oriental languages with a writing career, he can be seen as one example of the combining of the scholarly with the literary.

Along with his English contemporary Sir William Jones, Sacy was a man regarded as one of the foremost pioneers of modern Orientalism.

The OED lists the first use of the term Orientalism in 1769 and of Orientalist in 1779.


Both Trautmann and Lewis are in accord in isolating Raymond Schwab’s La Renaissance orientale as a factor in progressing their understanding of the origins of Orientalism, but what they get out of it differs. For Trautmann this idea “that Europe would undergo a second renaissance through the study of the Orient, especially through the study of Sanskrit and the Veda, much as the study of Greek was the cause of the first Renaissance” becomes central to his theory that India and Sanskrit were the defining center of a new Orientalism . . . the ensuring Indomania gave the Oriental renaissance a new Indian center” (26). For Lewis, however, Schwab’s work illuminates Said’s “alternative universe”. He suggests Said’s work and the “ensuring wave of anti-Orientalism” it created were “obviously deeply influenced by a reading of Schwab’s book, which is frequently and admiringly cited. The otherwise mystifying schema of Arabic studies in the West as seen by Mr Said becomes intelligible, though not of course acceptable, when one compares it with Schwab, whose framework has been taken over and applied to another region and another purpose” (Macfie, 260). Lewis claims that the “change of purpose . . . is debatable, but the change of region [equating the relationship between Europe and the Islamic world to that between Europe and India] reduces the argument to absurdity”.

Trautmann used such adjectives as “expansionary” and “inflationary” to qualify Said’s “redefinition” of Orientalism, but it is clear that Said took away from the term more than he added in the changing of the meaning and thus perhaps ‘reductive’ would be a better descriptive word.

Trautmann, for one, appears to argue in favour of an ethnographic discourse instead of linguistic on the part of some of the leading Orientalists. See my note 76.

The word was traditionally used most commonly in two—some historians claim three—separate ways. The first use describes a school of painting created by European artists “who visited the Middle East and North Africa and depicted what they saw or imagined, sometimes in a rather romantic and extravagant manner . . .” The second, rather more common, meaning relates to scholarship, specifically to philological scholarship, and dates from the great expansion of scholarship in western Europe from the time of the Renaissance onward (Macfie, 251).

In his discussion of Sir William Jones (1746-94) who was one of the earliest Orientalists and founder/first president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, Trautmann argues that Jones’ principal concerns and projects were “primarily ethnological” and not philological (40). He quotes Jones: “‘I have ever considered languages as the mere instruments of real learning, and think them improperly confounded with learning itself,’ although they are indispensable to opening the immense mine of the literatures of Asia (Jones 1807, 3:7)” (60).
In terms of my thesis, Hastings (Governor-General of India 1773-84) provides an excellent example of yet another Orientalist sensitive to the needs of the people he governed who is almost totally ignored by Said. He is mentioned in only one sentence in Orientalism, in which Said states that “Warren Hastings had decided that Indians were to be ruled by their own laws . . .” (78) a reference to the “Sanskrit code of laws” which existed only in Persian until translated by East India Company official Charles Wilkins. Wilkins went on to translate the Bhagavad-Gita (1785) for which Hastings wrote the introduction.

Indeed, it is the high-handedness of such men as Macaulay who “imposed the British model on the entire Indian school system (Rodinson, 52).

Removing the Middle East from the debate would certainly have simplified it. Said: “The least encouraging impact, though, was in Middle East studies. There the reaction was uniformly defensive” (“Orientalism Revisited”, 32).

Although it should be noted that it still appears in Webster’s (1981) as “scholarship or learning in oriental subjects” (803). 

With reference specifically to Kipling’s Kim.

In fact, some scholars are quite damning, going as far as to say “. . . most of the work that has followed [Orientalism] . . . is usually quite academic, far more tame, quite well-behaved, colourless and even at times, spineless,” (Ahmad, Macfie, 294).

An analogy from Alvin Toffler’s excellent although now somewhat dated book, Future Shock, is useful here. Toffler suggests that change can be likened to an elastic band which when merely stretched and released returns to its original size. In order to make any change permanent, he says, heat must be applied. Heat applied to the stretched elastic changes its size and shape permanently. Insofar as the debate surrounding Said and his brand of “orientalism”, it could be said that Said has certainly applied the heat. “Orientalism” will never again be the innocent word of yore. Although it can still be said that the discourse is misleading, contrived and in itself a misrepresentation, this does not detract from the fact that Said’s use of discourse has served its purpose, if indeed that purpose was primarily to raise awareness.

See my discussion of current cross-cultural writing in the conclusion.

By employing a form of “mutual interrogation”, I propose to examine the respective authors’ hierarchical systems of thought-processes (“routine habits of thought”), as well as questions of identity and the representation of that identity. I am indebted to Christopher Norris for the clarity he brings to the concept of Derrida’s deconstruction processes. See Derrida (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), 19.

The behaviour of all of them was admirable; they have the instincts of gentlemen in the best sense of the word . . . ” (Browne Papers, Box 9). Other friends were from within the Persian community some of whom would visit him in his rooms at Cambridge.

But Gobineau’s story of the Baha’i lingered in his mind, and Browne still dreamed of visiting Persia. To this end he tried repeatedly to find employment in one of the Eastern consulates. That this was not destined to be underscores the somewhat haphazard status of Orientalism in Britain in the 1890s and provides clear evidence of Britain’s lack of organizing—or “orientalising”—intent. At this point, Browne’s efforts culminated in a series of disappointments: “The hopes with which I had left Cambridge had been dampened by repeated disappointments” in the form of “curt official letters” insisting that the languages of Browne’s proficiency—namely Arabic, Persian and Turkish—“were not recognized as subjects of examination” (17). Consider the lack of both logic and common sense in correspondence that clearly stated that if Browne wished to become a consul in Western Asia the qualifications he needed were the languages of German, Greek, Spanish and Italian. Change was in the offing, however. Having passed his final examinations at the College of Surgeons and the College of Physicians, Browne was considering his next move when he found that he had been elected a Fellow of Pembroke College, Cambridge. Thus ten years after leaving school, after making efforts in so many different areas, “at last I was really to go to Persia” (19). Not only that but, coincidently, the university would soon require a resident teacher of Persian and spending the first year of his Fellowship in Persia would qualify him even more soundly for the position.
My representation of Browne to this point has been one that portrays him as oblivious to the racist implications of “orientalism”, as one who is apparently unaware of the imperialist and colonizing designs of the country of his birth. However, patently this is a case of a man on the brink of an Orientalist career that falls clearly within the defining parameters Said provides for “orientalism”. Further, although Browne was born just eighteen years before that well-known opponent of imperialism, Leonard Woolf, with a life span that overlapped Woolf’s by some forty-six years, there is virtually no mention, let alone criticism, of Britain’s colonial ventures in Browne’s works, quite the opposite of Woolf. As I have pointed out, this was not for want of a political mind and will on the part of Browne, nor a reluctance to speak out against what he believed to be wrong.  

While this difference could, of course, be attributed to dissimilarities in the characters of the two men, this fact alone is not sufficient to account for the variance in their approach to the epoch of imperialist enterprise in which they lived. Moreover, the similarities were more pronounced than otherwise. Both men were of a political turn of mind, both campaigned against their own government in support of political causes, both were thinkers and writers. Most importantly, both were men who had, to use the phrase MacEion applies to Browne, “an inborn affinity” for the East, in Browne’s case “the Persian East” and for Woolf, the island of what was then Ceylon. However, Woolf’s lifetime extended beyond that of Browne by not only spanning the pinnacle of imperialism but by lasting well into the decline and virtual death of the British Empire. This suggests that the death throes of this period of decline and the accompanying publicity might be held responsible for a burgeoning awareness and self-reflexivity within its citizens, the “self-reflexivity” that Said claims as the only basis for exoneration of representation. Certainly Woolf’s work reveals
that reflexivity; the extent to which it appears in Browne’s work I will discuss later in this chapter. I need first to complete the story of his life, one which takes a scholarly turn on his return to Cambridge from Persia.

Although for most of the four decades between his return to Cambridge and his death, Browne was consumed by his academic interests, his love affair with his university was equalled by his passion for the Persians, an obsession that inevitably led him into politics which provided an ideal outlet for his totally unrestrained and fearless views. In 1907, by which time he was a severe critic of the British foreign policy towards Persia, his sense of injustice was again ignited by his distaste for the agreement the newly elected Liberal Government had made with Russia. While Browne insisted that the agreement had been made out of Britain’s fear of Russia and that the result had compromised Persia’s newly formed constitution, foreign minister Sir Edward Grey saw it somewhat differently. For Grey, the offering of British support for the autocratic government in St Petersburg was an opportunity to improve the Anglo-Russian rivalry that had been going on with regard to Persia for over a century.

But Browne was not one to protest idly. He joined the newly launched Left opposition to England’s Liberal party and his anger at British treatment of the Persians was supported by articles in some of the more influential local newspapers, in numerous pamphlets and books, by public lectures and by the formation of the Persian Committee. He also wrote two texts—*Short Account of Recent Events in Persia* and *The Persian Revolution of 1905-09*—“... with the object of explaining to the West that a new spirit of sound nationalism had recently been born in that country and that it deserved to be respected and encouraged by
the English people” (Inayatulah, 20). Although the struggle was to continue for five years until 1912, what amounted to pressure-group protest was eventually successful in reversing British policy towards Persia. But it took its toll on Browne. How strongly he felt over the entire course of proceedings is borne out by his outpourings in the press and by his voluminous correspondence on the matter, feelings which are summed up in a letter he wrote to a Persian friend, “‘It is now close upon three years that I have been living in a state of agony on account of the affairs of Persia’” (Inayatulah, 22).

Meanwhile, Browne’s domestic life was every bit as successful as his professional career and fell into two distinct halves: that of his bachelor days at Pembroke College and his later marriage.32 Although there have been a number of descriptions of these long evenings and nights of debate at Cambridge, I will quote from just one, a testimonial written by Professor Inayatulah to commemorate the forty-fourth anniversary of Browne’s death. This extract gives an insight into the social atmosphere of these gatherings and the esteem with which Browne was—and continues to be—held.33

It would be hard to imagine a more delightful evening than one which began in the Common Room of the College and ended in Browne’s rooms, sometimes with the setting of the stars. He had an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes and tales, which were mainly drawn either from Oriental literature or from the adventures of himself and his friends. There were a hundred topics which kept his hearers enthralled for a whole evening. Oriental by his temperament, his experiences and his studies, he had made up his mind on many issues by the time he was twenty-two, and to these determined views he was rigidly faithful. . . . He loved to expatiate on the beauties of Eastern poetry, which he quoted profusely either in support of his argument or for the benefit of his visitors. The quotation of the original Arabic or Persian verses was invariably followed by a fluent rendering into English, in which not a point would be missed. (20)34

In the years before his death, Browne continued to attract accolades, both from his Persian friends and acquaintances and from scholars of the European community, but it is worth noting that on his sixtieth birthday, he was presented with a limited edition Festschrift. This
is a book that consists of a collection of essays contributed by scholars of many countries, titled in English *A Volume of Oriental Studies* and subtitled in Persian ‘Ajab-nama—Book of Admiration—the word ‘Ajab being a play on Browne’s initials. Since Browne’s background of Persian friends, affiliations and interests would have been almost synonymous with his name at that stage of his life, it is surprising that the list of contributors to the volume is comprised almost totally of Europeans—among them English, German, Danish and French Orientalists—the only Asian being a scholar from Lahore, Muhammad Shafi’. While there is no doubt that the eclectic nature of the collection—the contents of which included the etymology of words and the classification of certain works, the translation of Arabic poetry into English, an analysis of specific passages of the Kur’án—would have appealed to Browne’s intellectualism, and almost certainly Browne would have been flattered by the attention and admiration of his peers, pleased, too, that they had chosen a Persian subtitle, I wonder how he would have viewed an omission on the part of his fellow Orientalists to include Persian contributors? Closer examination of Copy No. 238 (*A Volume of Oriental Studies*) does, I believe, provide an answer. Pasted into the very front of this volume—printed on a coated paper of a different stock in another font, but placed so carefully it almost forms part of the original volume—is a copy of the Persian presentation to Professor Browne. I have no evidence that this was Browne’s action but given his attention to detail, his meticulous filing and labelling efforts and his emotive connections, I think it is not implausible to suggest that this act of prefacing the Orientalist accolade with the Persian presentation was, for him, a way of completing the tribute. Perhaps it was his way, too, of alerting later generations of scholars to the original omission. In other words, where were the Persian and other Asian scholars? The Persians did, however, celebrate Browne’s birthday in their own way. Arberry relates the proffering of an
“Address” to Browne “which bore thirty-four signatures including those of three Prime Ministers and eight other Cabinet Ministers [and which] read as follows: ‘On this occasion . . . [W]e the undersigned, not only on our own part, but on behalf of our appreciative countrymen, offer you our sincere congratulations and heart-felt greetings . . . Your services to learning generally, and to the Persian language and literature particularly, are such as tongue cannot declare nor pen describe. We now profit by this opportunity to express our gratitude for the labours which you have undertaken for us and for our country, whereby you have made the Persian nation your eternal debtor . . .’” Other presentations that followed the first included a collection of laudatory poetry and a conferring by the Shah of Persia of the Order of the Lion and the Sun (189).37

Although Browne was only sixty-four years of age when he died in 1926, in his lifetime he accumulated not only professional honours, but esteem and affection, too, given freely by both East and West. There could be no more fitting tribute to Browne’s life than this obituary by one of his Iranian friends, Mirza Muhammad of Qazwin which reads: “Browne’s love for the world of Islam in general, and for Iran, and the Iranians in particular, had no bounds. There was to be seen in it no material or selfish aim, such as position or wealth or political gain for his country. It had no other motive except heartfelt emotion and spiritual attraction, that is to say, love for whatever is true and good and fine in human life. Indeed, for Iran, the existence of Browne was a God-given blessing . . .’” (Inayatullah, 22).
British Orientalism

My discussion of the foundations of Orientalism in chapter one concluded with the acknowledgement that although some use was made of Orientalists by Britain in administrative positions as these became available in the “vulnerable territories” created by the decline of the Ottoman Empire, little was done to encourage Orientalism as a profession. But put so simply this statement does no justice to the actuality of the situation which was in itself contentious. In reality the case was not only far more complex, but quite contrary to Said’s claim that colonialism and Orientalism were one and the same thing. In fact, far from being in a position to instigate a multifarious plot to redefine and conquer Asia, Britain did not produce enough Orientalists to meet its own fairly basic needs within its own nation. Although within Europe in the late nineteenth century Oriental Studies were becoming increasingly organized and widespread, in Britain the situation was somewhat different. The truth was that the British government gave little support to the furthering of this discipline.

Some idea of the reality of the situation in late nineteenth-century Britain can be deduced from a statement of Browne’s in which he asserts: “[T]he question ‘What first made you take up Persian?’ when addressed to an Englishman who is neither engaged in, nor destined for, an Eastern career deserves an answer”. This is more than a superficial social comment and stands at the beginning of A Year Amongst the Persians as an apt foreshadowing of Browne’s looming battles with the English Government and his lack of respect for an England that gave so little encouragement to the study of Oriental languages (2). Although Browne was still a young man in his twenties at this point, his bitterness drives the tone of
this passage in which he quotes the advice of his much respected Arabic professor Dr. William Wright:

... if you ... are obliged to consider how you may earn a livelihood, then devote yourself wholly to medicine, and abandon, save as a relaxation for your leisure moments, the pursuit of Oriental letters. The posts for which such knowledge will fit you are few, and, for the most part, poorly endowed, neither can you hope to obtain them till you have worked and waited for many years. And from the Government you must look for nothing, for it has long shown, and still continues to show, an increasing indisposition to offer the slightest encouragement to the study of Eastern languages. (3)

But it is Browne’s reaction in which I am most interested:

Often I reflect with bitterness that England, though more directly interested in the East than any other European country save Russia, not only offers less encouragement ... to engage in the study of Oriental languages than any other great European nation, but can find no employment even for those few who, notwithstanding every discouragement, are impelled by their own inclination to this study, and who, by diligence, zeal, and natural aptitude, attain proficiency therein. How different it is in France! ... May she long maintain that position of eminence in science [the science of language] which she has so nobly won, and which she so deservedly occupies! And to us English, too, may she become, in this respect at least, an exemplar and a pattern! (4-5)

Browne’s disgust for the priorities of the English government during this period of high empire is made abundantly clear in his earliest writings and it is plain that far from being a premeditated endeavour to set up a power base, Orientalism was a profession that existed, or subsisted, with little support from the British Foreign Office. Had Browne’s interest not been diverted to the Persian cause, it is conceivable that he would have focused more on the interests of Orientalists within Britain, a situation which in his own time went from the
frustrating situation he deplores in the excerpt quoted above to even worse. Or had he lived longer, he may have placed his considerable energy and influence behind the sentiments that went to the development of the Scarbrough Report, a 200-page document which was to become known as the “Charter of Modern Orientalism”.

It would, however, have been of great interest to Browne himself to know that it was not until the closing years of World War II that the English statesman (later to become prime minister) Anthony Eden appointed a commission under the chairmanship of the Earl of Scarbrough to examine the facilities offered by British universities and educational institutions for Oriental, African, Slavonic and Eastern European studies. Excerpts from the report state:

> A significant part of our contribution to world peace is to understand and to know our neighbours, both near and distant. Western and Eastern civilizations have been brought together by a revolution in communications and must not remain separated by superstition and ignorance. The East makes great efforts to know and understand the West and our interests and our traditions require that among the Western powers we of all people should reciprocate. . . . What place should be made, in the post-war life of British people, for the study of the languages and cultures of almost all the peoples of the world not of Western European origin? . . . it is not only the teaching of languages with which we are here concerned; it is, rather, the interpretation to the British people of the whole way of life of these peoples. How do they live, what is their history, as well as how do they speak, are questions which these studies should attempt to answer. (Cited here from Arberry, 242-3)

It is significant that recommendations within the document for a sounder and closer understanding of other countries were made by men who were, for the most part, not academics but who came from diverse walks of life and who “were characterized by an equal combination of farsightedness and close attention to the possible and the practicable” (245).
Just after the war, the report was adopted by Parliament amid much rejoicing by British Orientalists but failed almost immediately in the recession that followed with only a modicum of the promised funds materializing and was, according to Arberry, quickly forgotten. And so it was not surprising that by 1959 the situation had not improved. In a pamphlet: “East and West: Towards Mutual Understanding”, UNESCO states:

But there are other forms of ignorance that can be remedied, especially when the sufferers are aware of their state. Such is the ignorance of the men and women, young and not so young, who nowadays feel hampered by their lack of knowledge when faced with the irritating problem called “the East”. They hear it spoken of as an infinitely complex enigma which only specialists can attempt to decipher. It seems to be made up of all-too-vast continents, unknown seas and enormous nations which used to be little heard of, especially as they were often considered merely vague and picturesque provinces of empires whose capitals lay in the West. In it live an incredible number of extremely varied peoples, speaking an equally incredible number of languages . . . When most Westerners were at school, all they learned about these [oriental] religions and cultures were the fact of their existence, and even this was usually brought in merely as a footnote to a chapter of ancient history . . . The history of these peoples? Western schoolbooks rarely mention it except in relation to the West. The Arabs, for instance, appeared just in time to invade Spain and fight the Crusaders in the Holy Land, after which they left the stage and went back into the void. India emerged from a long, legendary, fairy-tale night to be exploited from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century by two or three trading companies. China escaped from its dreary isolation to welcome the “civilizers” of the Opium War . . . our ignorance can often be explained or excused. But it can no longer be tolerated. (Arberry, 249-50)

I have cited at some length from these two sources because they form part of texts that are seldom quoted or discussed in contemporary studies. As well, they proffer a concerted and—to my way of thinking—rational point of view in terms of what would appear to be a genuine desire for mutual understanding on the part of the West towards the East, a celebration of a future time when, in Arberry’s words “it will be considered as normal for an undergraduate to study the history of Arab, or Persian, or Indian or Chinese, or Japanese civilization as to investigate the ancient and modern civilizations of Europe” (256). Although from a distance of some sixty years the language used in these texts could be
considered a little ‘quaint’, the sentiments expressed have a surprising resonance with the
public lectures of Homi Bhabha.44 Said, of course, does not mention either the Scarbrough
Report or the UNESCO pamphlet, understandably perhaps, because not only do they run
counter to his argument but also since they lie outside the temporal parameters of his
discourse. However, these pleas for a greater understanding of other races and their
languages return my argument to Thomas B. Macaulay and, as I will show, ultimately to
Said. It is here, with Macaulay, that the state of affairs that existed in terms of Britain’s
support for the Orientalists had its inception.

In postcolonial literature, the arrogance embedded in Macaulay’s ridicule of the Indian
vernaculars is well-known and I do not propose to cite the offending and offensive passages
again. What is less familiar is the Orientalist response to Governor-General Bentinck’s
support of the Anglicist Macaulay and the context of the debacle within the Anglicist-
Orientalist controversy mentioned in chapter one. While the Indians were insulted, the
Orientalists were angered and their response vigorous, but in the end, useless. The result
was that “the effects of Bentinck’s support of Macaulayism greatly reduced the dynamism
generated by two generations of Orientalist institutional growth and development” (Kopf,
Macfie, 205). Under Bentinck’s administration, colleges, schools and societies ‘failed’ or
were closed and Orientalism as a profession continued to exist in the superficial state that
Browne found it fifty years on.45

However, while I am indebted to Kopf for this information and for his quotations and
citations, I differ from his opinion on one important point. This is that I do not believe that
the brevity of Said’s references to Macaulay and his passing mention of the infamous
Minute on Education proves that Said “misunderstood the nature and function of Orientalism” (my emphasis, Kopf, 205). To the contrary, I think Said’s rapid glosses of Macaulay occur precisely because ultimately the man and his report do not serve his argument. And so, far from a matter of misunderstanding, I suggest that in fact Macaulay may have presented Said with somewhat of a dilemma. To clarify: to overlook entirely the existence of an imperialist of the order of Macaulay in a work like Orientalism is unscholarly. But if Said had been more fulsome in his description of Macaulay, had he, for example, cited those sections of the Minute which would so readily support his own argument; in fairness, he would also be obliged to cite portions of the Orientalist response which was so vehement in its opposition to the anglicization of Indian languages. Finally, he would be forced to mention the Anglist/Orientalist division and dissention which, ostensibly at least, he would appear to have carefully avoided. An acknowledgement that there were Englishmen—many of whom were the much-maligned philologists on which he bases much of the substance of his study—who not only disagreed with the methods of imperialist governance but who were prepared to place their careers in jeopardy in support of the rights of indigenous people against their own government, renders the basis of Said’s argument uncertain to say the least.

Although as I have said, from a postcolonial vantage point, it is understandable that Said ignores a lot of the above, it is this obvious lack of encouragement the British government offered to those who set out to study Oriental languages that makes Said’s assault on Orientalists all the more surprising, an “attack” from within the ranks, as it were. In this respect, Trautmann suggests:

For those whose training was in the Orientalist tradition, the Saidian attack was something of a surprise. Does studying the ancient languages of Asia hold out the prospect of lucrative careers and an abundance of jobs among
which to choose or influence in the formation of government policy? [In other words, it could be argued that this is the most direct route to knowledge and, thus, power.] If anything, the public image of Orientalism before Said was that of Proust, for whom (in his great novel) the Professor of Sanskrit alternates with the Professor Tamil as the . . . purveyor of arcane knowledge . . . Scholars are used to such cruel jibes from the great writers, but the changed image of Orientalism in Said—from dreamy obscurantism to the intellectual Foreign Legion of Europe—was a shocking reversal.

(19)

Literary works

My discussion so far has centred on the character and emerging political personage of Browne and the Orientalist environment in which he lived and worked. I have spent some time on this section because an understanding of the level and nature of Browne’s commitment to the Persians is fundamental to my argument. I have endeavoured to show the depth of the regard in which Browne held the Persian people and the corresponding respect in which he was—and continues to be—held in that country. Correspondingly I have shown how little guile there was in the manner in which Browne came to Orientalism as a profession and how implausible it would be to attribute any sort of racist agenda—either implicit or explicit—to his actions in this respect. Clearly, too—although there is no doubt that his own country was his comfort zone—he held very little respect for his own government and the nationalism he displayed was not cast in the direction of England. Accordingly, if imperialism springs from nationalism and connotes power and dominion, he was not an imperialist. On all these counts, Browne appears to be exonerated. On the face of it, it would appear that the existence of Browne has disproved Said’s argument: “It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric”.

(19)
However, it is not quite that simple. Questions still remain as to the degree of interference Browne demonstrated in Persian affairs and to what extent his written work can be said to exhibit the self-reflexivity that will continue to vindicate him from accusations of “orientalism”. In his presentation of some of the more “factual” information on Persia, for example, does he—like Sacy before him—present those “facts” as doctrine without allowing the Persians their own voice? Or does he allow the Persians to speak for themselves? If so, how does he achieve this and is he successful? In an effort to address these concerns, I come now to his correspondence and his literary works, to their reception and reviews and to detailed examination of selected passages. Since Browne’s chief literary preoccupation in the years following his return to England was with the history and doctrine of the Baha’i movement and the translation of numerous Baha’i documents and texts, these tend to make up the majority of the archive. The work for which he receives the most acclaim, however, and one which is considered the greatest of his literary achievements is the immense and comprehensive *A Literary History of Persia*, published in four volumes in 1902, 1906, 1920 and 1924 respectively. The information on Browne that a close reading of this work offers is an underscoring of his attention to pure scholarship, his dedication to translating quotations from both prose and poetry with as much exactitude as he can muster, and his obvious dedication to the intellectual thought and history of the Persian people. The work itself could be best described more as a history of the nation out of which its literature grew rather than an account of Persian poets and writers. It is “a work that fully displays Browne’s strengths and weaknesses: broad in scope . . . based almost entirely on original sources . . . but also diffuse and at time irrelevant (Volume 1, for example, consists largely of prolegomena, though originally intended to comprise the entire work)”. Or in Browne’s own words:
For many years I had cherished a desire to write a history of the intellectual and literary achievements of the Persians... It is strange that so few attempts should hitherto have been made to set forth in a comprehensive and yet concise and summary form the history of that ancient and most interesting kingdom... it was the intellectual history of the Persians which I desired to write, and not merely the history of the poets and authors who expressed their thoughts through the medium of the Persian language; the manifestations of the national genius in the fields of Religion, Philosophy, and Science interested me as much as those belonging to the domain of Literature in the narrower sense... 

In the preface to the first volume Browne states that the work is dedicated “...most of all to that small but growing body of amateurs who, having learned to love the Persian poets in translation, desire to know more of the language, literature, history, and thought of one of the most ancient, gifted and original peoples in the world” (ix). That this work was progressively translated into Arabic, Persian and Urdu in whole or part would have pleased Browne immensely. Professor Inayatullah’s praise of Browne’s “great work” is lofty indeed. It emphasizes the regard in which Browne is held, but lacks the critical appreciation of Wickens’ review of the work. For example, he says, “...the lively pages of Browne breathe the spirit of a genius. He ranges freely along the paths to which his tastes and predilections direct him, but there is a method in his wanderings, and those who accompany him will... have obtained such a commanding view of Persian literature and thought as they could hardly expect within the limits of any other single book. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that Browne’s characteristic treatment of his subject has not only informed but inspired the work of all subsequent writers in this field, not excluding the scholars of Iran itself” (21).
While that may be so, this is the point at which I would like to examine more closely Browne’s motives for his enthusiastic and almost unconditional embrace of the Persian people and their culture. Despite the claim by Mirza Muhammad who asserted that there was “no other motive” in Browne’s enthusiasm for Persia “except heartfelt emotion and spiritual attraction”, this “heartfelt emotion” was retrospective to Browne’s year in Persia. In other words, this sentiment was one that grew over the years and which inevitably followed an initial interest. I am interested in attempting to assess exactly what it was that was at the base of Browne’s original curiosity about Persia? Was it based solely on adolescent enthusiasm . . . on a few lines from a book chosen at random by a bored teenager from Eton library stacks? Or was there more? And if so, how close was this to Marlow’s statement in *Heart of Darkness*, oft-quoted by postcolonialists as an example of the proprietary behaviour of the colonizers: “At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there”?

The answer lies as much in Browne’s correspondence, in the letters he wrote to the Foreign Office and to the press on behalf of the Persians in the early years of the twentieth century, as in his published literary work. Browne’s letters, particularly those which express his emotions in regard to the British interference in the Persian Constitution, certainly provide an insight into his Orientalist mind and leave no doubt as to his ferocious attachment to Persian self-rule. But these letters were indicative of a later, more studied and problem-solving frame of mind. They provide an insight into the thought processes of a man of mature years and it is the relatively unformed mind of Browne in his late twenties that I wish first to pursue. And although Wickens claims that it is Browne’s four-volume *Literary*
History that exemplifies his “strength and weaknesses”, like his Persian correspondence, this too was written throughout the latter half of his life.

However, before I look at Browne’s earlier text, this is an appropriate juncture to investigate my previous claim that he is typical of “romantically-inclined Victorians” in terms of his upbringing and of his imagination and therefore, it logically follows, in how he represents the people and a lifestyle of a culture not his own.

The first point that I want to make here is that there is a significant difference between being “romantically-inclined” and the type of romanticism that can be equated with exoticism, distortion of fact or the use of setting as a representation in itself. I posed the question above as to what extent Browne’s desire to visit Persia echoed Marlow’s “When I grow up I will go there” and I think the answer is that a youthful desire for travel and adventure is not unusual. There is no doubt that there was a great deal of impending romance and spirit of adventure involved in setting sail for a distant land. But to connect this without sufficient evidence with the type of romantic representation of the Orient which tends to suffocate fact, gloss over the obvious and ultimately lead to distortion and inaccuracy or, in other words, the idealistic framing that understandably upsets scholars like Edward Said and Chinua Achebe, I think goes too far. Applying twenty-first-century enlightenment to a nineteenth-century situation provides a distortion in itself.

My second point concerns the following claims by Abbas Amanat. Although Amanat—while fiercely defending Browne from allegations of “orientalism”—agrees that in his representation of Persia Browne was “acting in a customary manner in sympathy with the
era in which he was living . . . [a vision that] was part of the prevailing spirit of his time and
the way Europe viewed a largely imaginary construct identified as the Orient . . . ””, he goes
on to say: “Yet such a romantic bent, accentuated throughout his works by a sense of
personal experience and an intimate style of writing, was not in any way antagonistic to the
cultures and the peoples he studied. Nor was his presentation of the subject matter itself
distorted by his idealism beyond the standards of his time or ours. On the contrary, it may
be argued that his very romantic aspiration made him seek and discover ‘amongst the
Persians’ the downtrodden, the dissenters, and those who were branded by the powerful as
outcasts and undesirables” (XI).

I agree with what Amanat has to say here on two counts. Firstly, that in any reading of any
of Browne’s texts one would be hard put to find hostility towards the Persians and, besides,
I have already established that Browne was no racist. Secondly, there is no question that
Browne was acting and writing in inevitable accordance with his Victorian upbringing.
However, I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that one might not be “racist”, but still
be an “orientalist”. In this respect, Amanat misses the crux of Said’s argument. It is much
less Said’s concern whether Browne’s account is friendly or hostile to the people he
describes than it is in how Browne depicts or presents the Persians.56 It is in this sense that
“orientalism” becomes inextricably coupled with the issue of representation. In other words,
does Browne attempt to describe what he finds and how he finds it, even if the situation or
event seems strange from the inevitably narrow viewpoint of a Victorian youth? Or does he
romanticize the narrative in order to make it popular reading for a Western audience? In
Said’s terminology: Does Browne “write the East”, imparting to it a sense of the
mysterious, the theatrical?
In order to answer these questions with any degree of accuracy, I need a point of reference against which to place Browne’s text. I need to be able to ascertain what constitutes the exotic and to ask whether what appears to me to be exotic would be the same if viewed from the viewpoint of the culture from which it emanates. Accordingly, this is an appropriate juncture to pause for a moment to examine one of the most renowned Oriental texts to make its appearance in “Western” literature: *The Book of the Thousand and One Nights.*

**The Nights**

In a mention of Antoine Galland in my earlier discussion of the ‘exotic’, I pointed out that Rodinson echoes Said in contending that it was Galland’s preface to Barthélemy d’Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque orientale* that led to the Western construct of an “exotic, enchanting Muslim East”. But Galland had an even greater responsibility with regard to his translation of the *Nights*. Editor P. H. Newby claims that Galland intended his version “to be popular and this he achieved by emphasizing the strange and the miraculous, and ignoring much that was characteristic of the original: the very frank treatment of sex and its perversions, the more savage stories of brutality and corruption, the historical and semi-historical anecdotes” (*The Book of the Thousand and One Nights, 7*).

The very language in which Newby describes Galland’s work makes it abundantly clear that in rendering a translation of this nature whereby the new version departs both from the intent and the actual tales of the original in order to solicit public appeal, Galland is indulging in a form of romanticism. Furthermore, it is not only the language of the
translation Galland employs but also the conscious selection of detail—in terms of what he leaves out as much as he includes—which romanticizes, or exoticizes, the East. He smothers the frankness and highlights the mystery and in so doing provides not only a totally different story, but also the methodology that engenders Said’s criticism in Western attempts to “write” the East. (Although Said dismisses E. W. Lane’s rather too literal translation of the Nights as “uninspired”, perhaps Galland can be taken to account for being too inspirational!)

However, in contrast to Galland’s method, when Richard Burton came to translate the Nights, he tried to do so “. . . by writing as the Arab would have written in English . . . I have carefully sought out the English equivalent of every Arabic word, however low it may be or ‘shocking’ to ears polite; preserving, on the other hand, all possible delicacy where the indecency is not intentional; and, as a friend advises me to state, not exaggerating the vulgarities and the indecencies which, indeed, can hardly be exaggerated. For the coarseness and the crassness are but the shades of a picture which would otherwise be all lights” (11).60

Since one of the features of ‘romantic’ writing is that it tends to tamper with the balance between light and dark by glossing over unpleasant facts so that the text is “all lights”, it could be said, firstly, that in his conscious effort to avoid this and, further, in that the selection of tales is unexpurgated, that Burton’s translation errs less on the side of the ‘exotic’ than Galland’s. In other words, it is probably as good as we are going to get, given the inevitable vagaries of transliteration.

Here, then, is an example from “The Reeve’s Tale” as translated by Burton:

“If so it be,” he replied, “and needs must I eat of it, I will not do so except I wash my hands forty times with soap, forty times with potash and forty times with galangale, the total being one hundred and twenty washings.”
Thereupon the hospitable host bade his slaves bring water and whatso [sic] he required; and the young man washed his hand as afore mentioned. Then he sat down, as if disgusted and frightened withal and, dipping his hand in the ragout, began eating at the same time showing signs of anger. And we wondered at him with extreme wonderment, for his hand trembled and the morsel in it shook and we saw his that his thumb had been cut off and he ate with four fingers only.

A few sentences later, the frame narrator discontinues his tale and allows the protagonist to continue the story by relating the reason for his disfigurement.

One day, as I sat in my shop, suddenly and unexpectedly there appeared before me a young lady, than whom I never saw a fairer, wearing the richest raiment and ornaments and riding a she-mule, with one negro slave walking before her and another behind her. She drew rein at the head of the exchange-bazar [sic] and entered followed by an eunuch who said to her, “O my lady come out and away without telling anyone, lest thou light a fire which will burn us all up.” . . . Then she unveiled her face, and I saw that she was like the moon and I stole a glance at her whose sight caused me a thousand sighs, and my heart was captivated with love of her. (143-4)

Certainly, there is no apparent attempt to spare the reader the less savoury facts. The (to our ears) quaint language in which the tale is couched is Burton’s attempt to render the effect true to the original, remembering that these stories originated in an oral medium. So much for the style. But what of the content?

The first passage contains description rich with biblical allusion in the repeated washing of the hands. It is followed by descriptions of a torture medieval in effect. The repetition in the use of “wonder” both as noun and verb within the same clause encourages manipulation of reader senses into this very state of wonder or amazement. And then there is the “negro slave”, the Africans of that era belonging to the formula of exotic writing. The ugliness implicit in the first passage sits in juxtaposition to the richness and beauty only a paragraph later which talks of “richest raiments and ornaments”, of bazaars, of sheer beauty and a palpitating heart, those lush and colourful descriptions that Rodinson speaks of in his
discussion of exoticism. These are the sort of tales responsible for entering the imagination of many a young Putney boy born and bred within a rainy cloying Victorian England. And responsible, too, for the Western picture of the East that Said condemns.

Is this, then, despite Burton’s efforts to remain true to the original, the exoticism that Said speaks of when he claims a Westernized re-structuring of the Orient? Are these the tales we retrospectively regard as fantastical with twentieth- and twenty-first-century post-Saidian awareness? After all, one of Said’s contentions is that Western tales of the East offer “[S]ensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy” . . . all qualities present in the passages quoted (Orientalism, 119).

The point here is that these tales are not a Westernised version of the Orient. This text was written by the East for the East. The translation from which I have quoted was, even by Saidian standards, written by a translator widely acknowledged within both the Western and Eastern worlds as sensitive to nuance as well as content. The popularity that Galland sought was not one of Burton’s considerations. Given the inevitable difficulties inherent in transliteration, he endeavoured to be as consistent to the original as possible. In his introduction to Burton’s translation, Newby says: “It may sound odd to recommend The Thousand and One Nights as a picture of Arab civilization. It is hard to see how stories of such exuberant fancy can bear any relation to reality, but of course they have—a very close relation—to the emotional life of the people who created them or coloured them with their imagination; and this emotional life is the distinctive feature of any culture” (14).
At this stage, two answers emerge. Firstly, despite Burton’s efforts, it is clear that the nature of the text is indisputably exotic, certainly in Saidian terms. But this is because it is being viewed from “an altogether different world vision”—distanced temporally, geographically and culturally—from the one to which it was addressed. It is constructive to bear in mind that because Eastern texts tend to conceal less than those of the West, Eastern fantasies can appear fairly erotic and far-fetched to the Western mind. Secondly, it is salutary to reflect that perhaps it was the way in which the Orient represented itself that caused such representations to re-appear in Western texts.

*A Year Amongst the Persians*

I return to a discussion of Browne’s work, specifically *A Year Amongst the Persians*, to further illustrate my point as to the manner in which such representations re-appear. Written and published within five years of his return to England, before the academic world claimed him entirely, its real value to this thesis lies not in what Browne really thinks of Persia and the Persians, but in how he represents the Persians, their values and belief systems to the West.61

Two examples will suffice before a more general discussion of the text. The first concerns Browne’s description of the poetry of Mírzá Bákir—the eccentric Persian mentioned earlier in this chapter—in the manuscript he spent so many evenings editing during his medical internship and which was filled with “grass-eating lions, bears, yellow demons, Gog and Magog . . .” (13). The question that arises here is whether Browne’s description is a Western re-presentation of an Oriental construct or whether Browne was attempting to relay
the substance of Mírzá Bákir’s poetry. One further example will provide further clarification.

The second is this excerpt from Browne’s re-telling of an incident based on experimentation within the occult sciences allegedly related to him by a philosopher from the city of Isfahán:

“I have tried most of them [most religions],” he said. “I have been in turn Musulmán, Súfí, Sheykhí, and even Bábí. At one time of my life I devoted myself to the occult sciences, and made an attempt to obtain control over the jinnís . . . [T]he seeker after this power chooses some solitary and dismal spot . . . [and remains there] for forty days . . . [and] eats very little food . . . [then] on the twenty-first day a lion will appear, and will enter the magic circle . . . if he resists the lion, other terrible forms will come to him on subsequent days—tigers, dragons, and the like—which he must similarly withstand. . . . [In my case, I stood my ground until] a most hideous and frightful dragon appeared, [at which point] I could no longer control my terror, and rushed all further attempts at obtaining the mastery over the jinnís. When some time had elapsed after this . . . I came to the conclusion that I had been the victim of hallucinations excited by expectation, solitude, hunger, and long vigils . . .” (161-2)

Lions and lion dogs, dragons, tigers and jinnís . . . On the face of it, this is an exotic description of an event in that it is different, mysterious, not part of daily life or conditioning. But is the representation misleading? Does it carry “a chameleon-like quality” in that it is changeable, elusive, full of withheld promise (Orientalism, 119)?

There are two points to be made here. Firstly, as is widely known, “lion dogs, dragons, tigers and jinnís” are a part of Eastern, not Western, lore; and, secondly, it is highly unlikely that the imagination of someone as prosaic as Browne would have created such a fantastical succession of events. Browne had many eminent qualities, but as I have demonstrated his skills lay in the areas of description and faithful translation of what he saw and what he read, not in embellishment. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the originator of the tale was in fact the Persian philosopher and that the verity of the representation was both
enabled and restricted by Browne’s own level of understanding. If the East represents itself
in this way, it follows that someone with an obvious affinity for the East may well do so in
like manner. Such writing cannot necessarily be termed “orientalist” and, indeed, only
becomes romantic or exotic when viewed from a Western perspective. It is part of an
incontrovertible arrogance on the part of the West—and, ironically, it is impossible not to
include Said in this category—that assumes the totality of the Western point of view.
Interestingly, in a note on the representations of the Orient as an “exotic locale”, Said
himself admits that it is a “too-little-investigated subject” (n.8, Orientalism, 336). This
returns us to Rodinson’s argument with regard to the diversity of world visions between
different cultures discussed earlier.

But there are additional extenuating factors which save the relating of this particular
incident from accusations of gratuitous romanticism. The first is that the story-teller or
“informant” as Browne calls him is named in the text as one “Aminu’š-Shari’at, who
came to Teherán in the company of his friend and patron, the Banánu’l-Mulk, one of the
chief ministers of the Zillu ’s-Sultán” (161). This gives credibility to the account and renders
it directly experiential in comparison to, say, a tale or yarn. As well, the ending of the
philosopher’s story is plausible, with a return to reality, lacking the dramatic moral
sequestered in the dismembering of the lover’s thumbs and toes in “The Reeves’ Tale”.

Before entering into a more general discussion of this text, this is an appropriate juncture to
discuss Browne’s motives for visiting Persia in the first place, since the notion of ‘motive’
is so closely connected with the question of underlying agendas that ranks so highly in
Orientalism.
Denis MacEion is of the opinion that the primary reason for Browne’s visit to Persia was “above all” one of pilgrimage. To substantiate this claim, he cites Said’s assertion that “...from one end of the nineteenth century to the other...the Orient was a place of pilgrimage, and every major work belonging to a genuine if not always to an academic Orientalism took its form, style and intention from the idea of pilgrimage there” (A Year Amongst the Persians, xi). While I agree that this line of reasoning has considerable merit when one considers Browne’s efforts to visit the birthplace of the Báb, his meetings and conversations with the Baha’i, and the subsequent scholarship that arose out of these beginnings, I believe this rationale for Browne’s trip is too retrospective, deduced from a late twentieth-century, post-Saidian viewpoint, and does not arise from within the spirit of Browne’s own era and orientation.

Accordingly, as banal as such a notion may seem, I suggest that although the original motivating factor behind Browne’s overt enthusiasm to visit Persia may well have grown from childhood nostalgia, that it was the culmination of a number of circumstances that enabled the trip, key among them the chance to perfect the language in which he had invested so much time and effort.62

And yet there remains a conundrum: Why did Browne never return to the East? If his devotion to the Persian people was as whole-hearted and genuine as it appeared to be, and since he continued to support the Persian cause to the point of his own exhaustion in his later life, why did he never return to the Persia for which he professed such a deep love? MacEion expresses this enigma thus, “Yet it must remain a puzzle that Browne never again
set foot in Iran nor, apart from his journey to Cyprus and Palestine in 1890, revisited the Islamic East. No explanation of this curious fact has ever, to my knowledge been put forward, nor do I think any likely to be” (xiii). Why did not Browne return? Finance was not an issue and, quite apart from his own obsession with the Persian culture, it is clear that not only was he highly respected in Persia, but also that he had many friends in that country.

Because there is no way of knowing for sure, I am going to assume that there are a number of different reasons behind what appears at first to be a paradox. Firstly, there is MacEion’s insight that Browne’s “European sensibilities” were often shocked by what he saw and experienced in the East (viii). For example, there are moments in the text when he quite openly expresses surprise or shock, as on this occasion: “Our third day’s march took us through . . . the village of Demirji-suyu, on emerging from which we were confronted and stopped by two most evil-looking individuals armed to the teeth with pistols and daggers. My first idea was that they were robbers . . . ” (29). This is a passage representative of many instances in the text that spell out situations that many young and inexperienced travellers come across in one form or another: being overcharged or ‘tricked’, enduring hard or less-than-clean beds or unusual foodstuffs. But although he had read widely, it is important to realize that aside from his brief sojourn in Turkey, Browne had never set foot outside the confines of Victorian England at the time of his Persian travel. The Persian culture of its day cannot have been more different from English ways and customs and may just have presented a surfeit of ‘adventure’ for this not particularly adventurous Orientalist.

Another part of the answer to this paradox may lie in the closing phrase of Browne’s book, namely the reference to “toil and fatigue”. Browne was not a man who would ordinarily
give recognition to “toil and fatigue”, in terms of fact, word or sentiment. The boundless energy for which he is noted is contradicted by this concluding phrase that suggests that his year away left him oddly drained. But, significantly, it is with this somewhat negative sentiment that he chooses to end his lengthy narrative. When one considers the enormity of his feeling for the Persians, which resulted in the rest of a lifetime spent fighting his own countrymen on their behalf, the disjuncture between these words and Browne’s energetic character becomes all the more marked.

Accordingly, I suggest that implicit in the phrase “toil and fatigue” is that it was the act of travel itself that was hard work for Browne, a labour of an incompatible and thus stressful nature. Travel for travel’s sake—for the sake of seeing sights—fatigued him a great deal more than striking up a conversation with a total stranger in one of any number of the foreign languages with which he was familiar. Thus the word “fatigue” would appear to reflect this state of mind, a reflective judgement on the travel component of the year he spent away. In other words, Browne’s empathy was directed towards the people, and not the country itself. Of particular consequence in this respect is the title Browne chose for this work, *A Year Amongst the Persians* and not, for example, *A Year in Persia*. The subtitle elucidates further: *Impressions as to the life, character, and thought of the people of Persia*. It was not Persia that Browne fell in love with; it was the people of that country. He was neither a traveller of the ilk of Richard Burton nor a statesman like Curzon. Thus it is my contention that it was the act of travelling itself that Browne found particularly wearying, and it was this that contributed to the rationale that lay behind his lack of desire to return to Persia or to anywhere else for that matter for other than a short visit. The five-minute
‘travel’ between Firwood House and Cambridge University suited him well for the major part of his adult life.

To unpack the remainder of an answer to this contradiction—that of Browne’s work on behalf of the Persians alongside his failure to return to that country—I need to refer once again to a diary entry in *A Year Amongst the Persians*. There is a moment in Browne’s book when the decision to leave Persia is uncertain. “I had now no excuse for prolonging my stay at Kirmán; yet still I could not summon up resolution to leave it. It seemed as though my whole mental horizon had been altered by the atmosphere of mysticism and opium smoke which surrounded me. I had almost ceased to think in English, and nothing seemed so good in my eyes as to continue the dreamy speculative existence which I was leading, with opium for my solace and dervishes for my friends” (583).

I think it is apparent from this passage that it was not indecision, as such, that gripped Browne at this time so much as a reluctance to make any decision at all. It is also plain that at this point, Browne was not *travelling*, he was in a stationary mode surrounded by people with whom he felt a great deal of compatibility. I suggest that the contentment he felt in this “space of life spent among a people and their ideas” was never in doubt; it was the travel component that distressed him (MacEion, ix). So happily ensconced was he within Kirmán society and so dependent was he on his opium pipe, it is pertinent to ask whether Browne might have lived happily amongst the Persians for the rest of his life.

In fact, it is interesting to speculate on what Browne’s life might have been had he not left Persia when he did. The West would have lost a passionate Cambridge academic, an
accomplished writer and translator, a devoted husband and father; the East would have lost a valuable political activist who spent a large proportion of his life campaigning against western interference in Persian affairs. Had he stayed would he have written differently: a book of the ilk of Leonard Woolf’s *The Village in the Jungle*, perhaps? Or, despite the heavy silence in his texts on the female sex, would he have married a Persian woman? Or would an increasing narcotic addiction have claimed him entirely? One can only surmise, but I suggest that although the narcotic haze in which he lived was pleasing to him at the time, once clear of it he was intelligent enough to realize its dangers. To realize, too, that he had left little in Persia to which to return. He had left no specific love interest behind. He had no prospects of employment within Persia. Admittedly while he had friends there, he had Persian friends in England as well. Moreover, he had already established Cambridge as his comfort zone. On his return, it provided both social and professional solidarity: a nucleus of identity he was never to leave, a rootedness clearly shown in the closing paragraph of his book which yields no sense of ambivalence, no desire to return. The experience for Browne was complete.

Thus another part of the answer, I believe, to the apparent paradox that presents itself between Browne’s unquestionable feeling for Persia and the Persians and his failure to return to that country lies in the clear and unchallenged sense he possessed of his own identity. Further, and most importantly for my thesis, I claim that this sense of identity was linked more strongly to his profession than his nationality. Despite parental opposition, he had set out on a path—albeit almost by default—that was to lead him to become an Orientalist in the best descriptive sense of the term. His affinity for languages led him to
study, teach, research, write and translate across a number of Middle Eastern languages, chiefly Persian but Arabic and Turkish as well.

Although his visit to Persia was coincidental with the zenith of imperialism with all the implications of hegemony, domination and indoctrination that word suggests, I would be surprised if Browne, as intellectual as he undoubtedly was, ever really thought in terms of empire. His rigorous mind was filled to the brim with poetry and with a love of language; he was too keen on the intense debate surrounding religion, too intent on researching the history of the Baha’i to be concerned with the dialectic of imperialism. One has only to compare *A Year Amongst the Persians* with Curzon’s *Persia and the Persian Question* to see the truth in this. 64

Accordingly, Browne could accept the label “The Persian” without losing any of his Englishness in the process precisely because there was little incentive to physically return to Persia. But in this, there is a poignant irony. Although there is no doubt that he did more for the people of Persia from outside their country than he ever could have done from within, in terms of Said’s “orientalist” argument, by his later “interference” in Persian affairs, he excludes and displaces the Persians in their own country. This is an issue deserving of fuller discussion towards the end of this chapter.

Turning now to a more detailed discussion of *A Year Amongst the Persians*, I think it is important to note that Browne’s book was in advance of its time both in its lack of genre boundaries and its composite nature and a very different text from *Persia and the Persian Question* published the year before. 65 This is no seamless narrative. It cannot be described
as a travel book, even though it describes a journey, nor can it be called an autobiography even though it contains autobiographical detail. Neither is it a history even though it contains a great deal of historical information about the origins of the Baha’i faith, nor is it a religious text, although a large proportion of the text is devoted to religious debate.

Aside from the “introductory” setting out the series of events that led to the realization of an adolescent ambition, the work is inserted neatly enough between the events that mark the start of Browne’s journey and his subsequent return to England. Central to the story and occupying a significant proportion of the book is his quest to visit the home of the Bābis, his endeavours to learn as much as possible about the faith, and the episodes that befall him as a consequence. Throughout the book are scattered details of conversations or debates on metaphysics, religion and mysticism that give some idea of the direction young Browne was destined to follow. At the head of each chapter—most of which describe another staging of his journey—there is an epigraph. Most often these take the form of quotations excerpted from the work of one or more of Browne’s beloved Persian poets or writers, although occasionally an epigraph pertinent to the particular chapter and taken from English or French literature replaces the Persian. Scattered throughout the book are tracts of Persian proverbs or verses where the Persian is set down first followed by the English translation in parenthesis.

Since part of my analysis here concerns Said’s notion of “exteriority”, a notion in “orientalist” discourse concerning itself more with what lies on the text’s surface than with what is hidden, the privileging of the Persian language over the English calls for further examination. It not only illustrates a moot issue concerning the difficulties of working
within the parameters Said has set, but also provides further evidence for the claim that traditional Orientalism and “imperialism” are not interchangeable. Thus while it would be natural to assume that the motive in what was obviously a deliberate act on the part of the writer in placing the Persian ahead of the English translation was to honour the Persian origin in an English-language text, within the discourse of “orientalism” the fact that the Persian exists at all beside the English translation becomes questionable because this then becomes a device for “mak[ing] the Orient visible, clear, ‘there’” (Orientalism, 22). One can acknowledge that both parts of this double bind have merit. In other words, while it is clearly an honour to be placed first on the one hand, it is equally obvious that this placement then becomes a Western representation of the Orient which constitutes an “orientalist” action on the other. But the real problematic of this discourse emerges in a hypothetical situation where the placement of the languages is transposed. If the English were placed ahead of the Persian, or if there were no translation at all, it could be argued that this is still an “orientalist” action of displacement and arrogance.

From a comparison of passages from selected texts of Curzon and Browne, it becomes obvious that both of Curzon’s texts from I am about to quote have a totally different aim and agency from A Year Amongst the Persians. Witness Curzon’s blatantly imperialistic preoccupation, his gamesmanship and declaration of hegemonic intent in the following sentences: “Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia—to many these names breathe only a sense of utter remoteness or a memory of strange vicissitudes and of moribund romance. To me, I confess, they are the pieces of a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world” (Quoted from MacEion, ix). Similarly not only the language and content, but also the tone of the following dedication from Problems of the Far East
published two years later, once again display an unquestionable ‘overriding’ of the Orient: “To those who believe that the British Empire is, under providence, the greatest instrument for good that the world has seen and who hold, with the writer, that its work in the Far East is not yet accomplished this book is inscribed” (vii).  

It is words—and work—like this that gave rise to Said’s “product of rage” and make that rage justifiable. But, ironically, it is also the existence of works of this nature juxtaposed with the books of such Orientalists as Edward G. Browne and Leonard Woolf that underscore the inaccuracies within Said’s catholic approach. To prove that Curzon is an imperialist underscores only what we already know: namely, that imperialism existed. To prove that there were Orientalists who lived and worked without the hegemonic desires declared synonymous with imperialistic practice disproves Said’s argument only because the Saidian thesis is all-embracing. Indeed to prove that only one Orientalist existed without this fundamental desire to promote imperial domination damages Said’s theory. The generalizing nature of his discourse permits few exceptions.

This returns me to a discussion of Browne’s dedication, an exordium that like Curzon’s prefaces the work. But here the similarities end as, characteristically, Browne’s dedication is directed at “the Persian reader only” and commences with lines and phrases from the Kur’ân in English translation. An excerpt from the exordium suggests a reason for Browne’s visit and in doing so states an epistemological incentive for his trip:

... and how in pursuit of knowledge I had forgone the calm seclusion of college, and through days warm and weary, and nights dark and dreary, now hungry and now athirst I had tasted of the best and of the worst... until I had made an end of toil, and set my foot upon my native soil; then, wishful to impart the gain which I had won with labour and harvested with pain (for “Travel is travail” say the sages), I resolved to write these
pages, and, taking ink and pen, to impart to my fellow-men what I had witnessed and understood of things evil and good.  

A close reading of the textual “surface” of this excerpt provides evidence of an extremely convoluted treatment. This was no dedication written on the spur of the moment, but a carefully crafted piece of writing. For a start, it is composed of rhyming couplets of a somewhat uneven rhythm, almost as though it was composed mentally while Browne was riding a horse with a game leg. But these couplets not only suggest the somewhat uneven rhythm of the time Browne spent in Persia, but also serve to underscore the binary nature of the content. In highlighting opposing forces—day/night, best/worst, gain/pain, evil/good—I suggest that Browne is describing the ambivalence with which he looks back on the year he spent away. Ostensibly, the disparity between Curzon’s texts and that of Browne is unquestionable.

However, two contradictory points interest me here. Firstly, Browne’s choice of the term “exordium” to introduce this text suggests that this term was chosen specifically to preface a work designed or constructed to largely consist of argument. Thus, it could be said that this is a book of argumentation as much as it is a book about travel. Since implicit in argument is a requirement for two persons or more, this is probably one of the clearest signs that this work is couched in a dialogic mode. If indeed this use of the dialogic illuminates Browne’s unambiguous self-reflexivity, it also answers in the positive a question posed towards the beginning of this chapter as to whether Browne allows the Orientals to speak for themselves. Throughout his texts, they are given a voice and that voice is privileged more often than not over Browne’s. If, for Edward Said, this demonstration of self-reflexivity is enough to exonerate the writer from charges of “orientalist” depiction of the East, it might seem as though Browne—despite his obvious idealism and passionate enthusiasm for a
culture not his own—is vindicated. But, secondly, the complexity of the construction in the passage above is diametrically at odds with the apparent innocence of the content. And so the question must be asked: to what “gain” is Browne referring? If, by use of this deconstructive technique, I were to make the assumption that the “gain” is the acquisition of knowledge of Persia that he wishes to pass on to his ‘fellow’ Englishmen, could this despite all ostensible evidence to the contrary be termed an “orientalist” text?

Since it is too early to reach a conclusion of this nature, I move forward to the first chapter. Here the ambiguity of purpose mentioned earlier is again evident at the start of the narrative where the opening sentence—“So at last I was really to go to Persia”—is written in a tone of barely-contained excitement, unequivocal and forward-looking, a disbelief made real. But it is the juxtaposition of the following sentence which gives rise to the ambiguity. Directly above these ebullient words, the epigraph suggests a contrasting uncertainty in style, content and tone:

And I know not, when bound for the land of my quest, if my portion shall be
The good which I hope for and seek, or the evil that seeketh for me.
(Al- Muthakkibu’l-‘Abdi)72

It is not until the reader arrives at the end of this lengthy narrative that a balance is achieved between the sense of reservation this opening quotation foregrounds and the tidiness and air of finality in the final paragraph:

Thus ended a journey to which, though fraught with fatigues and discomforts, and not wholly free from occasional vexations, I look back with almost unmixed satisfaction. For such fatigues and discomforts (and they were far fewer than might reasonably have been expected) I was amply compensated by an enlarged knowledge and experience, and a rich store of pleasant memories, which would have been cheaply purchased even at a higher price. For without toil and fatigue can nothing be accomplished, even as an Arab poet has said:—

Wa man talaba ’l- ‘ulà min ghayri kaddin
Adá’a’l-‘umra fí talabi’l-muháli.

And he who hopes to scale the heights without enduring pain,
And toil and strife, but wastes his life in idle quest and vain. (635)

The tone in final piece of text, rising and falling in congruence with the words it accompanies, projects in turn messages of relief, disillusionment, weariness, and of a satisfaction just out of reach. It provides closure to the feelings of doubt or uncertainty that introduced the first chapter and stands in stark contrast to excitement and anticipation in his first sentence.

From the analysis so far, it should by now be clear that this is no guidebook, but more significantly, it should also be evident that neither is this a book of romantic or exotic insights about the East. The Persia of exotic scenes, harems and captive women was certainly not Browne’s Persia, for his was a Persia of people: of muleteers and wayfarers, of hosts (both British and Persian), of dervishes, of the differences in the peoples he meets (Turkish, Armenian and Persian), of gatherings of wine and music, and of the long days and nights of theological discussion that so delighted him.73

Since any discussion of textual representation is incomplete without an exploration of viewpoint and perspective, I come now to a discussion about the approach Browne decided to take with this book. In this respect, there is no question that matters of structure and style loomed large in his decision on how best to manage this text. Presented as it is in the first person with characters and events unfolding page by page, it is told in diary form and it is this treatment that achieves the type of immediacy and lack of division between reader and writer that has a correspondence in journal writing. It would also, however, suggest copious and detailed notes written by Browne at each day’s end.74 While the use of first-person in a
work of this nature could be considered obtrusive, it is a measure of the attention that Browne gave to the text that the choice of viewpoint was not a decision he took lightly. In the “introductory” that sets the scene for this account of the year he spent away from his homeland, Browne discusses this dilemma: “I have not arrived at this decision [the inclusion of an “introductory”] without some hesitation and misgiving, for I do not wish to obtrude myself unnecessarily on the attention of my readers, and one can hardly be autobiographical without running the risk of being egotistical. . . . It is too late now to turn squeamish about the use of the pronoun of the first person. I will be as sparing of its use as I can, but use it I must” (1).75

Perhaps the only barrier to an immediate empathy with this work for twenty-first-century readers is the quaint but rather antiquated language Browne uses in such phrases as “for I had long determined to go” or “ere I set foot in the town”, but this somewhat antiquated form of expression is eventually neutralized or diluted by the diarized style of the book. At the same time, while Amanat refers to this as Browne’s “intimate style of writing”, I am pressed to find anything “intimate” in it. Instead I find it somewhat theatrical and archaic, a style that cannot be entirely attributed to the era in which the book was written since it sounds dated even beside the books of his peers. I suggest that if intimacy had indeed been what Browne had intended that it has the opposite effect of, at least initially, distancing the reader.

Contemporary reviews capture his political orientation at the beginning and end of his adult life and are as enlightening as to the interests of the British public as they are to the content and orientation of A Year Amongst the Persians. For example, The Athenaeum (January 20,
1894) published a lengthy and somewhat gushing critique which praises both Browne and the book alternately and in equal measure. Of most interest, however, is the final paragraph that ostensibly presents a picture of an apolitical Browne but which nevertheless, I suggest, hints at a latent political agenda: “. . . if one expects to find in this book any new developments of Russian intrigue or stagecraft, or any specimens of political gossip . . . he or she will be grievously disappointed. It eschews politics as its writer eschewed the society of Europeans generally, and of those native government officials whose business is rather the mysticism of diplomacy than that of Omar Khayyam and Hafiz”.

In the figure of the young Browne, at least, there was no hint of imperialist agenda and no doubt of his empathy for the people of Persia. Thus, insofar as his motives were not those of dominion or power, I repeat that Browne’s Orientalism was not that of Said.

But to be too certain of Browne’s innocence in this regard risks falling into the trap of simplifying a situation that is intrinsically complex. Witness a review of a reprint of the same book over thirty years later that focuses almost entirely on Browne’s political disposition. Using the release of the 1926 edition of *A Year Amongst the Persians* as an unconcealed excuse to devote almost the entire review to Browne’s political involvement in Persia, *The Times Literary Supplement* ends thus: “Persia was unquestionably his spiritual home, and therefore in all things the Persians were necessarily right and the others including his own country, necessarily wrong. His boundless admiration for the Persians went so far to distort his judgement that when the supreme moment came in 1914 he was among those who protested against England taking up the Kaiser’s challenge . . .” (December 16, 1926).
Consequently, it is not accurate to assert that Browne’s Orientalism and Said’s “orientalism” are contradictory concepts because at a certain juncture there is a collision between the two descriptions that forms an inescapable fusion. In spite of Browne’s indubitable love for and efforts on behalf of the Persians, despite his attempts to allow—or further, encourage—the Persians to represent themselves, despite the reflexivity that he brings to his texts, it is unarguable that he still draws a picture of Persia for Western consumption. Despite all the positive statements one can make about Browne—and there are many—he is still “writing the Orient” and in so doing—based on the argumentation of Edward Said—it would appear that scholars like Abbas Amanat are not correct and that Browne is, after all, an “orientalist”.

The political Browne

But before I finally concede this point, I would like to look further at his political career. Although, as I mentioned earlier, Browne and his books attracted very little contemporary attention, the furore that erupted over his contribution to the Persian cause was an exception. While Browne fuelled the fire by bombarding his colleagues, the press, the Foreign Office and Sir Edward Grey with letters, as much as he sent out, he received in reply, and meticulously labeled and filed.

Following the release of his major political work, *The Persian Revolution*, the press—both in Britain and overseas—responded by devoting considerable space to correspondence and reviews, some of which were favourable, others openly critical and scornful. This was the text that interrupted his work and delayed the appearance of the third volume of his major four-volume *Literary History*, but it was an account of events that in Browne’s view
demanded to be written. Although correspondence to Browne following the first publication of this book in 1910 lists some of the inaccuracies it contained, consideration must be given to the fact that it was written under some duress. But significantly, some of these letters and reviews illuminate foreign sentiment towards Orientalists in general and Browne in particular. In this respect, an interesting juxtaposition of opinion on Browne’s involvement is provided between the following excerpt from the Persian daily newspaper Iran-i Nou and a review which appeared in The Times of London two weeks later.79

Iran-i Nou concluded the last of its series of installments of The Persian Revolution with the following statement:

[W]e too end our articles on Professor Browne’s history of the Iranian revolution and express our affectionate gratitude to that renowned orientalist for composing and publishing such honest [record] of the struggles of an unfortunate, oppressed nation . . . particularly at a time when the [notorious] David Fraser, former correspondent of The Times in Tehran, has written and published a book in defense of [the forces of] reaction and the Russian actions in Iran[--] entirely omitting references to the circumstances [i.e. origins and motives] of the Iranian revolution[and thereby] poisoning public opinion. We are hopeful that [Professor Browne’s] history of the Iranian revolution will be shortly translated into Persian . . . (December 24, 1910)80

In reply, The Times launched a line of attack on Browne which would have sounded more natural emanating from the text of Edward Said than from one of Browne’s own countrymen. The Times claimed: “Professor Browne has a case to prove. He has ardent sympathies, a vivid imagination and little practical experience of politics. Persia to him is an idealized land, which he sees transfigured by the roseate memories of a single journey made
a couple of decades ago . . . He is saturated by a love of Persian literature, history and traditions” (January 5, 1911).81

However, knowledge of this newspaper’s arch-conservatism and the fact that Browne was at that time a founding member of the newly formed Left Opposition to England’s Liberal Party provides an understanding of part of the reason for The Times’ rather mocking perspective. Further, the David Fraser referred to in Iran-i Nou’s statement (above) was not only a former correspondent of The Times’ Tehran bureau, but he had also just published a book on Iran, titled Persia and Turkey in Revolt, which was being reviewed jointly with Browne’s in the complete version of the extract above. It is important not to overlook the fact that far from epitomising the conservative scholar, to the contrary, Browne was noted for being outspoken and on no topic was he more so than on the subject of England’s interference in Persian government.

It was precisely because The Times was also pro-Foreign Office, that it more often than not received the brunt of his bitterness; in the words of the newspaper “. . . we should be sorry to have to compute how often The Times receives his zealous castigation. Rarely has there been a more violent example of the professor in politics” (Bonakdarian, LIV). The “violent” professor’s “zealous castigation” took the form of letters of this nature printed in The Times of September 9, 1909:

."... need you refuse to recognize the fact that Persia . . . is, after all, capable of inspiring that ultimate and unswerving affection which Italy inspired in this country in the middle of the last century, and that there are Englishmen who regard Taghizada and Sattar Khan somewhat as their fathers regarded Mazzini and Garibaldi? And to suggest, as you suggest, that because these men hail from Azarbaijan, and . . . Persia they should not be credited with their merits, seems to me hardly fairer than the contention one sometimes
hears that literary talent in England is always associated with Celtic blood, or that the leaders of English enterprise are invariably either Scotchmen or Jews.82

While this hardly resembles a “racist” letter, it does expose a disposition to idealism on Browne’s part that I have not yet fully addressed, but which has been hinted at by Amanat and in some of the reviews from which I have quoted. For instance, in an excerpt from the foreword to the 1995 edition of *The Persian Revolution*, editor Amanat states: “What Browne primarily intended to achieve in his book was to allow the voice of the Persian people to be heard by his Western audience” (X). However, a little later, he continues: “*The Persian Revolution* was more than a simple record of a revolution, for it influenced the very course of events it covered in its pages. Few historians, even those who covered revolutions of their own time, afforded, or perhaps wished to afford, such a vantage point . . .” (XII).83

I would like to examine these two statements alongside each other. On the one hand, Browne can be commended for allowing the Persians to be heard, but on the other, if indeed his work was so powerful that it influenced the course of the revolution, he was doing more than simply giving the Persians a voice in the West.84 In *The Persian Revolution*, his was the voice purporting to represent “a nation wronged by the abuses of its own government and wakened by foreign encroachments” (Amanat, XI). Whatever Browne’s agenda here, does not this constitute an open involvement in the affairs of another nation, the very interference that Said so condemns, the quintessence of “orientalist” control? There is no doubt that Browne was in the grip of a vision for Persia so strong that he was prepared to
fight his own government in helping the Persians attain their ideal. But was this “ideal” actually “Persia’s ideal” or Browne’s ideal?

Before attempting to answer these questions, one other example of the lengths to which Browne was prepared to go in his efforts to shape the Persian Constitution further illuminates his idealistic nature. In *A Year Amongst the Persians*, for example, his attitude towards Islam is somewhat ambiguous. He relishes the theological discussions within the predominantly Moslem community on an intellectual level, but it is clear that his feelings and emotions lie away from mainstream Islam in derivatives of the faith like Bábism and Sufiism. While Browne himself claimed a “Pantheistic idealism” and delighted in all forms of philosophical, metaphysical or theological discussion and debate across a number of faiths including Sufiism, there is no doubt that his sympathies lay with the Baha’is. 85 However, in *The Persian Revolution*, because Browne is making political capital out of the rising Pan-Islamic sentiment in the Muslim world as well as the greater understanding of Islam in the West mentioned earlier, he whitewashes all signs of religious turmoil. His zeal to promote the Constitution is such that when he needs a figurehead to act as a “selfless champion whose aim was to unite the Muslim world against despotism and foreign aggression” (Amanat, XIX), he not only overlooks the apostasy of the Shi’ite turned Sunni Sayyid Jamal al-Din, but praises him highly as the man to whom the Constitutional Movement in Persia “in large measure owes its inception” (*The Persian Revolution*, 30). This admiration for al-Din shows Browne’s deliberate avoidance of the fact that the founder of the Baha’i faith, his own hero, the Báb, was murdered by Shi’ite Moslems. 86 It also necessitates his disregard of “the Babi background of some major constitutionalists”, which must have been particularly difficult as he happened to be working on a Baha’i historical
text concurrently. Although obviously Browne’s sense of political expediency overrode any qualms he may have had in these respects, the point I want to make here that his obsessive desire for Persian self-rule triumphed over his intrinsic honesty and openness. Is this the point at which Said’s notions of “objective structure” and “subjective restructure” coincide? I have already discussed how easily Browne wears the title “The Persian”, but this observation demands an answer to the question posed earlier: Was Persia’s “ideal” seamlessly concomitant with that of Browne? Was Browne Persia?

Yes and no. Again the answer is not as simple as it might first appear. It further needs to be taken into account that Browne was a passionate proponent of self-determination. He would hardly have thrown himself behind his wife’s nationalist endeavours had he believed in the intrinsic right of self-rule. 87 He felt even more strongly that an “awakening” Persia should be in control of its own destiny and feared that the country would fall under the dominion of one of its imperial neighbours. One only has to read the preface to The Persian Revolution to observe the depth and intensity of Browne’s fears in this regard. Like Leonard Woolf after him, he vehemently rejected “what was then a common defense of colonial domination—that the so-called ‘backward’ countries should be ‘developed’ on a European model of material progress” (Amanat, XVIII).

As I have claimed all along, Browne was no imperialist. That much is clear and it makes it difficult to disagree with Amanat’s summary in the following passage: “Browne’s liberal views in defense of Iran and its revolution, in open defiance of the prevailing imperialism of his time, are essentially at variance with the negative stereotype of orientalism developed in our time by such critics as Edward Said. The often indiscriminate condemnation of the
orientalists, and therefore of their scholarship, has cast upon them a shadow of imperialist partisanship, undue romantic exoticism, and even simple mischief which diametrically differs from Browne’s vision and his undertaking” (X).

All this is so, but it tends to smother a surfacing issue. If it can be said that Browne identifies too closely with the Persians, to what extent, then, does he write Persia and its problems, not only for the West, but for Persia itself? Of The Persian Revolution, a review in the Spectator (November 5, 1910) asserts: “Probably in Persia itself nothing so full of instruction could be written, for much that is said here could not be safely said there; and, further, Professor Browne, who has correspondents in every part of Persia, has, we suppose more threads of information in his hands than any Persian. . . . Professor Browne is a Persian, as other men are Hellenists; his reverence for Persian literature and art makes him perhaps suspect conspiracies against Persia which do not exist . . .” (Bonakdarian, LIII).

It becomes obvious that while Browne may not suffer from an “undue romantic exoticism” that he is clearly an idealist in regard to Persia. That this idealism is used to present an aspect of Persia to the West is undeniable. When Browne's discourse is examined within the context of the dominant discourse, it is clear that his relationship with the East is dreamy and romantic and that out of this romanticism—albeit a different romanticism from that of Gallard—arises a paternalistic emotion for Persia.

If this paternal role is powerful enough to influence the affairs of a nation—albeit for that nation’s ‘good’—this then is the epitome of “orientalist” manipulation in that it constitutes foreign intervention.88 A Persia thus ‘saved’ becomes Browne’s Persia; Browne displaces the Persians in their own country by becoming—as Arberry (and others) label him—“The
Persian”. This is the theoretical positioning that makes it unfeasible to refute Said’s contention that it was impossible for a European to have anything to do with the Orient without both knowledge and power entering the equation.

Accordingly, paradoxically, one can be in complete accord with a defence of Browne such as that of Amanat, but it is not possible to escape the fact that the tightly-knit boundaries of Said’s discourse make it unworkable for Browne or anyone else with a “vision” beyond their own nation—and the contacts and influence to make a difference to that nation—to be other than “orientalist”.

While Browne indubitably examined both his own methodology and approach with regard to the writing of *A Year Amongst the Persians* and while this book also provides constant evidence of a high degree of reflexivity and self-examination, in his passion for ensuring that the Persians get a fair Constitution, Browne falls into a doctrinal mode every bit as dogmatic as that of de Sacy. As an Englishman who lived during the years that constituted the very apogee of Britain’s empire, Browne was also someone who was, certainly in his later years, rich, influential and politically-centric. There is no doubt he used these opportunities to assist in “dominating” and “re-structuring” a country that is both geographically and ideologically central to the Orient. It does not matter that he acted in “open defiance of the prevailing imperialism of his time”, that he spent his life resisting racism, or that he was unswerving in his purpose so far as defending Persia was concerned, Browne’s interference in Persian affairs of state renders him “orientalist” under the terms of the postcolonial framework under examination here. Even the obvious reverence with which the Persians still speak of him—epitomized by the street in Tehran that continues to bear his
name—does not alter the fact that within the parameters of postcolonial discourse, Browne cannot avoid being typecast as “orientalist”. Perhaps the headline from *The Times Literary Supplement* review—“Dreamer in a Land of Dreamers”—says it all (December 16, 1926).
Notes

4 Patrick Browne’s full quotation appears in the foreword to the 1984 edition of A Year Amongst the Persians (London: Century Publishing and New York: Hippocrene Books): “Until a few years ago, he was still remembered and beloved in Persia. There used to be a street in Tehran named after him, and his statue there is said to have been the only statue of a European which was spared during the rule of Dr Mossadeg” (vi).
5 My thanks to Shahram Sharafi for this information and for confirming that a street named after Professor Edward Browne was still in existence until very recently. I have been unable to verify whether the statue still stands.
7 To avoid confusion between the Orientalism of Browne’s day and Said’s “inflationary redefinition” of “orientalism”, Trautmann uses the designations Orientalism 1 and Orientalism 2 respectively. I have adopted the practice of differentiating between the two meanings by placing the definition of the latter— Said’s “orientalism”—in quotation marks.
8 For a more complete list of works on Browne, see editor Abbas Amanat’s “Notes” in the 1995 edition of Browne’s The Persian Revolution of 1905-1909 (LVIII).
9 While this was painstakingly tabulated by Jill Butterworth (librarian at Cambridge University) before her retirement in 2001, very little has been done to update the Browne Papers since then. These are badly in need of computerisation and cross-referencing to bring the archive into line with the approach taken by Sussex University with respect to the Leonard Woolf archive.
10 For a full-length and balanced account of Browne’s life, I wait with a high degree of anticipation for the publication of Dr. John Gurney’s book.
11 Denis MacEoin’s sketch of the romantic vision the Victorians held of the East is as succinct and accurate as any I have read. Significantly, this is uncannily descriptive of the French painter J. L. Gérôme’s painting, “The Snake Charmer” reproduced on the cover of the 1991 Penguin edition of Said’s Orientalism.
12 In this respect, in his “memoir” to the 1950 edition, Browne’s friend of forty years E. Denison Ross (London: A. and C. Black) claims: “It is a strange fact that a gift for languages in almost all cases is a gift for a particular group or type of languages, and it is quite conceivable that if E. G. B. had not been accidentally attracted to the languages of Islám, he would never have taken up linguistic studies at all. . . . He was not really interested in languages as such; neither Semitic nor Iranian philology made any appeal to him . . .” (x).
13 Denison Ross makes a clear distinction between “conversationalist” and “talker” (xvi).
14 An example of Browne’s incredible energy was his handwritten replies to more than 300 letters of condolence he received after the death of his wife. He himself had suffered an immense heart attack the year before and was to outlive his wife by only six months.
15 The controversy that surrounded Browne with regard his efforts to promote and shape the Persian Constitution following the release of The Persian Revolution was an exception in this respect. But it was a debate that affected only a specific segment of the public for a relatively short period.
16 While it is true that, outside his Persian experience, Browne appeared to do little that physically called forth danger or risk, in terms of the events, undertakings, challenges and campaigns that filled his life, it could be considered venturesome enough.
17 Although “Empire Day was introduced in 1904, and was held on the late Queen’s birthday . . . the real beginning [of empire] . . . is generally acknowledged to be the Great Exhibition of 1851, in which the colonies

18 Just how effective Browne’s own teaching tactics proved can be assessed in the light of this claim by his pupil and colleague R. A. Nicholson some thirteen years later: “He would have admitted the value of grammar as a necessary discipline for scholars to whom exact linguistic knowledge is either an end in itself or a means of promoting philological studies; but his own mastery of three Oriental languages was not gained by those methods . . . In his view, to know a language was to possess its literature, and through the literature a key to the minds and hearts of men; hence, though he admired profound scholarship . . . he himself really cared for it in proportion as it was capable of being used to throw light upon Islamic, and especially Persian, culture and civilization”. From A. J. Arberry, *Oriental Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 192.

19 At that time, this was a sect that was regarded as an heretical offshoot of the Islamic faith and, as a consequence, severely persecuted. The graphic description of the public execution and subsequent martyrdom of the Báb, the young prophet of Shíráz, and the sect’s secretive existence from then on, had an immediate and dynamic effect on Browne.

20 In Browne’s own words: “. . . gradually pity turned to admiration, and admiration to enthusiasm, until the Turks became in my eyes veritable heroes, and the desire to identify with their cause, make my dwelling amongst them and unite with them in the defence of their land, possessed me heart and soul” (8).

21 As Nicholson claims “. . . already we see his whole-hearted sympathy for the Oriental mind and, conversely, the fixed point of view from which his judgements on the West were formed and delivered” (Arberry, 167).

22 In late Victorian England, teachers for Oriental languages were still few and far between and his efforts to find tuition for those he found he wished to study making reading and give an idea of his depth of his aptitude for language and the commitment to the East that was growing concomitantly.

23 According to the correspondence in the Browne Papers, Box 12, Cambridge University Library, Browne wrote home quite frequently from Turkey during his two months away. In a letter to his mother on September 7, 1882, he describes his new “friends”, among whom he lists a Sufi, booksellers and prayer-carpet merchants, people he found mainly in the bazaars he frequented. Browne divided the people he met into the “new kind” and “old kind” of Turk. “The thing is that the good old-fashioned Turks don’t read the papers, and never look at a book less than fifty years old—so that they don’t know anything about passing events. The new kind of Turk knows—but doesn’t much care. The papers here write in a very friendly spirit towards England on the whole.” If Browne found the ‘friendliness’ of the Turks towards England somewhat surprising given the anti-Turkish sentiment in Britain just four years earlier during the period of the Russian-Turkish war, this could be attributed to the “old kind” who “don’t read the papers”. A little more thought, however, dissolves the contradiction altogether. The English Royal Family had close ties with Russia at that time. In 1874, Queen Victoria’s son, Prince Alfred, had married the Grand Duchess Marie, daughter of Tsar Alexander II. Victoria’s granddaughter, Alix, was to become the wife of Russia’s last tsar, Nicholas II. Thus since the British Establishment had no choice but to be pro-Russian, it follows that the leading newspapers of the day—from which Browne would have received his information—would project similar views and thus appear anti-Turkish in their inevitable support of Russia. But the opposite does not hold. The Turks had no reason to dislike the English.

24 Among the Browne Papers there is a letter from a colleague complaining that he terminated his Arabic studies because he could find no one of “culture” with whom to converse. As a person who practised his language skills at every opportunity, one wonders at the impatience and lack of empathy with which Browne might have read such a letter.

25 In an essay entitled “Edward G. Browne’s Turkish Connexion”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, 49 (1986): 25-34, Peter Chelkowski points out that “Browne’s sense of affinity with the Turks endured from the time of the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-78, when he was only 16, until the end of his life in 1926. In 1914 he wrote in his introduction to *The press and poetry of modern Persia* [Cambridge, 1914]: ‘Curiously enough it was the Ottoman Turks, a people far less original and talented than either the Persians or the Arabs, who so far as the Near East is concerned, introduced the hitherto unknown ideas of “The Fatherland” (watan), “the nation” or “people (millat) and “liberty” (hurriyyat) and who succeeded in giving to these old words this new and potent significance’” (25).

26 About this time, too, he met “a very learned but very eccentric old Persian, Mirzá Bákir”, who by dint of reading compositions of decidedly unconventional poetry of “grass-eating lions, bears, yellow demons, Gog and Magog . . . Hebrew and Arab patriarchs” to Browne over many a long hour helped in this way to correct the rather “erroneous and unlovely pronunciation” of Persian Browne had absorbed from his previous tutor
The colourfully drawn ‘characters’ in Mirzá Bákir’s poetry gain relevance in my later discussion of similar descriptive writing in the Nights.

27 See my discussion of the lack of support provided by the British Government to Orientalists later this chapter.

28 Although Browne’s name is more often associated with the Persian language, his knowledge of Arabic and Turkish were also excellent. Not only did he hold the Chair of Arabic at Cambridge for over two decades, but his written Arabic was indistinguishable from that of a native speaker. A letter from W. A. Smart, written in Morocco in 1916, states “... your letter created quite a sensation among the Ulema of Fez, who were with difficulty persuaded that the writer of such pure Arabic could be a Western barbarian”. From the Browne Papers, Box 9.

29 I will examine Woolf at length in the next chapter; it will suffice for the moment to emphasise the differences in their awareness of the strategies and effects of British imperialism.

30 This was one of the ways in which Browne differed from Leonard Woolf. Woolf was, of course, also a university graduate but his passions were directed almost solely into his creative and political writings rather than scholarship. Browne, however, attracted academic accolades throughout his life. He held the Chair of the Sir Thomas Adams’ Professorship of Arabic from 1902 for almost a quarter of a century during a time which, according to Professor Inayatullah, was “undoubtedly the most distinguished and exciting in the long history of the Sir Thomas Adams’ foundation” (20). From “E. G. Browne: Friend of the Muslim East”, Hamdard 14.1 (1971): 19-22, 33. In 1903 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy and in 1922 a Vice-President of the Royal Asiatic Society. Nor was his early contribution to medicine ignored. In 1911, he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. Towards the end of his life he was invited to deliver the highly esteemed Fitz-Patrick lectures on Arabian Medicine, later published by Cambridge University Press as Arabian Medicine and finally translated into a number of different languages, among them French, Persian and Urdu.

31 The hundreds of letters Browne wrote and received, many of them archived in the Browne Papers, bear witness to the extraordinary and unflagging effort he expended on behalf of the Persians.

32 Although one would have assumed that such a successful marriage would inevitably have taken Browne away from his college friends, it would appear that Browne’s energy (and diplomacy!) was such that Firwood merely replaced Pembroke as the meeting ground. Although the fact that the tributes and testimonials of Browne’s colleagues and peers rarely mention his wife tempts one to consign her to the role of post-Victorian wife and mother, this would not in fact be correct. It seems that Alice Browne was the ideal partner for Browne in almost every respect. While there were differences in their backgrounds as she came from a wealthy Roman Catholic family and their political affiliations were aimed in different directions, they were both politically-inclined and a strong sense of nationalism united them. Just as Mrs. Browne was determined to further the Irish cause of independence, Browne’s energies were directed towards Persia, but it was not long before Browne’s sympathies and support towards both Catholicism and Ireland were engaged in his wife’s fight, if in a relatively remote manner. See G. Michael Wickens, Encyclopaedia Iranica, Vol. IV, 484. Alice Browne, on the other hand, “took a great deal of personal interest in many of Browne’s scholarly and political undertakings and friendships” and became one of the founding members of the Persia Society established in 1911. See Bonakdarian, The Persian Revolution, XXXIII.

33 It would perhaps be more accurate to call these evenings of talk, rather than discussion, because from all accounts, it was mainly E. G. Browne talking and reciting.

34 These long evenings of discussion and true argument at Pembroke lasted until 1906 when Browne at the age of forty-four married Alice Blackburn-Daniell.

35 My thanks to Shahram Sharafi for the following information: Ajab-nama is a Persian word with two parts and does not translate literally into English. Ajab has an Arabic origin and a meaning that suggests “strange things that make people wonder”; nama is a Persian word meaning “showing”. Thus the translation that most scholars have decided most closely transliterates is that of a Book of Wonder or Admiration or Amazement.

36 That this book drew “a sour review or two” aimed at the mediocrity of some of the articles may have taken away some of the pleasure from Browne, too. See Encyclopaedia Iranica, 485.

37 Little known is that the Order of the Lion and the Sun was established to honour distinguished foreigners by Shah Feth of Persia in 1808. Pronounced shir-o-khorshid in Persian, the Lion and Sun is a famous symbol of Persian culture and is mentioned in much Persian literature. It was also used in the Iranian flag, coins and the Iranian equivalent of the Red Cross (called Red Sun and Lion) before the Islamic revolution of 1979. Incidentally—of interest in terms of ‘orientalist’ representation of the other—the Order in the shape of a meritorious medal also formed the basis of a short story by Anton Chekhov titled “The Lion and the Sun” which represents its Russian protagonist in a very poor light in contrast to his Persian counterpart.
The contention that surrounded this issue laid the groundwork for Browne’s later anger with regard to English and Russian interference in Persian affairs.

Note Browne’s admiring comments on the French system started by Sacy and backed by his government, which on completion of satisfactory training, would offer to a French subject “such employment as his tastes, training, and attainments have fitted him for” (4). See, too, Browne’s unsparing use of exclamatory punctuation; there are more exclamation marks in this paragraph than in the entire “introductory”, and not very many more in the total 600 pages of text. Given the gist of the textual message, they function here in a denunciatory fashion to highlight his disappointment with his own country’s deficiency.

The Report covered eighty countries and was published in the chaos that surrounded the end of World War II. See Arberry, 241.

The commission was appointed on December 15, 1944.

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Which is, of course, not surprising, because the sentiments expressed are not recognized within postcolonial discourse.

See my discussion of Bhabha in chapter one or see, as an example, his lecture series titled “Minority Culture and Creative Anxiety” presented as part of the “Re-inventing Britain” workshop.

For a detailed discussion of events, see Kopf, British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernisation, 1773-1835.

The sentiments embedded in Trautmann’s descriptive phrase “dreamy obscuranticism” with reference to the Orientalists is echoed in a review of A Year Amongst the Persians titled “A dreamer in a land of dreamers”, The Times Literary Supplement, December 16, 1926.

Browne’s output in terms of published works was considerable and thanks are due to R. A. Nicholson that a complete and almost fully classified bibliography exists. A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental MSS belonging to the late E. G. Browne was collated, edited and published posthumously by Nicholson in 1932 and, along with a memoir by Nicholson, contains a classified bibliography of the fifty-five major items published by Browne. Many of his numerous articles are listed in the Index Islamicus.

Little has been said on Browne’s involvement with the Baha’i in this thesis for two major reasons. Firstly, the story of Browne and the Baha’i faith is a full-length work on its own; secondly, much of the scanty critical material extant on Browne has already covered this area of his life. For my purposes here it is sufficient to note that his focus in this respect was every bit as centred as the efforts he expended on behalf of the Persians and what he believed were their constitutional rights.

That these volumes were twenty-two years in the writing is due in part to Browne’s six or seven years of intimate involvement with the Persian crisis and the books that were to come out of this that drew Browne’s attention from this major work. But even so, Browne claimed that this task represented “the labour of a lifetime, for ever since I began the study of Persian in the summer of 1880, being then only eighteen years of age, the desire to write a complete Literary History of Persia has increasingly possessed me”. From Vol. IV, this edition (London: Cambridge University Press, 1956) vii.

Encyclopaedia Iranica, 484.


Rhetorical though it might be, the question must again be asked: Where were those “scholars of Iran” when Browne’s “tribute” was being prepared? Why were they not invited to contribute? If they were, no record exists.

From Conrad’s Heart of Darkness in Youth and Two Other Stories (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1925), 52.

See, for example, the voluminous correspondence contained in the Browne Papers, Box 2.

There is no doubt that Browne was a romantic; he would hardly have followed through on his boyhood dream to visit Persia had he not been lured by the idea of adventure. Neither would he have rebelled against the wishes of a father for whom he had a high regard—witness the tone of his frequent letters from Turkey—had he not had more imagination than was needed to follow in his ‘father’s footsteps’ in the Victorian mode of the day. However, this does not in itself mean he misrepresented his subject matter by exoticising or idealizing.

See Chinua Achebe’s 1987 lecture “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness” (reprinted in Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988) in which Achebe takes Conrad to task for his “obvious racism” (258). And further that “… this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that is manifestations go completely unremarked” (257). The point I want to make here is, firstly, that Achebe is taking Conrad’s text out of its Victorian context and applying to it a twentieth-century
awareness. In a recent interview with Achebe (Guardian Review, Essay section, 22.2.2003), fellow writer Caryl Phillips questions the widely-acknowledged “father of African literature in the English language and undoubtedly one of the most important writers of the second half of the 20th century” on his long-held and polemical views on Conrad. Phillips asks: “‘But is it not ridiculous to demand of Conrad that he imagine an African humanity that is totally out of line with both the times in which he was living and the larger purpose of his novel [which is to show the infinite capacity of human beings for evil]’”. Achebe’s answer lies in my second point which underscores my argument in relation to Browne. Namely, that it becomes clear from this article that Achebe’s central concern is the portrayal of Africa and Africans in this story, and that in this dehumanizing representation he finds a corresponding betrayal by someone he otherwise—and actually—regards rather highly as a fellow artist. With thanks to Pamela Mace for sending me this article.

57 In the sense of what I am discussing here, the word exotic contains connotations of ‘misleading’.

58 The true origin—dates and places—of the Nights is a matter of some controversy and we know that the original must have passed through the hands of many scribes and editors along the way. However, it is obvious that the tales come from many Eastern lands and also from different epochs. We know, too, that the Kitab-al-Fihrist, an index of Arabic works compiled in A. D. 987, claims “that the framework of the book, the story of Scheherazade and the misogynist king [the ninth-century Hárûnu’r-Rashid], was Persian in origin and that the device was taken over by the Arabs who ‘polished and embellished’ the Persian tales and ‘wrote others resembling them’” (Newby, 8). Given that the origin of at least some of the tales are Persian, I find it interesting that E. G. Browne does not enter this debate and one has to wonder whether he holds back out of a Victorian prudishness. His references to the Nights are few and brief. Of one of the ninth-century poets, Abu Nuwas, presumably responsible for many of the tales, Browne says: “... one of the most brilliant and shameless poets of Hárûnu’r-Rashid’s Court. His discreditable adventures, ready resource, and unfailing wit are familiar to all readers of the Arabian Nights” (A Literary History of Persia, 277).

59 Galland was a French scholar and Orientalist who, as attaché-secretary to the French ambassador, travelled a great deal in the Middle East. His translation of the Nights, or Mille et une Nuits, Contes Arabes traduits en Francois, to give it its correct title, was published between 1704 and 1717.

60 Burton worked on the project somewhat spasmodically from 1852 onwards; his translation is widely held to be the most faithful.

61 From the outset, his representation of the British Government is clearly a reflection of his own thoughts and impressions on imperial administration as the testimonials from his peers and excerpts from his own correspondence make manifest. Plainly the Government’s lack of encouragement for the learning of Oriental languages and the equal lack of any attempt to provide a career for those who were proficient in foreign languages discussed earlier in this chapter was, in Browne’s view anyway, not only shortsighted but insulting.

62 While there was no doubt that the desire had been in Browne’s mind for quite some time, I maintain the trip was destined to take place simply because the timing was perfect. At this point his medical studies were complete; he had spent considerable time and effort securing tutors for his languages; there was a post for a Persian teacher in the offing at Cambridge; and the Fellowship from Pembroke College enabled the trip financially.

63 Browne travelled very little in his life. Travel outside England consisted of his visit to Turkey in 1882 and Cyprus and Palestine in 1890.

64 Somewhat ironically, these two books sit cover to cover on the shelves of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Cambridge University.

65 In contrasting Curzon’s approach with that of Browne, MacEion appropriately describes Curzon as “a one-man fact-finding expedition” while “Browne is next to useless as a guide for the traveller or as a source of information for the merchant . . .” (A Year Amongst the Persians, ix-x). Curzon’s book certainly attracted positive reviews, not the least from Browne himself, and it was unquestionably researched with thoroughness and packed with the type of facts and figures that travellers of the times would have found useful.

66 I think there is no question of Browne’s intention in placing the Persian ahead of the English and suggest that his act of enclosing the English translation in parenthesis only underscores his honouring of the Persian.

67 Interestingly, Persia and the Persian Question was written ten years before Curzon was to become Viceroy of India. In contrast to Browne’s work, note how both the title and the words of introduction declare Curzon’s strategic location in relation to the text.

68 The full title is Problems of the Far East: Japan, Korea, China (London: Longmans, Green, 1894).

The Exordium contains an Arabic quotation translated by Richard Burton into English, thus: “‘Es-seferu kit’atun mina’s–sakar’ (‘Travel is a portion of hell-fire’)” which clearly expresses Browne’s own attitude towards travel.

In this excerpt, I have attempted to duplicate the spacing in the 1984 edition of A Year Amongst the Persians.

Throughout his works—and in his verbal renderings too—any quotation that Browne has translated from the Persian is reproduced in Persian and is given precedence in its placement above the respective English translation.

The fact that the Persia of Arabian Nights does not appear in Browne’s book does beg the question, however, as to how much else he saw and silently appreciated or alternatively, was repelled by, and did not report.

Scholars suggest that the detail included in this narrative is a result of Browne’s prodigious memory. However, he also relied heavily on travel notes and journals to which the plethora of notebooks in Box 8 attest.

From a literary standpoint, the diary style and structure achieves a greater degree of empathy than would have the “systematic treatise” which was one of Browne’s other options insofar as the narrative treatment of the text was concerned. He had been tempted to write a “systematic treatise” but decided not do so for a number of reasons: that his publishers thought the narrative form would be more readable, and thus more saleable, that a treatise of the type he had in mind would absorb more time than he could devote, and because Curzon’s “encyclopaedic work” was already in existence.

Given that this review was written at the time of high empire, to my mind the observation that “. . . its writer eschewed the society of Europeans . . .” is a political statement in itself.

For a more complete account of the furore that reigned at the time, see Bonakdarian’s “Selected Correspondence of E. G. Browne and Contemporary Reviews of The Persian Revolution 1905-1909”, XXIX-LVII.

There is no doubt that Browne was a hoarder, but he hoarded with intent and precision and it is his diaries and detailed notebooks from which his books on Persia were drawn.

I am indebted both to Mansour Bonakdarian’s selection of Browne’s correspondence on this subject and contemporary reviews from the press of the day.

Quoted here from Bonakdarian, LVII.

Qtd. from Bonakdarian, LIV.

Browne Papers, Box 8 (tin trunk).

Although not relevant in this respect, Amanat’s analyses and reasoning behind the two revolutions Iran has undergone in the course of a century make fascinating reading in the light of contemporary issues.

See my discussion of Bakhtin in chapter one or my later exploration of the use of the dialogic in Amitav Ghosh’s work.

See, as an example, his discussion of the mystical aspects of the mind (A Year Amongst the Persians, 16-7).

A large portion of A Year Amongst the Persians is devoted to discussion of the relationship between Moslems and Baha’is, the latter persecuted within Persia for most of Browne’s lifetime. A typical passage relates the following: “‘You see, Sáhib,’ whispered my companion, ‘what our condition is. We are like hunted animals or beasts of prey, which men slay without compunction; and this is because we have believed in God and his Manifestation’” (231).

See my note 32.

We are witnessing clear examples of this in contemporary politics.
Chapter three

LEONARD WOOLF: A CONSCIOUS IMPERIALIST?

_The British Empire in 1907 was certainly a very strange phenomenon._

Leonard Woolf

_It is true that the question whether Africans should be ruled by Frenchmen, Germans, Englishmen, Portuguese, Belgians, or Italians has caused the most difficult and dangerous international situations, but the policy pursued in nearly all cases, has been comparatively simple and direct. It is the policy of grab._

Leonard Woolf

As a figure almost totally overshadowed by his famous wife, it is difficult to view Leonard Woolf as anything other than the self-assured, albeit somewhat uncomfortable, British imperialist who was married to Virginia. But this would be inaccurate as he is—as the scope and intensity of his writing demonstrates—infinitely more complex and anti-imperialist than is popularly held. His inclusion here is due partly to the perspective this complexity brings to my thesis and partly because in his writing about a culture not his own, he provides a useful comparison to the figures of Browne, Ghosh and Ondaatje. Born over sixty years earlier than Ondaatje, Woolf writes about colonial Ceylon, the Ceylon of Ondaatje’s parents, before it became the independent republic of Sri Lanka. And as a close
contemporary of Browne—who was born just eighteen years earlier—it is quite a revelation to observe the marked difference in the awareness and attitude of the two men towards empire.

In the introduction to Woolf’s first autobiographical volume, *Sowing: An Autobiography of the Years 1880-1904*, one of his friends, Quentin Bell, describes Woolf’s personality. I quote it here not only for its quick summary of the nature of the man, but primarily for its ostensibly casual, but significant, reference to the influence that the Ceylon of the early twentieth century had on his character:

> . . . it would be wrong to think of him as one so cerebral in his approach to life as to be quite separated from his fellows by a ‘superior’ Cambridge arrogance. . . . *If he ever had that quality he lost it in Ceylon.* I have only to recall the many times that I myself have heard him, patiently, quietly, without the faintest air of condescension or of ‘side’, explaining . . . some difficult question. . . . He had only one aim in view, to make a difficult proposition clear; there was an honesty and a simplicity about him to which those audiences responded. His clarity gave them greater acuteness than they knew themselves to possess; his manifest sincerity was entirely lovable (my emphasis).

Leonard Woolf provides an example of an early twentieth-century Orientalist who—unlike Browne whose focus was philological scholarship—travelled to Ceylon as a civil servant of the British Empire whose ambit was to administer the colony in the name of the Crown. In chapter one I argued that—broadly speaking—many Orientalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century were men who “worked or travelled within the East arriving back in the West to write about their experiences”, an appropriate description for Woolf. Given that Edward Said’s definition of someone who practises Orientalism is irretrievably tied to eurocentricism and thus “orientalist” with all the implications that word now connotes, in what follows here, I ask to what extent this particular Orientalist can be described as “orientalist”. In that Woolf administers a colony on behalf of the British Government; in
that he writes fictionalized versions of oriental countries based on his experiences in the East, is he a prime example of an “orientalist”—a word Said equates with power, abuse and arrogance—or are there any mitigating factors for his defence? Does, for example, the lack of arrogance and condescension that Bell and others perceive in his habit and behavior challenge Said’s definition of an “orientalist”? Do accolades such as this of Michael Ondaatje—“Apart from Knox, and later Leonard Woolf in his novel, *The Village in the Jungle*, very few foreigners truly knew where they were”6—justify Woolf’s attempts to write about a culture other than his own?

But before I start to analyse the critical reception of his work, a biographical note will serve to contextualise Woolf in time and place. He was born Jewish (which, although beyond the scope of my interests here, inevitably provided its own influence on his world view) in London in 1880, attended St. Paul’s School in Brighton and completed his education at Trinity College, Cambridge. Unlike Browne, he looked back on his years at Cambridge with mixed feelings, but similarly, he left England for his first and only overseas experience when he was twenty-four years of age. Having failed to qualify for the Indian Civil Service, in 1904 he accepted a position as a cadet in the Ceylon Civil Service where he served in various capacities over the next seven years rapidly working his way through the ranks to the post of assistant government agent.7 On his return to London, he was introduced to Virginia Stephen by her sister Vanessa and they were married a year later in 1912. Evidently, at this point Woolf felt it safe to allow his natural intellectual disposition to surface and along with people like John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey and E. M. Forster, the Woolfs became the centre of what developed as the Bloomsbury group, the intellectual cult-society of writers, philosophers and artists. But the return to London was
useful in another way, too. It appeared to liberate Woolf’s creative nature and in 1913 he published *The Village in the Jungle*, the first of his twenty-one published books and one of those I look at closely here.⁸

It is a moot point, however, whether an England at the apogee of empire whose critical centre was peopled by the likes of the Bloomsbury set was ready for a tale of the nature of *The Village in the Jungle*. A starting point for my discussion of its reception lies in Anindyo Roy’s claim that this book “was largely ignored by scholars” until the 1960s when it was suddenly recognized and hailed “as a significant social document about colonial Ceylon”.⁹ Given the literary circles in which Woolf moved, it is all the more surprising that Woolf’s book was by and large overlooked by the *scholarly community*, but Roy’s words do not give the complete picture of the critical response to the novel which is a pertinent part of my discussion here.¹⁰ Scholarly attention *The Village in the Jungle* may have lacked, but it should be noted that while in a number of cases the book was greeted with what we would today regard as imperialist arrogance and some misunderstanding, it was also received with enthusiasm, and it certainly did not go unnoticed by literary critics.¹¹ Another round of reviews both from the Sri Lankan and English press followed Woolf’s visit to Sri Lanka in 1960 after an absence of nearly fifty years, these coinciding with a reprint of *The Village in the Jungle* and the release of *Growing* in 1961.¹² His next novel, *The Wise Virgins*—based on the racial and class antagonisms and prejudices modelled on those that existed between Virginia’s family and his own with insights into the disturbed and disturbing relationship between Virginia and her sister Vanessa Bell—was published the following year.¹³ A similar theme of religious intolerance emerges in a short story titled “Three Jews”, which appeared along with Virginia’s “The Mark on the Wall” in *Two Stories*, the first publication
undertaken by The Hogarth Press in 1917.\textsuperscript{14} Woolf’s attempts at writing fiction ended in 1921 with a collection of three short stories published as \textit{Stories From the East}—rather pointed tales which clearly highlight instances of colonial superiority—and which appeared to receive as little scholarly consideration as his first text. Apart from \textit{The Hotel} (a play published in 1939), the remainder of his work reflects his preoccupation with political theory in its focus on the issues of imperialism and socialism and it was not until the 1960s that he published his autobiography in five volumes: \textit{Sowing} (1960), \textit{Growing} (1961), \textit{Beginning Again} (1964), \textit{Downhill All the Way} (1967), only completing the final link, \textit{The Journey Not the Arrival Matters} (1969) in the year of his death.

However, what concerns me first here is a closer investigation of Roy’s claim of inattention by scholars and the literary magazines of the time to \textit{The Village in the Jungle}.\textsuperscript{15} Given that I too have been unable to find evidence to suggest any substantive scholarly interest, I propose to quote excerpts from the popular press of the day instead, which will give some idea of the early twentieth-century mindset that sits at the centre of Edward Said’s grievances. \textit{The Times Literary Supplement}, for example, headed its review of \textit{The Village in the Jungle} with the clause, “It requires no small skill to write a story wholly about natives, in whatever part of the world they may be, without introducing civilized man as an occasional relief;” in a similar vein the \textit{Morning Post} wrote, “Mr Woolf knows India as well as Kipling or Mrs Steele, but makes no attempt to rival either. He reproduces the very atmosphere of the jungle, without animal language: from the animal nature of the village native, who seems scarcely to understand the use of language at all. The concentrated misery of these innocent and inarticulate creatures is most powerfully drawn. Cowed by superstition, and tricked at every turn by the cunning of unprincipled petty officials or
travelled merchantmen, they have no idea how to benefit by the means of obtaining justice so carefully established under English rule”. A less arrogant summary from Hubert Bland of *The New Statesman* reads, “Mr Woolf”s interesting and most admirably written story takes us a long way from Europe, to the very heart of Ceylon . . . the reading of *The Village in the Jungle* has been a sombre as well as a poignant experience; but it has been a real experience and one not readily to be forgotten”. Another positive appraisal, but again a confusion between India and Ceylon, is this review from *The Daily Press*, “This is a quite enjoyable novel, though perhaps a little superabundant in asides and digressions. The author evidently writes from real knowledge of India and the life of the villages”. Lytton Strachey, one of Woolf”s own circle of friends, criticized the book for having “too many blacks in it”.16 Another longish, equally arrogant review in the *Daily News* (May 27, 1939) ends: “Everywhere it is read—except perhaps Ceylon”. This was an assumption quickly laid to rest by the number of articles and reviews that followed his visit in 1960. This excerpt from the *Ceylon Daily News* (March 6, 1962) is a typical example: “Woolf”s recent sentimental journey to Ceylon kindled a new interest in him and his work notably [*The Village in the Jungle*] generally regarded as the supreme work of fiction about this country . . .”

As troubling as some of these phrases become when read from within a postcolonial context, it is salutary to bear in mind the fundamentally—and inevitably—parochial worldview of a British press and its public emerging from six decades of cloistered Victorianism. For example, when I analyse some of the reviews from which I have quoted above, I find instances of ignorance of basic geography in national newspapers and the reason for this is not difficult to understand. The influence exerted by Queen Victoria and Rudyard Kipling on public and press should not be underestimated. If there were a country
outside England that resonated with the British at the end of Victoria’s reign, it was India, and in a number of reviews, Ceylon is mistaken for India. But it is the perspective that becomes all important here. As I have stressed in earlier chapters, what we today regard as ignorant or arrogant, or a combination of both, was a manner of speaking and understanding which was quite natural within its surrounding context. The language was a manifestation of what was going on in newspaper rooms and parlours in England—it was a language turned in on itself much as Bush’s rhetoric on Iraq—and as insulting as we now find it, it had nothing whatsoever to do with the inhabitants of Ceylon. In short, it is tempting to argue that it was, as I have suggested, simply that stories with an indigenous or “native” bias were too foreign in taste and flavour for an essentially insular British press and its public.

But perhaps my interpretation is guilty of reductionism? Examined now from a distance of over ninety years, is it that the mistakes—or the silences—speak with a greater clarity than the words? One of the (still) comparatively few critics of Woolf’s work is unambiguous in his assertion of a political cause for the critical silence that greeted the release of Woolf’s work. Roy maintains that the “underlying question about questioning authority . . . opens a particularly ‘brutal’ history of power relations between the metropolis and the colony . . . [and further that] Woolf had targeted his own Bloomsbury audience for being complicit in maintaining these power relations while professing to be emancipated left liberals” (‘Telling Brutal Things’). While there is much to be said for this line of reasoning—which I will explore in detail later in the chapter—a critical comparative reading of two of Woolf’s texts in particular—The Village in the Jungle and his autobiographical Growing which details his years in Ceylon—begs the question as to how someone with such an affinity and understanding of local people, conditions and wildlife found it possible, not only to align
himself with the rather ersatz intellectualism for which the Bloomsbury set was renowned, but to take a central position within that group. While Woolf makes much of his own intellectual qualities, this was not necessarily a social intellectualism: an equally substantial part of his character was just as self-reflexively solitary and introspective. While there is no doubt he was anxious to be accepted as “a good fellow” in the colonial society in which he found himself in Ceylon, this was a conscious decision taken more for reasons of career ambition than it was to join the social circles by which he became almost instantly and increasingly bored. In fact, Woolf regarded intelligence as a social “liability”: “Intelligence and the intellectual produced the same feeling of uneasiness, suspicion, and dislike among the white population of Jaffna and Ceylon as they had . . . in nearly all strata or pockets of English society . . . [which resulted in my constructing] a façade behind which I could conceal or camouflage my intellect and also hide from most people, both in Ceylon and for the remainder of my life, the fact that I am mentally, morally, and physically a coward”.20

If there is an anomaly here, perhaps it is answered in Stories From the East. An analysis of this collection leads one to suspect that a story such as Woolf’s “A Tale Told by Moonlight”, which appears at first glance to present an “orientalist” fantasy for a Western readership has a sting in the tale, and that sting is directed backwards at the expatriate, or sideways at the Bloomsbury group perhaps, certainly at people of their ilk. If author Michèle Drouart, with all the self-reflexivity engendered by thinking and writing at the other end of the twentieth century, found it necessary to start her story “within orientalism” in order for it to be understood by and appeal to “ordinary people” before taking an “anti-orientalist stance”, it could be argued that so too did Woolf write the imperialist tale for his imperialist audience, ending it with an anti-imperialist twist in the form of a moral.21 That
way, he could be sure of his stories being read and absorbed, if not yet understood (as is clear from the language and orientation of the reviews) or acted upon. It is sobering to reflect that it was not for another fifty years that his fiction was to gain the critical attention it deserved.

**Woolf’s world view**

This discussion of Woolf’s work has so far been limited to his fictional and autobiographical works, all of which are substantially anti-establishment as well as anti-imperialist. Because Woolf’s socialist politics lie outside the direct concern of the literary orientation of this thesis, I have not listed the many political, social and economic texts which constitute by far the major portion of Woolf’s corpus of works. But while it is not my intention to analyze these texts in any detail, neither can they be ignored, so clearly do they explicate Woolf’s constant challenge to the imperialistic order which lies at the centre of my concerns here. As an example, *Empire and Commerce in Africa*—part of the series *The Empire and its Critics 1899-1939*—provides an exposé of the expropriating process of exploitation and cruelty and of the general “delusion” and arrogance of colonial government in Africa. Although it represents an attempt to portray circumstances as they appeared to be, it is written with an overt sarcasm: “And yet in the end . . . the fruit of empire . . . dropped gently into the hands of General Kitchener and Colonel Harrington, and thence as gently into the lap of the British Empire” (203). As an exercise in disdain, it is well deserving of a place alongside Said’s *Orientalism* for the simple reason that if *Orientalism* could be said to provide an uncompromising representation of Western hegemony in the East, *Empire and Commerce in Africa* is equally critical, unrelenting and focused in its bias and
condemnation of European praxis in Africa. I quote from the final chapter, “The Future of Africa”:

. . . I have attempted to trace the general effects of European policy in Africa. In my judgement those effects have been almost wholly evil. The European went into Africa about forty years ago desiring to exploit it and its inhabitants for his own economic advantage, and he rapidly acquired the belief that the power of his State should be used in Africa to promote his own economic interests. . . . The State, enthroned in its impersonality and a glamour of patriotism, can always make a wilderness and call it peace, or make a conquest and call it civilization. The right of Europe to civilize became synonymous with the right of Europe to rob or to exploit the uncivilized. The power of each European State was applied ruthlessly in Africa. In bitter competition with one another, they partitioned territory which belonged to none of them. By fraud or by force the native chiefs and rulers were swindled or robbed of their dominions. . . . In this process tribe was used against tribe and race against race, and wherever any native administration existed it was destroyed. (352-3)

Holding together some well-researched statistical information, there are many such passages in this text. On its release in 1920, it is not surprising that this book, in its unflinching condemnation of British power politics (integral to the economic policy of its governance), failed to find favour in an empire already showing signs of decline. Like Browne, Woolf was pursuing an unpopular path and such texts were unlikely to be well-received by the establishment and the book was almost completely ignored until its reprint by Routledge/Thoemmes in the more favourable critical climate of 1998.25

This returns me to my discussion of Orientalism in chapter one, where I suggested that one reason for the success of what I describe as “Said’s polemic” is its timing in that a postcolonial marketplace is a fertile receptor for such views. Support for this argument lies in the nature of the reception of another text written by Woolf which is equally critical of European dominance. This takes the form of a pamphlet titled, “Kenya: White Man’s Country?” (London: Fabian Society, 1944) and it is an interesting document in that the statistical information it contains cannot really be separated from its political orientation.
Although this was not printed until 1944 when Britain was getting ready to divest herself of her colonies and although its concern is with Africa and not Asia, I refer to it here for its clear and unequivocal declaration of Woolf’s position with regard to British policy and settlement abroad. The grievances Said outlines in Orientalism with respect to British rule in Asia are echoed in what Woolf says here:

For very many years now a few instructed persons, notably Dr. Norman Leys, have been insisting that Kenya and its government are a test case of British colonial policy, of our sincerity in maintaining that we rule our Colonies in the interest of the native inhabitants. This pamphlet shows that Kenya still remains the test case and that a radical change of our policy is still required if we are to prove our sincerity. This is not a theoretical question or merely a nice point in academic morality. History, I think, teaches us one lesson at any rate—that great empires may be founded, but cannot be permanently based, on political cant and social hypocrisy. However good our intentions, if our practice is not in accordance with our principles, it is the practice which will hunt us down in the long corridors of history. . . . In Kenya our professed principles and our political practice have contradicted each other ever since the beginning of the century. For forty years the interests of three million Africans have been sacrificed to those of a handful of Europeans. To say that the Kenya Government during those years has administered the country in the interests of the African people or treated their prosperity and process as a ‘sacred trust’ would be a hypocritical lie. . . . I end as I begun with a hope that the pamphlet will be read by the ordinary voter. For it is upon us, the ordinary people of Great Britain, who will vote at the next election, that the responsibility for what has been and will be done in Kenya rests . . . The economic power of the country is in their hands [the hands of the European population], and the political power is all but in their hands as well. They use this political power to acquire for themselves further special privileges of every sort—in health and education facilities, in financial subsidies, in recruitment of labour, and in the distribution of land. (3-5)²⁶

But there was, too, another other form of writing in which Woolf indulged, in this case at the order of the British Government, and this was in the form of the diaries he kept so punctiliously during the years he spent as assistant government agent in the Hambantota district in south-eastern Ceylon.²⁷ Although the prime purpose of the diaries was to keep the centre of government in Colombo informed, as a byproduct of that effort a valuable archive of the history of colonial administration was compiled. This meant that from 1908 until his departure in 1911, Woolf kept a faithful record of his activities, recommendations and
observations, the content of which was to form the inspirational basis for *The Village in the Jungle* and which obviously also provided the source material for *Growing*. It is these two books that take up from where the diaries leave off—in terms of humanizing what is essentially and necessarily governmental reportage—and which start to provide answers to the questions I posed at the start of this chapter with regard to the agenda—unconscious or otherwise—of the young Woolf who went out to Ceylon to administer a colony on behalf of Britain. Before I begin to analyse selected texts, a brief comparison of the social and political outlooks of the two Orientalists under review in this thesis—Woolf and Browne—using their respective attitudes towards travel and “travail” opens up a worthwhile discussion.

As I have already implied, there is a much greater awareness of the politics of imperialism and of capitalist society in general exhibited in the autobiographical *Growing* than there is in Browne’s text, *A Year Amongst the Persians*, even though the two men lived for much of their lives contemporaneously. Bearing in mind that Woolf went out to Ceylon when he was almost exactly the same age as was Browne when he went to Persia, the difference between the resulting books written by the two men insofar as a critical awareness of empire is concerned is marked. Although it is clear that they were both motivated by a political agenda, Woolf shows a greater and more specific sensitivity to the specificity of colonial governance than does Browne whose twin obsessions were focused on promoting the Baha’i faith on the one hand and attacking the policies of the British Government in his defence of the Persian political situation on the other. Imperialism, both as a term and in effect of what it did and did not achieve, is not mentioned in all six hundred pages of *A Year*
Amongst the Persians and I suggest that there are both interior and exterior reasons for this heightened awareness of an imperialistic Britain in Woolf’s work.29

Firstly, although both Browne and Woolf lived through an empire at its zenith, Browne did not live through its decline as did Woolf. Almost inevitably, there is a particular certainty about the existence of a status quo that does not necessarily invite debate or doubt. Secondly, a dying empire readying itself to dispense with its colonies as was happening during the twenty years between the two World Wars at the time Woolf was writing his major political texts offers itself as a prime candidate for interrogation. Although it is not in doubt that Woolf’s anti-imperialist political orientation was determined well before he left Ceylon, I would suggest that the greater temporal distance from which Woolf writes about his colonial experience in Growing has a significant bearing on the book’s anti-imperialistic discourse. While Browne wrote about his experiences in the immediate period—the first four years—that followed his trip to Persia, Woolf’s insights had the advantage of some fifty years’ distillation and of being written in an era that had the distinct benefit of hindsight.30

This retrospective view of empire does not, however, explain why The Village in the Jungle and Stories From the East, published in 1913 and 1921 respectively should demonstrate a similar level of anti-imperialism and neither does it fully account for the political nature of Woolf’s earlier non-fiction texts. Hence I suggest that there was one specific incident in Woolf’s life which provoked an early attentiveness to the insidious production of power-mongering and hegemonic actions in general. It is significant that one of his first references to imperialism occurs, not directly in relation to British rule in Ceylon, but in connection
with British *class* war in an early incident on board ship on his way out to the colony. Fifty-six years later, he recalls the incident in *Growing*:

> One bitter lesson . . . [is] still vivid to me after more than fifty years. I am still, after those fifty years, naively surprised and shocked by the gratuitous inhumanity of so many human beings, their spontaneous malevolence towards one another. There were on the boat three young civil servants [of whom Woolf was one, as well as] . . . two or three Colombo business men, in particular a large flamboyant Mr. X who was employed in a big Colombo shop. It gradually became clear to us that Mr. X and his friends regarded us with *a priori* malignity because we were civil servants. It was my first experience of the class war and hatred between Europeans which in 1904 were a curious feature of British imperialism in the East . . .

White society in India and Ceylon, as you can see in Kipling’s stories, was always suburban. In Calcutta and Simla, in Colombo and Nuwara Eliya, the social structure and relations between Europeans rested on the same kind of snobbery, pretentiousness, and false pretensions as they did in Putney or Peckham. No one can understand the aura of life for a young civil servant in Ceylon during the first decade of the twentieth century—of indeed the history of the British Empire—unless he realizes and allows for these facts. It is true that for only one year out of my seven in Ceylon was I personally subjected to the full impact of the social system, because except for my year in Kandy I was in outstations where there were few or no other white people . . . Nevertheless the flavour or climate of one’s life was enormously affected . . . both by this circumambient air of a tropical suburbia and by the complete social exclusion from our social suburbia of all Sinhalese and Tamils.

> These facts are relevant to Mr. X’s malevolence to me and my two fellow civil servants. . . . [He] hated us simply because we were civil servants . . . [and] under the drapery of a joke he was able to make us “small, inferior, despicable, and comic” and so satisfy his malevolence and enjoy our humiliation . . . (16-19)31

The “joke” played on Woolf and a fellow civil servant was, of course, no joke, but instead a deliberate and successful effort to belittle the two men in front of a group of spectators and one that Woolf was to remember with bitterness for the rest of his life. The incident interests me for two reasons.

Firstly, it was exactly this type of social behaviour that was all too often indulged in by expatriates and usually directed at the subaltern (or someone unable or unlikely to retaliate)
that was responsible for a great deal of anti-imperialist feeling of the first half of the twentieth century. The unfortunate mix of irresponsibility and arrogance on the part of Mr. X inevitably provokes what could be construed as overreaction, but I suggest this is only an outward manifestation of the depth of inward hurt. Said’s broad generalisation that condemns all Orientalists for the transgressions of a minority is another example of this type of reaction. In examining texts in the cold light of scholarship, it is all too easy to overlook emotion as a motivating factor for the presence of those texts in the first place and for the content therein.

Secondly, the incident described above gives an insight into Woolf’s level of awareness and self-consciousness, which no doubt lies at the base of how he responded to and treated others throughout his life. I think, too, that this type of “civilized dirty joke” and the “malevolent hostility” which it poorly cloaked made Woolf even more appreciative of the primitive world in which he was soon to find himself and in large measure led to the sensitivity that was to surface in his fictional writing. This is evident particularly in relation to the way in which he tackles the writing of The Village in the Jungle, in particular the narrative style and the language about which I will say more later. It seems to me no coincidence that this volume of autobiography—which after all documents a stage of Woolf’s self-enlightenment—is framed by a description of this incident which takes place within the first few pages of Growing and Woolf’s reference to starting work on The Village in the Jungle in the final few page of the book.

But probably the most significant difference between the outlooks of Woolf and Browne lies in the fact that as a member of the colonial administration, Woolf not only experienced
the effects of empire firsthand, but insofar as it was his perceived duty, colluded with the system. A further demonstration of Woolf’s heightened awareness of empire and the position of the Orientalist within that discourse appears in the passage that follows which provides an unusually honest description of what a young Orientalist might feel in a strange country. As Woolf relates the feelings he experienced at a dinner party a few weeks after his arrival in Ceylon, it could equally be the voice of the nameless young clerk in the chapter on Browne. This account foregrounds the somewhat heady feeling of power, and comes uncannily close to the sense of theatre Said talks of in relation to expatriate behaviour.

The conversation never flagged . . . But we were all rather grand, a good deal grander than we could have been at home in London or Edinburgh, Brighton or Oban. We were grand because we were a ruling caste in a strange Asiatic country; I did not realize this at the time, though I felt something in the atmosphere which to me was slightly strange and disconcerting.

It was this element in the social atmosphere or climate which gave the touch of unreality and theatricality to our lives. In Cambridge or London we were undergraduates or dons or barristers or bankers; and we were what we were, we were not acting, not playing the part of a don or a barrister. But in Ceylon we were all always, subconsciously or consciously, playing a part, acting upon a stage. The stage, the scenery, the backcloth . . . at the Vigor’s dinner table was imperialism. In so far as anything is important in the story of my years in Ceylon, imperialism and the imperialist aspect of my life have importance and will claim attention (my emphasis). . . . In 1905 . . . the British Empire was at its zenith of both glory and girth. I had entered Ceylon as an imperialist . . . The curious thing is that I was not really aware of this. . . . Travelling to Jaffna in January 1905, I was a very innocent, unconscious imperialist. What is perhaps interesting in my experience during the next six years is that I saw from the inside British imperialism at its apogee, and that I gradually became fully aware of its nature and problems. (Growing, 24-5)

Meanwhile, back in Bloomsbury for a year’s leave among his Cambridge friends which he tellingly describes as a “slightly icy plunge . . . into an entirely different world, almost a different universe”, Woolf debates his future. If Virginia agrees to marry him, he decides that he will resign from Ceylon and try to earn his living by writing; if she refuses, he will return to Ceylon, note, not to “become a successful civil servant in Colombo and end
eventually with a governorship and K. C. M. G. [but to] . . . immerse myself in a District like Hambantota for the remainder of my life” (*Growing*, 246-7).

In the final pages of *Growing*, which contain the correspondence with the Colonial Office concerning his resignation, Woolf presents this summation: “I did not feel that I could explain to Mr. Harcourt or Mr. Stubbs that I had come to dislike imperialism, that I did not want to become a Governor, that I wanted to marry Virginia Stephen, and that, if I didn’t marry her, I would like to continue to be a Ceylon Civil Servant provided that they would appoint me permanently Assistant Government Agent Hambantota” (251-2). As we now know, Woolf *did* marry Virginia and, despite his obvious depth of feeling for the country and its people, did not re-visit Sri Lanka until the 1960s, not long before his death.34

By now Woolf’s obvious and enduring antipathy to the imperialistic machine and the degree to which he debated this point should not be in doubt. The personal nature of this insight into colonial imperialism is rare. Even rarer perhaps is the level of self-reflexivity engendered by his experiences: “I had been born in an age of imperialism and I disapproved of imperialism and felt sure that its days were already numbered” (*Growing*, 248). As noted by Quentin Bell and quoted earlier, it is clear from the final tone of this autobiographical text that Woolf was much changed by his experiences in Ceylon. Gone was the “unconscious imperialist” of the voyage out. Gone, too, was any vestige of the youthful arrogance so evident on his arrival in Ceylon.

It is clear that the articulated awareness of the defects in the imperialist order that surfaces in this autobiographical narrative renders Leonard Woolf quite singular. Given the
controversial anti-imperialist convictions present throughout the corpus of his work, it becomes less difficult to understand how he may have embarrassed and prejudiced the agendas of his contemporaries which resulted in the silence with regard to his work already discussed. He is completely forthright, for example, in his summary of the relatively “simple and direct” manner in which the European nations laid claim to colonies in Africa, calling it “the policy of grab” (Empire and Commerce in Africa, 55). And almost as candid is the blatantly racist portrayal of white authority embedded in his collection of three short stories which again attracted no more attention than his other works. From what I have been able to ascertain, they were ignored almost completely from the time of their publication in 1921, right through their re-publication in Diaries in Ceylon 1908-1911 and Stories From the East in 1963 to the present day.35

In this respect, and as but one example, I find it quite remarkable that a writer and academic of the calibre of Chinua Achebe neglects to acknowledge Woolf’s work. Although it is, perhaps, understandable that Edward Said’s stated mode of discursive treatment precludes a confession in that his generalized condemnation of Orientalists does not allow for any exception, at the same time it is a fact that a perceived weakness in an argument can also be a strength in the interests of an honest and thorough methodology, an option freely available to Achebe. In Home and Exile, for instance, a critique of Woolf’s style, language, gaps and silences would have provided a refreshing change alongside his continuing criticism of Cary’s Mister Johnson and his more general and unrelenting censure of Conrad’s works. While it could be argued that Achebe is discussing only African fiction—more specifically, primarily West African fiction—Woolf’s attitude towards the empire as well as the connection instigated by his views in Empire and Commerce in Africa would have provided
an interesting antithesis to Achebe’s discussion. Achebe’s silence on Woolf is a point that I will return to later.

At this point it is appropriate to signal a comparison with Ondaatje’s text *Running in the Family* which I will discuss at some length in the next chapter. Although, as I will demonstrate, there are instances of self-reflexivity in this book, it is clear that the type of reflection Ondaatje displays is of a different nature to that of Woolf. Woolf’s has less of the meditative, revolving, self-consciousness of narrative form and style that informs the Ondaatje text, but reflects instead the beginning of a depth of awareness which contains an undeniable disenchantment with the ‘system’. It is deeper, more reasoned and reasoning, more in line with a conscious indictment of both self and empire. While both writers are obviously sincere in their efforts to enter into a self-examination of their motives, in comparison the level of fluidity surrounding Ondaatje’s right to belong to—and thus ‘write about’—Sri Lanka clearly shows him as much an “orientalist” in Saidan terms as Woolf was in effect.

If I were now to refer back to Said’s statement—“one way of opening oneself to what one studies in or about the Orient is reflexively to submit one’s method to critical scrutiny”—based on that premise and on the evidence examined so far, it could be concluded with some certainty that Woolf, the true Orientalist, would be exonerated from charges of what Said would describe as “orientalist” behaviour (*Orientalism*, 327). But this addresses only one aspect of “orientalism”. What of the *nature* of Woolf’s *representation of the East* and its people contained in his novel, *The Village in the Jungle*? Does this text not attempt to reconstitute the Orient, to “recreate” Sri Lanka and its village life for western consumption?
And what about his *Stories From the East*? Before examining the novel in some detail, there are two short stories in particular that I wish to examine briefly, largely in an attempt to understand the reluctance of other scholars to engage with the issues they foreground, but also to examine for possible slippages.

*Stories From the East*[^36]

Somewhat in the style of Conrad, the first story “A Tale Told by Moonlight” employs the device of an unnamed frame narrator and his friends engaged in conversation on an English moonlit night. Spurred by the sight of two lovers walking along a riverbank, a second narrator, Jessop, unburdens his memory by telling a story that initially appears to offer a typical “orientalist” fantasy. It is an ostensibly uncomplicated tale. The two settings—the river in the moonlight and the Colombo bungalow—symbolize the metropolis and the colony respectively in much the same way as Conrad’s settings of the Thames and the inner station in *Heart of Darkness*.

The story is plotted simply. A novelist by the name of Reynolds comes out to Ceylon to stay with his friend Jessop who, feeling somewhat sorry for his friend’s naivety and desire to experience ‘life’, takes it upon himself to show him a good time by suggesting they visit a brothel. The inevitable happens: Reynolds falls for a beautiful Asian prostitute, and becomes completely enraptured and entrapped to the point where he contemplates suicide. Jessop saves the situation by suggesting that they buy the woman, Celestinahami, out of service and that the lovers then set up house together. This comes to be and for a while Reynolds and Celestinahami are happy until, once again, there is conflict: the novelist grows bored with the lack of intellectual stimulation of his beautiful companion and

[^36]: insert reference or page number
becomes restless. Empathising with her lover’s unhappiness, but uncomprehending of the reason, the beautiful Celestinahami becomes increasingly western in dress and habits in order to placate him: “And she—she of course couldn’t even understand what was the matter. She saw that he was unhappy, she thought she had done something wrong. She reasoned like a child that it was because she wasn’t like the white ladies whom she used to see in Colombo. So she went and bought stays and white cotton stockings and shoes, and she squeezed herself into them. But the stays and the shoes and stockings didn’t do her any good” (Stories From the East, 263).

Reynolds is persuaded by Jessop to settle some money on the girl and leave the colony. The narrator sees Celestinahami once more, but this time at the inquest of her death. She has been found floating in the sea “bobbing up and down in her stays and pink skirt and white stockings and shoes” (264).

The frame narrator concludes the tale: “Jessop stopped. No one spoke for a minute or two. Then Hanson Smith stretched himself, yawned, and got up. “Battle, murder, and sentimentality”, he said. “You’re as bad as the rest of them, Jessop. . . . I’m off to bed.” After a couple of minutes’ silence, the poignant ending of the tale is essentially greeted by a yawn as the group breaks up and its members depart for bed.

If this is the sort of reaction to his writing that Woolf expected from the Bloomsbury group, this is in essence was what he received: a yawn. I am interested in why that should have been so. The reaction encoded in the very silence and lack of debate from this intellectual group was deafening. Was Woolf too transparent in the model he chose for his story? Was
the yawn one of embarrassment rather than boredom? Or was it designed to cut off further discussion, to silence the storyteller? What threat to the order of social being was contained in the story to provoke this type of reaction?

Let me return to the scene quoted above and look at it from a number of angles. Obviously, Celestinahami’s dressing in Western attire in order to please Reynolds produces instead the opposite result in a decrease of the interest she was trying to revive. In claiming that Woolf has written in “the need of the western man to preserve the image of the exotic object after it has been subjected to the violent form of colonial traffic”, Roy’s interpretation leads to the heart of this thesis in that this, then, is the type of writing that sits right at the centre of what Said describes as “orientalist”. In other words, what is presented is what Said would clearly term and condemn as “a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient” (*Orientalism*, 21).

But Roy goes further in suggesting that “Woolf/Jessop’s narratorial authority [is] subject to the same illusionary haze that makes his metropolitan interlocutors reject his story while missing ‘the real’—the powerful fictionality of the state”. In this way, he asserts that Woolf “forces the question of the failure of representation into the domain of colonial ideology, disclosing its spectral power—the power to invest metropolitan subjects with their freedom and individuality while blinding them to their own fictionality”. In other words, the space between the metropolis and the colony is so great that such stories can belong only in the province of melodrama and thus lack any “real” meaning for the people of the group.
Douglas Kerr approaches the issue from a more literary angle, that of his observation that Woolf’s narratives are produced “in five different genres based on his Ceylon experience”. Kerr argues that, “None of them [the individual genres] stands at the centre: all of them, the full constellation, are the real stories of the east. . . . [“A Tale Told by Moonlight” is a story in which] seems to question the generic supercession of Woolf’s diaries by his novel. But although one of the morals of the tale seems to be the inferiority of the literary man’s perspective when compared to the lessons of hard experience . . . [it] is itself thoroughly literary: masculine, distanced, ironic, understated, unforgiving, it is in intertextual thrall to both the great masters of the colonial tales, Kipling and Conrad”.

While both arguments are scholarly and literate and make interesting, if opposite, points, I believe there is yet more to this. It is the gap in the story itself that interests me most, the silence between the ending of one narrative and the beginning of another. It is in this interstitial gap—the gap between the You and the I or in this case the I and the I, the Woolf:Jessop dialectic—that the essence of the reality of imperialism is articulated. In claiming that this “Third Space of enunciations” carries a cultural and historical dimension which stands as a precondition for the articulation of cultural difference, I am returning in part to the theory of Homi Bhabha discussed at some length in chapter one: the Third Space that is the in-between or the interstices—the gap in the conversation or narration—which carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It is within this space that Woolf allows himself the opportunity to articulate the difficulties inherent in and inseparable from interpretation. This stage of apparent disjunction is his moment of “dialectical reorganization” or reconstruction. This moment, or space of articulation, signifies the collapse of linear time and the rolling of the past into the present. This gap carries a further
weight in that it acknowledges Woolf’s own recognition of himself, of his own moment in
time and space, of his ‘other’. He comes face to face with the “Simurg”, with his own face in
the mirror of life. Applying this theory to the passage in question involves recognizing
that the process of interpretation is ambivalent and forever changing. In other words, the
significance of any one act of interpretation is circumstantial, belonging only to that one
fleeting moment in time.

I suggest that the ‘group of friends’ listening to the tale, their momentary silence as they
ingest the message, and their rapid dismissal of the narrative to the realm of melodrama is
clearly representative of the Bloomsbury set. The embarrassment of this group of
intellectuals is articulated both within the gap in the narrative and within the silence with
which they received the tale. Celestinahami’s sacrifice was not in vain.

On the one hand, I see this as an unquestioned attempt on Woolf’s part to present a story
that carries a clear message of anti-imperialism. On the other, it cannot be denied that in
constructing Celestinahami as the stereotypical ‘exotic’ oriental, Woolf is himself
promoting just that myth that he is attempting to discredit, an important point that I will
return to later in the chapter.

A second story in the collection, titled “Pearls and Swine”, is written in a similar manner
with a narratorial frame structure and style that again calls to mind Conrad’s Heart of
Darkness. As in “A Tale Told by Moonlight” there are two settings: the frame setting
which symbolizes the closed and collusive system of an ‘old boys’ network’ and the
colonial setting into which the moral of the story is inserted. In this story, a group of men
are gathered in the “smoking room” of an English club. The atmosphere is clouded not only with smoke, but with opinionated ‘views’ and the inevitable accompanying pomposity, the ‘hypocrisy’ which Woolf uses for “peeling the sordid reality away from the inflated platitudes of empire” (Boehmer, xxiii). Again, there is a frame narrator who functions as the observer of the group in the metropolis; again a second narrator, this time an Anglo Indian who tells of his experiences in managing a pearl fishery set in a mythical place in India. The story is, of course, based on Woolf’s Sinhalese experiences of administering just such an enterprise.

At the heart of this story is the juxtaposing of the three white administrators in this fishing ‘camp’ with the “twenty million or so” Tamils, Arabs, Negroes, Telegus and Parsees who actually did the fishing for pearls. The climax of the tale is a comparison of the death of one of the white men (significantly named “White” who dies with as much “horror” as Kurtz) with the dignity with which the Arabs handle the death of one of their own.41

And White thought they [the natives] weren’t real, that they were devils of Hell sent to plague and torture him. He cursed them, whispered at them, howled with fear. I had to explain to them that the Sahib was not well, that the sun had touched him, that they must move away. They understood. They salaamed quietly, and moved away slowly, dignified. . . . As dawn showed grey in the east, he was suddenly shaken by convulsions horrible to see. He screamed for someone to bring him a woman, and, as he screamed, his head fell back: he was dead. . . . Robson was sitting in a heap in his chair. He was sobbing, his face in his hands. (Stories From the East, 278)

Compare the dying of White with this description of the dead Arab:

They had a dead Arab on board, he had died suddenly while diving . . . Four men waded out to the boat: the corpse was lifted out and placed upon their shoulders. . . . The body was laid on the sand. The bearded face of the dead man looked very calm, very dignified in the faint light. An Arab, his brother, sat down upon the sand near his head. He covered himself with sackcloth. I heard him weeping. It was very silent, very cold and still on the shore in the early dawn.
A tall figure stepped forward, it was the Arab sheik, the leader of the boat. He laid his hand on the head of the weeping man and spoke to him calmly, eloquently, compassionately. I didn’t understand Arabic, but I could understand what he was saying. The dead man had lived, had worked, had died. . . . I watched them move away, silent, dignified. . . .

Then I moved away too, to make arrangements for White’s burial: it had to be done at once.

At this point, the frame narrator takes over: “There was silence in the smoking room. I looked round. The Colonel had fallen asleep with his mouth open. The jobber tried to look bored, the Archdeacon was, apparently, rather put out” and suggested that the narrator had chosen “rather exceptional circumstances” for his story. Of this motley representation of empire, only the Commissioner is thoughtful: “There’s another Tamil proverb”, he said: “When the cat puts his head into a pot, he thinks all is darkness” (279).

Aside from the Commissioner, who is allowed the benefit of the doubt here, and working from the setting of the ‘club’ (that bastion of colonialism) outwards, this story not only challenges but ridicules the empire and the ‘whites’ who people it. Significantly, too, once again there is the gap, a strained and uncomfortable moment of silence between one narrator and the next, when what is clearly regarded as a treacherous attitude to empire is articulated by the boredom of the men, tellingly cut short by the unspoken rebuke aimed at the narrow-mindedness of his companions contained in the Commissioner’s Tamil proverb. In all, Woolf was a great deal less subtle than Conrad with regard to his attacks on the British power system. Small wonder that these stories were received in silence by the Western audience at which they were projected.

I return now to my earlier discussion in which I suggested that while, from a postcolonial perspective, Woolf’s position on imperialism appeared to be irreproachable, there were
certain slippages in his stories and aspects of his tales which could be said to betray an underlying “orientalist” attitude. As I have already implied, one explanation for this could be the degree to which such thinking was naturalized within Britain in the first decades of the twentieth century. But does such a process of naturalizing of attitude constitute an apology for behavioural traits? In both these stories is not the East still being presented in an ‘exotic’ or theatrical manner?

A more rounded answer to these questions can be achieved by reading Woolf’s second volume of autobiography, Growing, against The Village in the Jungle. Although written some distance apart, read in a twenty-first century context, the two texts lend to each other an impressive synergetic influence, particularly if read in that order and it is only when one account is read alongside the other that one realizes just how enmeshed Woolf became with the local people of Ceylon, their conventions and convictions. It is this closeness and the resulting empathy that gives the fictional text its credibility.

But as discussed in my chapter on Browne, in the context of this thesis and its concerns with “orientalism”, it is this very empathy that gives rise to questions that demand explanation. We need to know, for example, how an Orientalist came to write a book like The Village in the Jungle which offers up such a credible and convincingly intimate knowledge of jungle life and native lore. In writing the story of the Orient from a western perspective—albeit an extremely knowledgeable and empathetic one—is Woolf not displacing the villagers themselves? If my discussion of Ondaatje’s account of life in Ceylon in chapter four causes me to suggest that this figure exists as native informant, what is to stop us from dismissing Woolf’s story as an example of pure “orientalism”?
The Village in the Jungle

Before I attempt to answer these questions, I need to look more closely at the narrative in question and what it attempts to achieve. The Village in the Jungle tells the story of an indigenous villager and the quandaries progressively faced by him and his two daughters. The story is one of human nature: of greed, fear, integrity and the power of human hopefulness and hopelessness. If I were to attempt to assign it to a sub-genre, I would say that it unfolds as a tale of sacrifice.45

At the same time, as a tale that at first reading appears deceptively simple, but which contains some useful ‘truths’, it also falls into the category of fable. It personifies the jungle, anthropomorphizes the animals, indulges the supernatural and offers a final moral. What it is decidedly not is an “historical novel” (Toynbee, 225), although admittedly, in retrospect, it does indeed have historical significance in that it exists as a social, almost anthropological, document.46

In terms of narrative style, it is a story simply told. It avoids any attempt to emulate the modernist innovation and experimentation that was shortly to become so prominent in Woolf’s world47; at the other end of the literary scale, it also lacks the finely-tuned sophistication and lyrical quality of an Ondaatje text. In fact, its power—the evocative nature of the text, the detailed characterization, the measured rise of suspense and the clarity of style—lies in this apparent simplicity.
The jungle in Woolf’s narrative has been compared to the jungle in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, both settings symbolizing evil and suffering therein (Mervyn de Silva, *Diaries*, lix). But, unlike Conrad’s setting, the jungle in Woolf’s text does not stay on the page. It pervades a village which is both “in, and of, the jungle”; it dictates the lives of the villagers and their *chenas*; it becomes both arbiter and executioner and, as such, is integral to this story. It is personified as oppressor, sharing the position of villain or antagonist with the wicked *vederalal*. It provides an overbearing backdrop against which and within which the narrative unfolds. In other words, in the final analysis, it is both character and setting.

The exposition foreshadows the power that the jungle will wield over the villagers: “There are people who will tell you that they have no fear of the jungle . . . Such people are either liars and boasters [sic], or they are fools, without understanding or feeling for things as they really are. . . . All jungles are evil, but no jungle is more evil than that which lay about the village of Beddagama” (2-3).

It is made clear in *Growing* that Woolf’s knowledge and fear of the forests in Ceylon were gained first-hand. If sometimes he lets slip a grudging respect, it is the type of respect that signifies a wariness. But Woolf’s animation goes further than merely attributing human qualities to the jungle. Encoded in his language is the animal within human; the primal is privileged over the somehow unsatisfactory veneer of civilization. The jungle crouches, waiting, exhibiting a stealth and an omnipresence that belongs as much to animal as man. In the fictional version: “Punchi Menika . . . was dying, and the jungle knew it; it is always waiting; can scarcely wait for death” (*The Village in the Jungle*, 306). And in his autobiography: “But the jungle and jungle life are also horribly ugly and cruel. When I left
Ceylon, and wrote *The Village in the Jungle*, that was what obsessed my memory and my imagination and is, in a sense, the theme of the book. The more you are in jungle, particularly if you are alone, the more one tends to feel it personified, something or someone hostile, dangerous. . . . I twice lost myself in jungle, a terrifying experience . . .” (*Growing*, 212).

I get the distinct impression that of the changes Woolf observes when he returns to Sri Lanka in 1960, the one that relieves him the most is the sight of the “flourishing villages” that exist in place of the Beddagamas of his day replete as they were with their “thousands of acres of waste land and scrub jungle” (*Preface, Diaries*, lxxx).\(^5\) For the present, at least, the jungle had been contained.

As I have stated, for the narrowly focused Bloomsbury set, this book contained “too many blacks”. And earlier in this chapter I excerpted a number of quotations from the British press most of which tended to dismiss the book as a romantic novel in an exotic Eastern setting. But I wonder whether the wider British public of Woolf’s day would have seen beyond the fictionality of this novel? Would they, for example, have re-sited Woolf’s portrayal of either the villagers or the white magistrate in any real political context? It is doubtful, I suggest. However, as a text that depicts indigenous village life under colonial rule, it offers a compelling site for examination by postcolonial critics. In the main, it is praised because it not only comprises an important social document about a country under British imperial administration, but also because in so doing it “avoids both the exoticism of traditional accounts and the colonial cringe of the more recent ones in its projection of a village gradually destroyed by nature and an uncomprehending British administration”
For De Silva, it is the personification of the jungle, which Woolf elevates to the position of a “‘central character’ that lifts it from the level of that kind of [exotic, romantic] fiction”. Instead Woolf replaces these potential “orientalist” traps with an awareness of the imperialistic order and an intimate understanding of the jungle in respect of both its dangers and its ways gained through deep personal experience. It would seem, then, that scholars agree that, unlike “A Tale Told by Moonlight”, this tale is neither romantic nor exotic in an “orientalist” sense.

However, in this case, the issue of the exotic cannot be dismissed quite so easily. As a work of colonial literature, there is a further issue—a replication of the concern that arose in my discussion of Browne’s emotive connections with Persia which resurfaces in Woolf’s close and empathetic identification with a culture not his own—that has to be taken into consideration in the deconstruction of this book. After all, Woolf is still an Englishman presenting his interpretation of the East and the people who live there. Although the claims of the Sinhalese themselves in this respect are unambiguously supportive of Woolf does this alone absolve Woolf from charges of displacing the locals? This excerpt shows the susceptibility of the father who refuses to give his daughter to the vederala although he knows his disobedience will incur an evil spell.

“. . . Evils come upon a man: it is fate. What can I do? The girl is unwilling: am I to throw away the kurakkan when the rice is already stolen? Am I to help the thief to plunder my house? I am a poor man, and the evil has come upon me; I can do nothing against it. His devils will enter me, and I shall waste away. But as for the child, what else is left to me? I will not force her to go to this son of a --------.” . . . He remained squatting in the compound, and as his anger died down fear possessed him utterly. He had no doubt of the powers of Punchirala over him: he knew that he had delivered himself into his power, and the power of the devils that surrounded him. . . . The charms of the vederala did not take long to act upon Silindu. He felt that he was a doomed man, and his mind could think of nothing but the impending evil. (82-3)
Rather than an exotic portrayal or fetishism of the East, this portrayal of a villager’s anguish is more akin to the nature of representation in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. This is a quotation from an unashamedly realist text that presents the agitated ruminations of a father about to force his daughter into an unhappy marriage. It contains angst and anguish. It gives insight into the customs and thought processes of a Ceylonese villager. But what saves it from the exotic more than anything else is the language that Woolf has chosen for the villagers’ speech. As Peter Elkin points out, “Woolf knows intimately the speech of the people: the dialogue . . . is rooted in the idiom of rural Sinhalese speech; its fidelity to this idiom was confirmed by Mr A. P. Gunaratna’s Sinhalese translation of the novel . . . At the same time the English is not outlandish, but remains simple and forceful within the distinctively Sinhalese rhythm and turn of phrase” (54). Elkin’s words are confirmed by Sinhalese Goonetilleke fifteen years later: “The artlessness of the speech and the occasional non-English turn of phrase are appropriate to the conversation of primitive women; the non-English turns of phrase echo Sinhalese idiom” (75).

Importantly, however, for my later progression of this argument, while Goonetilleke compares Woolf’s turn of phrase to that of Forster, I see a more direct comparison in the work of Achebe. Both Woolf and Achebe use the metaphoric language of the villagers ostensibly to make a point, but create instead a metalanguage which evokes the primitive essence they are attempting to represent. For example, compare this version of Woolf’s dialogue: “‘They call us veddas in the village, while you are of the headman’s house. Does the leopard of the jungle mate with the dog of the village?’ ‘That is nothing to me. The wild buffalo seeks the cows in the village herds. The girl is very gentle, and my mind is made up’” (59) with this of Achebe: “‘We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and
children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its aching flanks against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him”. The idiom of the villagers articulates an arguable logic which still defies being close-coupled with the issue of exoticism.

But as discussed in my chapter on Browne, while this writing is clearly not the flamboyant prose of Flaubert, the question still remains: Is Woolf still guilty of identifying too closely with another culture? Further, if the excerpt quoted above is typical, then it is clear that Woolf is offering a representation of the East in a story aimed at a Western audience, just as I show with regard to the works of Browne, Ghosh and Ondaatje in this thesis.

This is a good time to return to an examination of a further argument of Edward Said, namely, his acknowledgement that the English—he talks specifically of Richard Burton—have a tendency to “orientalize” or mythologize the Orient to a lesser degree than the French. There is, moreover, a grudging admiration in his words as he describes Burton “as sharing the life of the people in whose lands he lived”, of Burton’s fluency with the languages of the East, of the vast information he gleaned first-hand of the Orient and of his ability “to steer a narrative course” through this archive of knowledge (Orientalism, 195-6). Thus Said claims, “So what we read in his prose is the story of a consciousness negotiating its way through an alien culture by virtue of having successfully absorbed its systems of information and behavior. Burton’s freedom was in having shaken himself loose of his European origins enough to be able to live as an Oriental. . . . In no writer on the Orient so much as in Burton do we feel that generalizations about the Oriental . . . are the result of
knowledge acquired about the Orient by living there, actually seeing it firsthand, truly trying to see Oriental life from the viewpoint of a person immersed in it” (196).

High praise indeed which would appear to absolve both Burton and Woolf from charges of displacing the local people. In fact, if this passage were to be read out of context, it might lead one to question Said’s entire position on the Orientalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or “orientalist discourse” as a whole. Because if we then compare what we know so far of Leonard Woolf—he’s proficiency with the language, his first-hand experience of the country, his empathetic communication and feeling for the Sinhalese, and the viewpoint from which he presents his novel *The Village in the Jungle*—it would seem to be a reasonable assumption that Woolf, too, would gain a similar level of appreciation to that of Burton, and thus would constitute yet another exception to Said’s earlier condemnation of all Orientalists.

However, Said’s argument continues and is not to be dismissed so lightly. In fact, my de-contextualisation above created a complete reversal of meaning. For, on reading further, while Burton is highly commended on the one hand for “truly trying to see Oriental life from the viewpoint of a person immersed in it”, at the same time he stands culpable of “orientalist” practices because his prose presents a “sense of assertion and domination over all the complexities of Oriental life”. Said demands a recognition of “how the voice of the highly idiosyncratic master of Oriental knowledge informs, feeds into the voice of European ambition for rule over the Orient”. As a result, with such statements in his *Pilgrimage* as “Egypt is a treasure to be won”, Burton fails to pass through the second stage of Said’s discursive net that condemns the imperialistic phrases which lie close to the surface of his
works and thus, by reasonable assumption, close to his ideological self. Accordingly, Said completes this stage of his argument by asserting that such writing “becomes synonymous with European domination of the Orient” and thus, it follows, “orientalism”.

If, against this portion of Said’s theory, I attempt to deconstruct either of Woolf’s full-length texts from which I have been quoting so far, I think it is fair to say that these works certainly pass the first test. If the telling phrase here is “generalizations about the Oriental”, it is clear from what I have said so far that the temptation to make generalizations about the local people is exactly what Woolf avoids in this story. To the contrary, he is commended for his empathy, insights into the Sinhalese character, for his “understanding of social . . . [and] psychological processes, particularly that of “primitive psychology” (Goonetilleke, 74). We can assert that he truly attempts to look at life from the viewpoint of the people about whom he is writing. His realistic portrayal of Sinhalese customs and society and his level of absorption with its systems of information and behaviour are obvious from the short excerpts already quoted. But how does he fare measured against the second stage of argumentation?

I return first to *Growing* in which, as I have said, Woolf describes his increasing understanding of, and feeling for, the Sinhalese and their customs which expands in proportion to his growing disillusionment with the system of imperialistic rule. But in relation to Said’s comments on Burton, there is one incident that should be explored in greater depth.
In his duties as “policeman, magistrate, judge & publican”—during which he would travel up to 140 miles a month on horseback or by bullock cart in pursuit of his work—the sights, scenes and experiences that Woolf writes about are those that he took very seriously in his tasks as imperial administrator and in which he was immersed on a daily basis over a number of years. The incident in question took place on a day he travelled to one of the more remote villages. To his surprise and embarrassment, half a mile from the village he was met by a reception committee of headmen and villagers, complete with tom-toms and dancers. In his own words:

Then I had to stand . . . while each member of the crowd came and prostrated himself, touching the ground with his forehead.

In a letter . . . describing this, I tried to defend the system, arguing that the Europeanizing of non-Europeans is a mistake, that it is best for every race to remain “as it was before Adam” (a curious and somewhat exaggerated idea). The Kandyan, I said, grovels on the ground and touches your boots, but has retained his independence and manners. This letter reflects my growing awareness of the problems of imperialism and my personal relation to it in the plains of Jaffna, the mountain villages of Kandy, and later the jungles of Hambantota. For a long time I was uneasily ambivalent, exaggerating as in this letter, my imperialist, stern Sahib attitude to compensate for or soothe a kind of social conscience which began to condemn and dislike the whole system. Kandyan society in my day . . . [was an] extraordinary, hierarchical, and complicated engine of Empire and imperial government, [whereas the] Kandyan society in these villages was purely feudal. The Nugawelas, Ratwattes, and all the other great Kandyan landowning families were feudal chiefs, and the procession, and tom-toms, and prostrations which greeted the O. A. were merely an example of manners ordinarily displayed by the villager to the feudal chief . . .

(Growing, 157-8)

And so it is that Woolf gradually comes to the realization that his initial assumptions that the reception was staged purely because he was European and his subsequent embarrassment on this account were both misplaced, but not altogether incorrect. In other words, the scale and nature of the reception and the obeisance to which Woolf was subjected were not necessarily because he was a white man, but because he was an official. I repeat: “the procession, and tom-toms, and prostrations which greeted the O. A. were
merely an example of manners ordinarily displayed by the villager to the feudal chief . . .”
Again, it is easy to impart a racist conclusion which is not necessarily accurate. Instead what
this incident foregrounds is the fact that one of the many “problems” of imperialism was the
elevation of the government official to the rank of chieftain. Since that official was often,
though not always, white (see Woolf’s portrayal of the Sinhalese Ratemahatmaya in The
Village in the Jungle) it is easy enough to overlook the fact that the natives’ respectful
actions were predicated on the official nature of the visit and not solely or necessarily
because that official happened to be European. In other words, the villagers’ respect was
directed at Woolf’s status, not his colour.

Perhaps the degree of self-reflexivity to which the incident was subjected by Woolf is
enough to absolve him of accusations of “orientalist behaviour”, and on that count he does
pass Said’s test, but it is in the words that follow that his writing slips and undercuts itself.
In this next passage, Woolf is honest enough to admit that he is not impervious to this type
of flattery and that he enjoys being treated as “the great man and the father of the people”,
and this is where he falls into the same “orientalist” trap as Burton. He admits that this
almost inevitably leads to a type of schizophrenia as he becomes “more and more . . . an
anti-imperialist who enjoyed the fleshpots of imperialism, loved the subject peoples and
their way of life, and knew from the inside how evil the system was for ordinary men and
women” (158-9).

It is the nature of this behavioural division, albeit more honest and open than that of Burton,
that would provoke Said’s criticism, somewhat justifiably I am forced to admit. Constantly
one must bear in mind that we are addressing early-twentieth-century behaviour with the political consciousness of the twenty-first, and partly therein, I think, lies the difference.

However, this glimpse into the nature of someone who calls himself “a conscious imperialist” is excerpted from his autobiography and it clearly portrays the type of “orientalist” thought processes that Said condemns. Is there any absolution for Woolf from charges of “orientalism” if I now return to *The Village in the Jungle*? This is a text which, as I have said, is celebrated for its lack of exoticism and fetishizing of the East, its empathetic portrayal of its subject matter, and of its writer’s empathy and understanding of the local customs and lifestyle of villagers in rural Ceylon. When all is said and done, if this text were to stand alone, how would it rate? Is it indeed impervious to the type of slippage shown above?

At this point, it is pertinent to investigate Woolf’s portrayal of the role of empire in this narrative? As I have said, in both form and style, and to some degree in content too, this tale bears a surprising relationship to Chinua Achebe’s highly political (and highly acclaimed) *Things Fall Apart* written nearly fifty years later. In Woolf’s story, however, the magistrate is depicted in a somewhat more sympathetic manner than is the white court in Achebe’s account.

Take, for example, the scene where the exhausted protagonist, Silindu, is brought by the Sinhalese official, the *Ratemahatmaya*, before the white magistrate who when they entered was “lying in a long chair reading a book”. Woolf writes, “He [the magistrate] got up and went over to sit down at the writing-table. . . . He sat back in his chair and stared at Silindu
in silence for a minute or two . . . he looked cross and tired. Silindu had instinctively squatted down again. The Ratemahatmaya angrily told him to stand. The magistrate seemed to be lost in thought: he continued to stare at Silindu, and as he did so the look of irritation faded from his face. He noted the hopelessness and suffering in Silindu’s face . . . ‘He need not stand,’ he said to the Ratemahatmaya. ‘He looks damned tired, poor devil’” (The Village in the Jungle, 241).

An interesting comparison presents itself between the portrayal of an imperialist in the form of a magistrate by a white writer and the portrayal of an imperialist as district commissioner by a black writer as in Achebe’s celebrated text. While Woolf constructs his imperialist as an empathetic human being, in Achebe’s narrative the administrator is presented as completely devoid of any feeling. I quote from the final passage which presents the thought processes of the District Commissioner just after he has been led by the villagers to observe the hanged body of Okonkwo:

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. (179)

The pathos in this excerpt is unquestionable. The tribal customs on which the story is predicated proscribe the touching of someone who has committed suicide even if (or particularly) as in this case, he is “one of the greatest men in Umuofia”. Thus the final irony
becomes the most savage reality: that the enemy, the indirect cause of Okonkwo’s death, has been asked to intercede in the burial.

This book has attracted so much attention that I do not intend to spend much time on it here. What interests me is the attitude of the Commissioner and complete lack of humanity in his response. Compared to Woolf’s magistrate, he is a personification of inhumanity, if such an oxymoron be permissible. It is not so much that he portrays an inexorable callousness, but that he appears quite unmoved, totally unresponsive to the situation before him.

But there is more here and I am led to ask: If Woolf’s empathetic imperialist (the magistrate) is a projection of Woolf’s person and Achebe’s coldly preoccupied imperialist is a projection of the thought processes he attributes to an administrator like Woolf who returns home to write a novel about the villagers of his experience, called not quite The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger but The Village in the Jungle, which of these opposing authority figures most closely represents the ‘truth’?55

Perhaps the only answer to a question which is rhetorical at heart is to suggest that the portrayal of both men, opposite as they are, is about as realistic as one could get. In the vast majority of cases, the men who went out to Europe’s colonies were not handpicked for either their empathy or their predisposition to callousness. The process was considerably more arbitrary and less conscious than that. They came from all walks of life; their temperaments and their agendas were a mix. In other words, they were men who raised their hands for an overseas posting. If they could be said to have any characteristics in common, they could be described as slightly bored—and not always very bright—young men who
yearned for something different. Thus an imperialist could be a Browne without a racist bone in his body, a Woolf whose awareness quickly brought a realization of the cruelties and inequities within the system which in his own quiet way he did his best to illuminate, one of the Balfours and Curzons of whom Said speaks, or a personality in the form of the Mr. X who invoked Woolf’s eternal wrath.

The question now becomes, what agendas are at work here? I argue throughout this work, textual meaning is inseparable from context of both writer and reader. That being the case and looking first at *The Village in the Jungle*, could it be that Woolf, who was himself a magistrate, projected his own feelings and sympathies into the trial of Silindu? After all, this first book was written very shortly after his return from Ceylon. And his *Diaries* bear testament to the fact that on a daily basis during his years in Ceylon, Woolf was gathering experiences which would easily translate to that type of information. Despite his sensitive handling of *The Village in the Jungle*, in the writing of that text was he practising betrayal of trust and confidence at a certain level? Not as native informant, obviously, but perhaps as *resident* informant? Such questions have to lead me to claim that while assumption plays a part here, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Said’s thesis has merit. In other words, is not the writing of this novel a clear-cut case of a colonial administrator indulging in just the type of “orientalism” Said condemns? While the autobiographical *Growing* may contain the mitigating factor of self-reflexivity, this story is unambiguously an attempt to represent the Orient. It is a story of village life, observed, interpreted by a colonial administrator and written for consumption by a Western audience. Although this book drew little critical attention, the fact that it reached a relatively wide readership cannot be in doubt since it was printed a number of times between 1913 and 1961.
But before condemning Woolf, I would like to look a little further at Chinua Achebe. It is well-known that Achebe—who later became celebrated for his afro-centricism and his much publicized antagonism to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (novels which form the basis of much scholarly discussion in relation to Achebe as well as providing a central concern in his recent *Home and Exile*)—wrote *Things Fall Apart* to celebrate the stirrings of his political agenda in London in the mid-1950s. In choosing to write about the villagers, their customs and beliefs—of which he has never, certainly at the tribal level of which he writes, been a part—it is my contention that this text could also be said to be tantamount to a betrayal of trust and, finally, a disclosure of information held dear to the Igbo. While, as with the other figures that form part of this thesis—Browne, Ghosh, Ondaatje, Woolf—perhaps he is not quite the native informant, nor a resident informant, but he is an informant nevertheless. Ironically, on this basis, Achebe becomes as much an “orientalist” as Woolf. While Achebe is apparently an Igbo writing about the Igbo, he is an educated man who has chosen to live in the metropolis and who, for political expediency, has chosen also to present his writings in the language of the metropolis.  

In this—although in this *only*—his rationale reflects that of Naipaul and it should be emphasised that the comparison between Achebe and Naipaul stops right here as these writers occupy diametrically opposite discursive positions from one another. In her discussion of modalities in *Travelling Identities*, Clare Johnson claims:

> V. S. Naipaul occupies a particularly interesting position, accepting his interpellation by colonial discourse and adopting the role of the colonizer, freely embracing dominant attitudes not as one of the oppressed, but as an oppressor himself. However, he is also of necessity assigned to the position of the oppressed, since no matter how effective his ‘mimicry’ is, he cannot
alter the ineluctable fact of his skin colour—the irreducible signifier of difference: because he accepts the terms of oppression, he must also submit to them. . . . his position is always under threat because he is not white.58

It is not therefore surprising that Achebe goes so far as to describe passages in Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* as “pompous rubbish” and brings a Saidian turn of phrase to his précis of Naipaul’s book.59 But Achebe’s famous 1975 lecture—“An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” as visiting professor at the University of Massachusetts in which his condemnation of what he sees as Conrad’s xenophobia is absolute and where *Heart of Darkness* is described as “an offensive and deplorable book” (259)—prepares us for his reaction to Naipaul.60 It could be argued that a quick comparison between the two writers excuses Conrad on two counts for what Achebe views as his “racism”: namely a combination of being European and the particular historical moment in which the novel was produced.61 Or does it? Perhaps, as an outsider, Conrad should not have presumed to depict a foreign culture? In an interview with Achebe, self-admitted admirer of both writers Caryl Phillips seeks a response from Achebe specifically on this representation of Africa and its people.62 I have excerpted part of their fascinating conversation in the following: Phillips: “‘But you’re not suggesting that outsiders should not write about other cultures?’” Achebe: “‘No, no. This identification with the other is what a great writer brings to the art of story-making. We should welcome the rendering of our stories by others, because a visitor can sometimes see what the owner of the house has ignored. But they must visit with respect and not be concerned with the colour of skin, or the shape of nose, of the condition of the technology in the house.’” . . . “‘Chinua, I think Conrad offends you because he was a disrespectful visitor.’ . . . The realization hits me with force. I am not an African. Were I an African I suspect I would feel the same way as my host. But I was raised in Europe, and
although I have learned to reject the stereotypically reductive images of Africa and Africans, I am undeniably interested in the break-up of a European mind and the health of European civilization. I feel momentarily ashamed that I might have become caught up with this theme and subsequently overlooked how offensive this novel might be to a man such as Chinua Achebe and millions of other Africans. . . . However lofty Conrad’s mission, he has, in keeping with times past and present, compromised African humanity in order to examine the European psyche. [Thus] Achebe’s response is understandably personal.”

And it is on this last point—the respect with which he treats the local people, the empathy and understanding in the way he writes his tale of the villagers—that I believe exonerates Woolf in much the way Said claims Kipling’s aesthetic ‘saves’ *Kim*. For just as *Kim* “most assuredly is not a political tract”, in terms of promoting a hegemonic empire, neither is *The Village in the Jungle* (*Culture and Imperialism*, 196). Quite apart from his anti-imperialist treatises, books and pamphlets, what becomes paramount is the way in which Woolf conducts himself—in person and in his written work—and the bearing this has with regards to the respect with which he held—and in which he was received—in his hosts’ country. This is why he was received so kindly and so enthusiastically in postcolonial Sri Lanka—in which after all he spent only seven years half a century ago as a self-admittedly sometimes harsh colonial administrator.

Thus, in summary of this chapter, it can be seen that while it proves impossible to extricate Woolf totally from charges of “orientalism”, there are murmurs from both Achebe and Said—albeit reluctant—which suggest there might be mitigating circumstances. In particular, Achebe’s silence on Woolf becomes more understandable when one recalls
Mukherjee’s cry of betrayal. Scholarship admits only the argument in focus. This last word from Phillip’s interview with Achebe in regard to Conrad says it all: “Well, as you know, we have very few who have the talent and who are in the right place, and to lose even one is a tragedy. We cannot afford to lose such artists. It is sheer cussedness to willfully turn and walk away from the truth, and for what? Really, for what? I expect a great artist . . . not to make life more difficult for us. Why do this? Why make our lives more difficult? In this sense Conrad is a disappointment.”

Whatever side one takes in the imperialist/anti-imperialist Conradian debate, Heart of Darkness only has to be placed alongside The Village in the Jungle for the difference in representation of the native people to become patently clear. It is precisely because Leonard Woolf’s depiction of Sri Lanka is so empathetic that Achebe, the scholar, does not single him out for attention. In many ways, unlike Conrad, Woolf did not “disappoint”. Certainly, he was neither arrogant nor abusive. But he was clearly a part of the imperialist camp. In his final phrase of Things Fall Apart, Achebe, the writer, makes that patently obvious by his choice of title for the District Commissioner’s book: The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger.
As one would expect from a book published in the English language in England, the early reviews were not particularly encouraging. The first reviews were mixed, with some critical and others more positive. 

The early reviews for "The Village in the Jungle" were quite critical, with one reviewer stating, "A book for the first time, a book for the second time, a book for the third time."

Archival research into the Leonard Woolf Papers at the University of Sussex in Brighton (specifically files IA 3f and IL 13e) produced a reasonable quantity of press clippings from literary critics that greeted its release, but I am aware that in the restricted period I had available for research in Britain that I may have missed others of significance. There was, for example, a favourable review from Blackwood's Magazine by Sir Hugh Clifford, mentioned briefly in Letters of Leonard Woolf, ed. Frederick Spotts, that did not appear to be among the Woolf Papers, but it is conceivable that I may have missed it.

As one would expect from a book published in the English language in England, the early reviews were primarily from the British press—among them The Times Literary Supplement (27.2.13), the Morning Post (10.2.13), The Daily News and Leader (14.3.13), the Scotsman (21.2.13), The Westminster Gazette (22.2.13), The New Statesman (19.4.13), The Spectator (1.3.13)—while a number of later reviews greeted later reprints of the novel: Daily Herald (17.9.31), The Daily News (27.5.39). In Sri Lanka, there appears to have been little printed—save in the Weekly Times of Ceylon (3.4.13)—until the 1960s, as Roy notes.
The attention he received from postcolonial scholars came much later and some significant critiques of his rather sparse fictional work have come from Yasmine Gooneratne, D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, Elleke Boehmer, Selma S. Meyerowitz and Shirley Chew. The Sinhalese translation was undertaken by A. P. Gunaratna in 1947. A significant addition to local recognition of Woolf’s book was the television series based on Woolf’s novel The Village in the Jungle by Sri Lankan film and television director Wipula Sumanasekara which follows the 1980 film Beddegama based on the same novel (Sunday Times 6.6.93). For a comprehensive list of postcolonial Sri Lankan critics, see Douglas Kerr’s article “Stories of the East”, English Literature in Transition 1880-1920 41.3 (1998): 261-79, this version obtained electronically 26.6.2003 via Literature Online http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk

Conflicting opinions with regard to the success of this book come from Roy and Meyerowitz. Roy claims that The Wise Virgins “remains his most widely discussed literary work, mainly because of its portrayal of the troubled relationship between Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell” which would have appealed far more to the taste of the society in which it was produced than tales about ‘foreign lands’. While Meyerowitz remarks only that “it did not sell well and went out of print” (5).

The Hogarth Press was founded by Leonard and Virginia for printing both their own works and “literature by new writers which would not be acceptable to commercial presses. Soon they became the publishers of such important writers of literature as Katherine Mansfield, T. S. Eliot and E. M. Forster, and such significant social writers as John Maynard Keynes and Freud” (Meyerowitz, 8). In his edition of E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India (London: Penguin Books, 1979), Oliver Stallybrass called Leonard Woolf “that literary obstetrician of genius” for encouraging Forster to continue with his novel (13).


Letters of Leonard Woolf, ed. Fredric Spotts (New York: Harcourt, 1989), 197. But although this was the “reason” Lytton Strachey gave for not liking it, I wonder whether there was more to this? After all, Strachey and Woolf were at one stage the best of friends. In his voluminous correspondence from Ceylon to Strachey in London, Woolf was either lonely enough or close enough to Strachey to write, “I feel I want to talk [to you] a little before I go to bed”, but the change that Bell perceived in him on his return to London was even then beginning to take place (63). Eventually “around the midpoint of his years in Ceylon—the challenge of work and fascination with the country supplanted Leonard’s curiosity about old friends. He wrote fewer letters and eventually brought the correspondence with Strachey to an abrupt close; after years of encouraging a visit, he scotched any idea of his coming to Ceylon. Leonard had changed; as he wrote to Strachey in October 1908, ‘I have no connection with yesterday: I do not recognize it nor myself in it.’ He was growing; Strachey was stagnating. . . . The break [that ensued] in the correspondence marked a break in an emotional intimacy that was never fully restored” (64). Given this information, it’s hard to read Strachey’s comment as anything other than an expression of emotion or anger at having been superseded in Woolf’s affections by a foreign country and its people.

Obviously I speak of these figures as significant symbols, rather than in a restrictive sense. Victoria was, after all, proclaimed Empress of India in 1877, a symbolic attempt to consolidate the ‘British Raj’. Before Conrad, what anyone who claimed to be part of the literati ‘knew’ about ‘foreign parts’ would largely have been gleaned from Kipling’s tales.

Said’s caution, “It is crucial to remember that there were no appreciable deterrents to the imperialist world-view Kipling held, any more than there were alternatives to imperialism for Conrad” applies as much to the newsrooms of Europe as it does to Kipling and Conrad. See Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 176.

Or was it that a pre-war Britain had more on its mind?


From a telephone conversation with Michèle Drouart, author of Into the Wadi (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000).

As I discussed in chapter one, it is my contention that Edward Said achieved—in a different milieu perhaps—much the same ‘raising of awareness’ with Orientalism.

These include such titles as International Government (1916), Economic Imperialism (1920), Empire and Commerce in Africa (1920), Socialism and Cooperation (1921), Fear and Politics (1925), Imperialism and Civilization (1928), Quack, Quack! (1935), The War for Peace (1940), Principia Politica (1953), and After the Deluge (Vol. I, 1931; Vol. II, 1939).

A quote from the 1998 edition of Empire and Commerce in Africa.

Although, perhaps, the comparatively short period that has passed since reprinting does not allow a sufficient length of time in which to gauge current market reaction to the contents of this text, what does surprise me is that it is not more often discussed by students of postcolonialism in Africa.
One of the two excellent introductions to Woolf’s Diaries is by S. D. Saparamadu, the original editor of The Ceylon Historical Journal who published Volume 1, Number 1 “when he was still in his teens, or just out of them” (Ceylon Daily News, 6.3.62, Leonard Woolf Papers, ref. IA 3 f, University of Sussex Library). Saparamadu (identified only by the initials S. D. S. in his introduction to the Diaries) provides an illuminating account of the colonial civil service and it is from this account that I have taken this information. The Ceylon Historical Journal first published Woolf’s diaries in book form together with the accompanying trio of short stories in 1962.

See my chapter on Browne for an indication of the reaction of the British press to his work.

This time difference in the writing of books that were essentially about events that took place within the same temporal dimension may account, too, for the more modern turn of phrase in Woolf’s works in relation to those of Browne.

A number of incidents within my own experience support Woolf’s in that I have witnessed the class hatred to which he refers among expatriate Europeans and seen the extent to which this class snobbery becomes synonymous with and, as a consequence, inseparable from, imperialism. Accordingly, I have to agree with Woolf that since this sort of behaviour results from a sense of inferiority bestowed on the English by their own societal system, in that era in particular, it was so inextricable from English class consciousness that it did indeed lie at the heart of Empire. However, I need to go further than Woolf in stating that this need to feel good by ridiculing another in order to overcome an innate feeling of inferiority was not restricted to class relations but in the context of imperialist rule inevitably manifested in similar brutish behaviour towards indigenous peoples. From the distance of my own teenage years, I can remember a similar type of person to Mr. X making an indigenous person feel “small, inferior, despisiable, and comic” and the distress of that experience remains just as vivid in my own mind as it obviously did in Woolf’s. There is little wonder that imperialism left behind such an obnoxious image.

One of the accusations levelled at Said concerns the emotive style in which Orientalism is written which some scholars view as “unscholarly”. As I have shown in my account of Browne in chapter two and as I am about to argue in the case of Woolf, it is clearly inaccurate to place all Orientalists in the same category. However, the feelings responsible for the manner in which this text is written and for its exaggerated generalizations can be better understood vis à vis the attitude and actions of Mr. X. particularly if I extend the example to cover a range of physical or mental abusive situations, specifically the abuse inherent in being ignored or “obliterated” by all such Mr. Xs. Consider, firstly, Said’s stated motivation for writing Orientalism: “My own experiences . . . are in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental. . . . The nexus of knowledge and power creating ‘the Oriental’ and in a sense obliterating him as a human being is therefore not for me an exclusively academic matter (27)”. To be the target of such dehumanizing behaviour doubtless comprises part of the depressing “experiences” Said mentions. What Said fails to acknowledge is that this dominance—in whichever shape it takes—is not solely and necessarily projected at Said the Oriental, but just as much at Said the man. There is no reference to Freud in Orientalism, but his theories cannot be ignored.

In pondering this incident in Growing, Woolf quotes from Freud whose “usual lucidity unravels the nature of this kind of joke in Chapter III, ‘The Purposes of Jokes’, of his remarkable book Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious” (19). “Since we have been obliged to renounce the expression of hostility by deeds—held back by the passionless third person, in whose interest it is that personal security shall be preserved—we have just as in the case of sexual aggressiveness, developed a new technique of invective, which aims at enlightening this third person against our enemy. By making our enemy small, inferior, despisiable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter” (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 103.

Kenya was ‘granted’ Independence on December 12, 1963.

The keeping of a detailed daily account of the work done by government agents and their assistants was a requirement instituted by one of the governors of Ceylon, Sir Thomas Maitland, in 1808, a practice that continued for one hundred and thirty years.

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The Ceylon Independence Act was passed in 1947 and the dominion of Sri Lanka came into being the following year on February 4, 1948.

To the best of my knowledge, the only scholarly attention of any substance that these stories have received is from a critical article by Douglas Kerr, Selma Meyerowitz in Leonard Woolf; Anindyo Roy who concentrated solely on “A Tale Told by Moonlight”; and Elleke Boehmer, “Immeasurable Strangeness” in Imperial Times: Leonard Woolf and W. B. Yeats”, in Modernism and Empire, eds. Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby (New
What I find more difficult to understand than the earlier scholarly lack of attention, is why Woolf continues to be overlooked by present-day scholars intent, one would hope, on setting past records straight and not in founding yet another archive as biased and incomplete as the imperial one that has gone before.

An interesting slippage concerning a subtle change in this title with the preposition “of” replacing the correct “from” that occurs in the works of some postcolonial critics among which the otherwise well-argued essays of Douglas Kerr, Anindyo Roy and Elleke Boehmer stand as examples. In other words, the stories appear in scholars’ essays under the title Stories of the East (and in Shirley Chew’s case, Stories in the East). However, they were written, and published, as Stories From the East and the slip becomes less subtle in the orientation of what I have been discussing here. While The Oxford English Dictionary allows for some overlapping of semantics, it states that “from” is more commonly used to denote “departure or moving away” or to indicate “the starting point or the first considered of two boundaries adopted in defining a given extent in space”. “Of”, on the other hand, is commonly used to indicate “the thing or person whence anything originates . . . is acquired or sought”; it is also used to express “racial or local origin, descent”; or after a subject “of connects the material immediately with the thing”. These prepositions are both function words but their implications are opposite: while of connotes belonging or possessiveness or the object of an action, from connotes starting point, separation, distance, source. This becomes significant in the light of a discussion where the stated objective is to ascertain the degree of “orientalist” discourse discernible in Woolf’s writing.

How conscious is it on Roy’s part, I wonder, to use the phrase “illusionary haze” which conjures up images of the “haze” and “brooding gloom” that hangs over the five men in the Nellie in Heart of Darkness? Could one substitute “optional blindness” for the first phrase?

The five genres to which Kerr refers are: Woolf’s letters, the diaries he kept in Hambantota during his administration, his novels, short stories, and five volumes of autobiography. There were, as I have mentioned, a considerable number of political books.


The influence of Conrad is as clear in Woolf’s work as the influence of Woolf is on Achebe. See my discussion on Achebe later this chapter.

In fact, White’s death very closely resembles Marlow’s description of Kurtz’s final hours: “I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?” Heart of Darkness, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1971) , 71. As White’s death approaches, the “memory of his sins” asserts itself and he becomes aware of the “things which had happened to him, and things which he had done—and they weren’t nice either” (Stories From the East, 276). And a little later, overcome with “fear of punishment, of what was coming of death, or the horrors, real horrors and the phantom horrors of madness” White loses control completely (277), just as does Kurtz before his death with his famous words of comprehension, “‘The horror! The horror!’” (71).

I am reading resistantly here in relation to Conrad. I am, of course, aware that the dominant or popular late-twentieth-century reading of Conrad’s asserts his own imperialist agenda and do not intend here to go down that well-worn route. Suffice it to say, whether anti-imperialist or otherwise, it would be difficult not to miss the paradoxes of empire presented in Heart of Darkness. Interestingly, however, despite his own avidly political orientation, Woolf does not appear to derive any sense of the political from Conrad’s books. In the essay titled “Joseph Conrad” in Woolf’s Essays on Literature, History, Politics, etc. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927), 57-71, he claims: “Conrad was in no sense a preacher; he can hardly be said to have had what is ordinarily called a message; politics and social questions did not appear in his books; he had no axes to grind. He was pre-eminently a writer, and, I think, within certain limits, a great writer. . . . In Conrad’s best work, in Lord Jim, Heart of Darkness, Typhoon, there is either no ‘plot’ at all or at best but an incident which is made to do the duty of a ‘plot’; but about this incident of a young seaman’s panic or about a fact or phenomenon like Africa, Conrad weaves his immensely elaborate and often beautiful structure of words” (59). This admiration for the beauty of Conrad’s prose did not stop him, however, from commenting on the “purple passages” (58) in Lord Jim or of describing Conrad’s later work as “splendid shells, magnificent facades, admirable forms, but there is no life in them” (70). It is clear that Woolf intends this to be a literary and not a political critique of Conrad’s work which is a little at odds with the deliberate political perspective embedded in “A Tale Told by Moonlight” and “Pearls and Swine”, stories whose narrative structures so closely emulate that of Conrad’s famous novella.
As I have mentioned, the seminal source for both books were the diaries that Woolf kept religiously as part of his duties as assistant government agent during his years in Hambantota, Ceylon. It is, however, important to note that while the issue of credibility is particularly important in this context, the merit of The Village in the Jungle as a work of literature should not be overlooked. For example, English historian Arnold Toynbee—a man highly praised for his profound scholarship and erudition—places Woolf’s text in such illustrious company as Herodotus, Tolstoy and Victor Hugo, men noted for their literary prowess and ability to tell a good story as well as their attention to historical accuracy (A Study of History, Volume X, 225). The work for which Toynbee himself is most fêted is the twelve-volume A Study of History which ranks alongside Browne’s four-volume A Literary History of Persia in terms of a monumental scholarly undertaking.

Initially puzzling is the number of Sinhalese words it contains which are explained only by their context (in interesting contrast to Achebe’s Things Fall Apart which contains a glossary for this purpose), as well as the wealth of indigenous folk tales, charms, spells, superstitions and sayings. However, somewhat in line with the hermeneutic principles that became popular in narrative—and film—some fifty years after The Village in the Jungle was written, this adds to the demand of interpretive energy invested in the reading and, in so doing, promotes an added empathy with the characters.

I am somewhat surprised at this assertion by Arnold Toynbee; my own definition of an historical novel is as one set in the past or what which covers past events, not one containing a description of contemporary places and events.

While The Village in the Jungle predates T. S. Eliot’s “Alfred J. Prufrock” by only three or four years, Woolf was out of London’s literary circles for some seven years prior to the writing and publication of his novel. In relation to the similarity of some aspects of Conrad’s style that scholars have noted in Woolf’s fiction, Boehmer makes an excellent point. She suggests that: “The formal echoes of Conrad in Woolf are strong enough to suggest that the latter was increasingly relying on Conrad’s epistemological questions, and moving away from Rudyard Kipling’s colonial caricatures, in order to represent his own personal and political anxieties as an imperialist” (95).

Chenas were created by the controversial system of burning portions of the jungle for progressive plots of agriculture. Another interesting link back to Freud can be made here. See Freud’s final words in Civilization and its Discontents, tr. Joan Riviere, ed. M. Masud R. Khan (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975): “The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. . . . Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man” (82). It is clear from my earlier discussion that Woolf knew and respected Freud and that he was familiar with—and published some of—his work. The two men had a mutual interest in humanity and some of Freud’s psychoanalytical theories would have had a bearing on Woolf’s own reflections and writing. Meyerovitz presents an interesting discussion on Woolf’s fascination with “man’s conflicting impulses toward the communal psychologies of civilization and barbarism, and the relationship of social, political, and economic institutions to these psychologies. . . . After the Deluge, Volume I (1931) and Volume II (1939) were the first two parts of Woolf’s study of the psychology of man as a social being” (10).

Perhaps it is in this respect—that is, in comparing the poverty of 1910 with the comparative “prosperity” of 1960—that The Village in the Jungle fulfills the historical function that Toynbee ascribes to it. As one example, Mervyn de Silva, for instance, states, “Woolf’s ‘village’ shows an inward understanding. He was able to sense the quality of living in this small community and this required an intuitive power and a gift of imagination” (Diaries, lviii-ix).

Woolf’s The Village in the Jungle elicits a surprising number of comparisons with other works of literature. The temptation to compare Woolf with Conrad has arisen from a number of scholars and at least one critic has compared The Village in the Jungle with Forster’s A Passage to India and Kipling’s Letting in the Jungle. Peter Elkin hails it as a “masterpiece”, comparing it favourably with A Passage to India and the “consciousness of a life in nature which is stronger and more enduring than the human” in the novels of D. H. Lawrence (47). See “Leonard Woolf’s Masterpiece”, AULMA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association 13 (1960): 46-54. In “Leonard Woolf’s ‘Waste Land’: The Village in the Jungle”, The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 7.1 (June 1972): 22-34, Yasmine Gootneratne draws an interesting parallel between Woolf’s novel and T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, suggesting that as “the jungle ‘crouches’, waiting for rain, the poem captures the unmistakable atmosphere of the fine ‘drought’ passage in
chapter one of *The Village in the Jungle*, that begins: ‘The wind from the north-east drops . . . ’ and ends with the magnificent picture of the herds of desperate animals that wander on helplessly, ‘until at last they stand upon the barren, waterless shore of the sea’” (32-3). As already mentioned Woolf was Eliot’s first publisher and *The Waste Land* was printed by the Hogarth Press in 1923. Under the circumstances, it would have been unlikely that Eliot would not have read Woolf’s book. But Goonetilleke’s explanation for the similarities is plausible: “The fact that the novel is not among the many references provided by Eliot in this most heavily annotated of poems suggests that his borrowing from the ‘drought’ passage was as unconscious and unperceived in fact as it appears to be in the text, the result of an intimate, involuntary communication of impressions, of convictions, and even of images, rather than of a quotation consciously and deliberately made”. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke adds to this list the novels of Joyce Cary and Graham Greene, claiming that Woolf “is closer to the Ceylonese than Forster is to the Indians . . . [and more] akin to Joyce Cary” in that the novel has as its central characters indigenous people. “It is the indigenous quality of *The Village in the Jungle* that makes it an integral part of the tradition of Ceylon fiction in England, while it remains at the same time an integral part of a British tradition” (72-3). From letter to the editor, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 9.3 (1975): 72-5.


55 Although written half a century apart and set in different geographical locations, I see numerous parallels in these two texts: *The Village in the Jungle* and *Things Fall Apart*. Both books were about village life, customs and beliefs in a jungle setting in the early-twentieth century. In both cases, the protagonist is exiled from his own village. Although both stories are told largely from the points of view of their respective protagonists, in both cases, the viewpoint becomes omniscient with the entry of the imperialists as authority figures. White is set against black as arbiter in the latter’s own land with a blatant disregard for native customs and beliefs. There are other interesting points as well: Despite his own well-known antipathy to imperial authority, how much of Woolf is portrayed in Achebe’s Commissioner who walks away from the suicide site with no more on his mind than the book, quickly reduced to a single paragraph, that he will write about the incident?

56 Specifically, it was first published in 1913, reprinted twice in the same year, again in 1925 and 1931, 1951 (New Phoenix Library Edition), 1961 (The Hogarth Press).

57 Quotation from Achebe: “I’m an Igbo writer, because this is my basic culture; Nigerian, African and a writer . . . no, black first, then a writer”. From Kole Omotoso, *Achebe or Soyinka: A Study in Contrasts* (London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1996), xi. Omotoso’s final comment in this book is a quotation from Declan Kiberd (*Synge and the Irish Language*, 199): “The problem faced by nineteenth-century Irish writers was the linguistic disorder resulting from rapid loss of Irish and the yet imperfect assimilation of English. That problem, in Synge’s opinion, was solved by 1902, when he wrote that ‘the linguistic atmosphere of Ireland has become definitely English enough, for the first time, to allow work to be done in English that is perfectly Irish in essence’ (*Prose*, 385)”, 147.

58 “Travelling Identities: Interrogating the subject of (post)colonial discourse in contemporary travel writing” (Murdoch University, MA thesis, 1997), 71.

59 Note the language Achebe uses in *Home and Exile* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): “The real story of *A Bend in the River* is how an Indian shopkeeper doing business in the heart of Africa and with family connections in East Africa learns to break free from primitive ties to a doomed continent and make a dash for the bounties of the universal civilization in Europe and North America” (my emphases, 90-1).


61 Even Achebe is forced to concede that the novel reflects “the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination” (261).


63 Mukherjee’s views are discussed at greater length with regard to Ondaatje in the following chapter.

64 There are echoes of Said’s disappointment with Rodinson here. See my discussion in chapter one.
Chapter four

MICHAEL ONDAATJE AND THE BURDEN OF CULTURE

Migration is a one-way trip.
There is no home to go back to.

Stuart Hall¹

Exile is predicated on the existence of,
love for, and a real bond with one’s native place.

Edward Said²

. . . it’s my present that is foreign . . . the past is home,
albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time . . .

Salman Rushdie³

Moving on from the traditional Orientalists to contemporary writers at the other end of the twentieth century, the next figure in my re-reading of “orientalism” is located between cultures. This chapter reiterates my argument from a different discursive direction—that of diasporic “orientalism”—on which I reflect through the works of Michael Ondaatje, a writer I have chosen because of the sense of unease I have with regard to his cultural position. He
is neither native nor alien, neither settler nor expatriate, and yet, at the same time he is all of
these. Strictly speaking, he lives in the diaspora, but it is not clear where he positions
himself in relation to his birthplace.

In discussing Ondaatje’s “exteriority”, I ask to what extent his *Running in the Family* “re-
creates” the Ceylon of the past and how he has located himself with respect to this text.
Thus, one of the key issues I address is the extent to which Ondaatje’s work presents an
example of the ‘other’ as ‘native informant’. How much of the informant can be detected in
his works? Does he write from the outside or from the inside? By living in the diaspora, has
he given up the right to represent the Orient? In other words, should texts that concentrate
on a culture re-visited be construed as exploiting—or telling the secrets—of one’s erstwhile
homeland or are there exonerating circumstances?

Some of these enquiries provide for connections between the texts of Homi Bhabha, Said,
Žižek and Barthes as I endeavour to show how Ondaatje deals with the difficulties of
representation and to assess whether his ‘sense of belonging’ to more than one culture
absolves him from presumptions about that culture. In other words, in what way does
Ondaatje’s cultural status simplify or complicate Said’s contentions with regard to the
West’s “writing the East”? Does ‘the family home’ give him an intrinsic right to “write the
Orient” and, in so doing, excuse the indisputably ‘exotic’ within his writing? Is there a
contradiction between his verbally stated cultural affiliations and the way in which a
cultural ambiguity surfaces in his works?
It is clear that these questions cannot be answered without some discussion of identity which will help to establish a point of departure for Ondaatje’s viewpoint. By using two of Ondaatje’s texts in conjunction with excerpts from the work of other writers and theorists, I aim to demonstrate the extent to which issues of cultural identity and displacement dictate the way in which writers actively construct or re-present a certain world view for their readers. What sort of a text emerges? And what biases are contained therein?

**Ondaatje and identity**

In a number of interviews that took place in 1992 following the publication of *The English Patient* for which he just had received the Booker Prize, Ondaatje clearly states his affiliation with two very diverse countries: Canada and Sri Lanka. At this point, he has spent the last thirty years of his life in Canada and when quizzed by the interviewer if, after this length of time, he still felt he was “... in a sense a Sri Lankan person”, he replied, “Yes, very much so ... being Sri Lankan born and growing up there, I feel it’s half my life .. Sri Lanka was my culture . . . [but] Canada was the culture I adopted . . . so these two things are very important to me”.5

If I were to analyse Ondaatje’s statement vis à vis the facts, clearly his childhood in Sri Lanka did not take up “half” his life, and a great deal less in terms of ‘recollected time’. At the same time, there is no reason to doubt that recalled from a distance of forty years those eleven years may have felt like half his life. In an attempt to determine why—and bearing in mind that my interest here is restricted to the way in which the loss of a childhood home translates into feelings of identity and its consequent translation into literature—I need to touch on some differing viewpoints on the subsequent impact of events experienced in
childhood. Certain experiences on a young psyche can resurface in the conscious mind at a later date with a greater intensity and thus produce a telescopic effect on the period during which they took place; others remain suppressed and active only in the subconscious.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson suggests the following: “All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. After experiencing the physiological and emotional changes produced by puberty, it is impossible to ‘remember’ the consciousness of childhood. How many thousands of days passed between infancy and early adulthood vanish beyond direct recall! How strange it is to need another’s help to learn that this naked baby in the yellowed photograph . . . is you. . . . Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it can not be ‘remembered,’ must be narrated”.6

Following through on this premise, it could be said that arising out of circumstances of “estrangement” or loss, there is a need for “a narrative of identity”. What cannot be remembered must be narrated. Because narratives of this nature are by definition necessarily removed from their temporal and geographical actuality, being “set in homogeneous, empty time . . . their frame is historical and their setting sociological . . . [this is the reason] that so many autobiographies begin with the circumstances of parents and grandparents, for which the autobiographer can have only circumstantial, textual evidence; and why the biographer is at pains to record the calendrical, A.D. dates of two biographical events which his or her subject can never remember: birth-day and death-day” (204). As specific examples of how this “narrative of identity” declares itself, I quote below from two very different and
somewhat arbitrarily chosen pieces of text from Salman Rushdie and Ondaatje, both of which illustrate a sentiment, implicit and trapped.  

Importantly, too, because both pieces of text are removed from a chronological patterning, they fall into a category of story-telling where the limiting effect of time is removed and the sociological is privileged in its place. Sigmund Freud’s psycho-analytic histories are a case in point where the wish or the fantasy thus becomes a “shaping device” for the narrative, allowing the dream or “reconstruction” of desire to be presented as evidence. 8 “The case-study is not concerned with what really happened, it is not told in the order of historical time; chronology makes few demands on it” (49). 9

In the first example, the “absent” resonates in Salman Rushdie’s “broken mirrors” of memory, captured so beautifully in the Hindi song “Mera Joota Hai Japani” and roughly translated by Rushdie as:

\[
\begin{align*}
O, & \text{ my shoes are Japanese} \\
\text{These trousers English, if you please} \\
\text{On my head, red Russian hat—} \\
\text{My heart’s Indian for all that.}^{10}
\end{align*}
\]

In this song, it is the very absence of place—the place that exists only in the memory and thus the imagination—that adds to and thus defines the character. The imagination fills in what cannot be remembered or is remembered incompletely. Or, sometimes, for something that is absent. It allows a reaching out, an attempt to forge a link, an attempt to collapse present, past and future into one.
In a different way but designed to arrive at the same end, a desire to capture memory of place rounds out both the moment of experience and the identity of the author/protagonist in a passage taken from Ondaatje’s final words in *Running in the Family*:  

> Half an hour before light I am woken by the sound of rain. Rain on wall, coconut, and petal . . . I get up and stand here, waiting for the last morning.

> My body must remember everything, this brief insect bite, smell of wet fruit, the slow snail light, rain, rain, and underneath the hint of colours a sound of furious wet birds . . . Dark trees, the mildewed garden wall, the slow air pinned down by rain . . . I do not turn on the light yet. I want this emptiness of a dark room where I listen and wait . . . on my last morning, all this Beethoven and rain. (202-3)

Who can read either of these two pieces and not be moved? But *why* are we moved? What element calls to us from these apparently dissimilar pieces of text?  

I suggest that there are two overriding ways in which these pieces of literature speak to the reader: the emotive and the visual. Both pieces are awash with feeling and, at the same time, totally devoid of overt sentimentality. They can be described as narratives of identity because they each tell the ultimate story. They are case studies, too, separated as they are from a causal configuration. The visuals create pictures in the reader’s mind and in so doing, support the story by allowing the imagination to fill in the missing details. This is ‘the real’ combined with the fictive, a sense of poetry fused with the prose, the everyday experience lifted above the humdrum, feeling without sentimentality, a connection of homeland with identity . . . transnational writing at its best.

In the first excerpt, the “heart” is a symbol of feeling, love even, but the lack of sentiment is such that the text easily surmounts the problem of describing emotion on which the merit of a portion of text is so often judged. Hats, trousers, clothing can be destroyed without
destroying the person; but destroy the heart, you kill the living entity within identity. Visually, there is a brightness—an almost tangible jauntiness—about the song that would cause it to resemble a ditty save for the seriousness of the underlying message in the last line; “My heart’s Indian for all that”.\(^{13}\) This provides a contrast, a shock to the audience, a re-cognition of expression of feeling which cannot help but to call forth empathy, and thus a binding of reader, or listener, to the narrator. At the same time this segment of song, this narrative of identity, stands as a clear and unambiguous expression of national identity.

On the face of it, then, this is the effect on the reader of the text quoted by Rushdie. But what about the second example? How does Michael Ondaatje generate his effect? How does he draw the reader into his world of dark and rain? How does he narrate himself?

In the excerpt I have quoted, again there is emotion without over-romanticization. The reader’s attention is held by a sense of waiting, the sense of rupture we know is about to take place, but which in the narrative never does. And then there is a reference to “my body”, the corporeal inserted into a description of surroundings, of nature.\(^{14}\) The insect bite is welcomed. As in Donne’s “The Flea”, the insect now carries human blood, the narrator’s blood. It provides a link with Ondaatje’s homeland; now he will leave something of himself behind. Throughout the passage is the repetition of rain, the persistence of rain, the all-enveloping heartbeat of rain, a watery symbol of emotion that saturates the atmosphere of this final morning, a moment that belongs to both past and present and has no future. Unlike the vibrant colour imagery in the first passage quoted, visually this space is virtually monochromatic. The mind sketches in the imprint of a man’s body dark against a grey background; the fan is but a revolving shadow, the mildew dark splashes on a lighter wall.
Light is slowly seeping into the day, lending objects “a hint of colours” not unlike the subtlety of almost-colour, a sepia, gently shaded onto the cheeks, lips, eyes of the photographic portraits of the past. A greater sense of ‘colour’ is derived from what is not described: a contrasting sense of urgency to the waiting scene is inserted by the “furious wet birds” which awakens the senses, encourages the mind to draw on memories, and thus inserts images of the bright plumage of the birds of the jungle.¹⁵

Part of the appeal of this piece is that not only does it call on a range of reader senses: sight, touch, smell and hearing, but the act of waiting creates a tension between those senses. It further draws in the reader with repeated phrases like “last morning” which even in the most secular of adults (at least within the Western market towards which his text is projected) resonates with the lyrics embedded within biblical songs and hymns learnt by rote in childhood.

In both the examples, the descriptive prose is deliberately sparse with a corresponding absence of explicit sentimentality. And yet the effect on the reader is one of an experience vividly shared, apposite and unequivocal. In an attempt to explain why this should be so, I suggest that these passages are emblematic of narratives of identity: the under-writing, the shifting of responsibility to the reader’s imagination, the sincerity embedded in both allows us to empathise with the claiming of identity, the claiming of ‘personhood’, perhaps even filling that gap within ourselves.

Therefore, what would appear to emerge clearly from both these pieces of text is a total lack of ambivalence with regard to identity. In the first piece, it is clear that no matter what
imprint, or set of expectations, the rest of the world places on this character, his own sense of belonging is not in doubt. In the second passage, no longer do we question Ondaatje’s arbitrary doubling of the time he spent in the land of his birth because we understand that those years are weighted with something heavier and deeper... perhaps something that can never be adequately verbalized but finds instead its expression in a “narrative of identity”. After all the physical, mental and emotional delving into family history, after all the journeying—both metaphorically and in actuality—with members of his family and friends in the country of his birth, in this last short chapter there is a sense of stillness. Ondaatje is alone with memories that continue to ferment in the quiet of the morning. Just the writer and his world.

In this final passage, then, there would appear to be no hint of ambiguity with respect to Ondaatje’s belonging. Unquestionably, from the evidence offered in this passage and my accompanying analysis, it would appear that he has a clear sense of identity, of belonging to the landscape by which he is enfolded, of homeland.

This is neat, but too simplistic, and only one way of evaluating the text. If I set out to further analyse Ondaatje’s narrative, there are factors which emerge that not only challenge this conclusion, but which could be said to prove the opposite: Taken as a whole, *Running in the Family* ostensibly presents a total confusion of identity. For example, more than once in the earlier part of this narrative, Ondaatje stresses the paradox within which he suggests he is trapped. “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner,” he asserts (79). Two pages later, again he claims: “We own the country we grew up in, or we are aliens and invaders. . . . This island was a paradise to be sacked.” What is Ondaatje saying here? Is he
claiming that within his homeland he is simultaneously a stranger, a spendthrift who has squandered his inheritance, a native with rights of ownership and a conqueror who has plundered without permission? Is he admitting that he is both agent and victim of colonial aggression?

In discussing this question of identity, Rocio Davis’ answer to this apparent contradiction is to draw a parallel between Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* and *Running in the Family* in suggesting that in this text Ondaatje portrays a duality or doubled identity: “Ondaatje’s perception of Ceylon is thus made profound and complex because it entails examining the past with what Rushdie has designated a ‘stereoscopic vision . . . a kind of doubled perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society’”.16 This supports Kanaganayakam’s view of “the voice of the expatriate, the exiled voice that . . . is both marginal and central, divided in its loyalties, but clear and unequivocal in its commitment to struggle with competing identities”.17

The question of a “doubled identity” needs to be addressed at this point because a neat way of bypassing this whole identity problem is to acknowledge Ondaatje’s ‘affiliations’ with both countries by acquiescing to this argument of “stereoscopic vision” and simply labelling him a Canadian-Sri Lankan. Admittedly, this provides one way around the identity problem, but one which is simultaneously too simplistic and potentially unwieldy. Categorizing Ondaatje as Canadian-Sri Lankan ignores two other important constituents of his genealogical identity: the Dutch and the Tamil. A search for identity is a search for self and the self is somewhere apart from physical surroundings. If the result is doubled, the self (which is necessarily single) has not been found and the psyche remains split. It neither
explains the importance nor the role of identity within literature. Examples taken from the works of two other first-class writers—Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul—will clarify just what I mean here.

Rushdie describes himself—quite proudly and openly—as British Indian. He argues quite clearly for a “doubled identity”. But let me examine further the song “Mera Joota Hai Japani” quoted above and extracted, in this case, from Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands*. However, in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie states that it could “almost be Saleem’s theme song”. Since Saleem is the protagonist in *Midnight’s Children*, this reference provides a second instance in his work in which this song has significance. It is also the song sung by another protagonist, Gibreel Farishta at the beginning of *The Satanic Verses*. I have already established the unambiguous sense of national identity projected by the character in the song. That the same song repeats itself in three of Rushdie’s major texts would suggest to me that there is a strong likelihood of the author’s feelings paralleling those of his lead characters in this particular instance.¹⁸ And so while Rushdie, like Ondaatje, is appropriately grateful to his adopted country for the basics of food, shelter and clothing—and, no doubt, opportunity—it is reasonable to assume that his heart, his feeling, lies in his homeland and that perhaps a doubled identity becomes more a matter of ‘political correctness’ than a sense of rootedness. Accordingly I find the term “doubled identity” somewhat fragile and ambiguous. But I query the usefulness of the term in the context of this thesis for another reason, too: namely because it does not adequately explain why and how a writer with a sense of belonging to more than one culture writes.
Rushdie captures the problem of writing from without in this extract from *Imaginary Homelands*:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation... almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

In relating his experiences in attempting to recall Bombay in the 1950s and 60s just prior to the writing of *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie claims:

... it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*... the mundane acquired numinous qualities... I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being ‘elsewhere’. (12)

One of the reasons that identity is so vital to a writer is because it is the groundswell from which he or she draws inspiration. It could thus be argued that an identity that arises from, or is created by, cultural displacement is inevitably more intricate than one which has arisen without that complicating factor. But is this always so?

A possible answer to this question lies in the second example. Here I quote from an address given by Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul in New York in 1992. In an address titled “Our Universal Civilization”, Naipaul recounts the story of a young Javanese boy who wanted to be a poet. An important part of this story is the description of the boy’s mother: an elegant,
learned and refined woman whose “manners were like art; they were Javanese court manners”. Conflict between mother and son occurs when the mother rejects her son’s choice of vocation because in the tradition in which she has been brought up “the epics of her country—and to her they would have been like sacred texts—already existed, had already been written. . . . For the mother, all poetry had already been written” (504). Although the boy has grown up in the same nation and, ostensibly, in the same culture as his mother, a modern education has resulted in a set of values and corresponding ambitions that are vastly different. The distance between his mother and himself is more than a generation gap, more than an educational gap: it is a culture gap. In an analogy he uses to describe the magnitude of the lack of comprehension between the two, Naipaul suggests that it would be like “a devout mother in another culture asking her writer-son what he intended to write next, and getting the reply, ‘I am thinking of adding a book to the Bible.’” And this lack of understanding stems from within the same cultural milieu. Could it be that lack of understanding is all too often attributed to cross-cultural clashes when the real reason lies somewhere else? Thus while cultural displacement obviously generates its own problems, one must be wary that it does not become a handy catch-all for totally unrelated issues.

Take the notion of ‘home’, for example, as used in the sense of a place or country of origin and imbued with connotations that words like ‘domicile’ do not evoke. Recent findings as a result of case studies in the field of social anthropology and the new ethnography are salutary in that they show that this concept is also in a state of a flux. Witness the following statement: “Whilst they [expatriates] may dream of returning ‘home’, they can never go
back to the place they originally left, for the processes of globalization and modernity in which both they and the societies they left behind are caught up, have irredeemably changed them both”.

A seminar discussion with Satendra Nandan and Brij Lal arrives at a similar conclusion. Both Nandan and Lal were in agreement when discussing a return to the villages in which they grew up. “There are all sorts of confluences of influence [within Fiji]. We [no longer] speak the language of the local community . . . there are barriers to cross within our own group . . .”

Thus when discussing the often shattering effects of displacement, it is constructive to bear at the forefront of our minds that the cultures and nations of origin are not immune from change from within. And this is where I suggest that the position of exile may well be privileged in comparison to being displaced in one’s own culture. If one is displaced either as an elder or, as in the case of the story above, as part of the younger generation—one becomes in effect as much a stranger within one’s own country as the exile is in another. This can be a lot harder to bear since this form of alienation attracts less attention, less empathy, less sympathy, than that of the exile. Indeed, the only way to ensure that one’s ‘knowledge’ of a homeland remains intact is to hold on to the illusion. That necessitates leaving and never returning. And never picking up a newspaper.

But the attempt to ‘go back’ is too firmly linked to primal behaviour to be lightly discarded. It is instinctual within the animal kingdom to try to return to what has been left behind, to attempt to recapture whatever it was that one thought he or she had. There are those who
return to the geographical space that used to be called ‘home’ for whom the notion of a homeland can never be erased, however inaccurate. It is a sobering fact that this removal of self from a place of birth with its attendant need to rely on memories as unreliable as fading snapshots, intensifies an experience which may be magnified either by distance or by a real panic that the loss may be permanent. Thus ‘home’, too, is an unstable concept.

However, part of the fluidity of identity is that it, almost by definition, encompasses one’s own world view. In other words, while it is linked both to the ideology of a homeland and a nationality, it can also be separate from both, and closer to one’s perception of oneself. Thus while Rushdie talks of a “doubled identity”, Naipaul uses the predicament of the young Javanese boy as an introduction to a discussion of his own sense of identity, but the conclusion he draws is somewhat different to that of Rushdie. For Naipaul there is a “universal civilization” from which his identity is drawn.

I am not going to attempt to define this civilization. I will only speak of it in a personal way. . . . It is the civilization in which I have been able to practise my vocation as a writer. To be a writer, you need to start with a certain kind of sensibility. The sensibility itself is created, or given direction, by an intellectual atmosphere.

Sometimes an atmosphere can be too refined, a civilization too achieved, too ritualized. [As in the story of the Javanese culture quoted above.] . . . This kind of society [intellectual atmosphere] didn’t exist in Trinidad. It was necessary, therefore, if I was going to be a writer, and live by my books, to travel out to that kind of society where the writing life was possible. This meant, for me at that time, going to England. I was travelling from the periphery, the margin, to what to me was the centre; and it was my hope that, at the centre, room would be made for me. It took time; I was forty—and had been publishing in England for fifteen years—before a book of mine was seriously published in the United States.

But I always recognized, in England in the 1950s, that as someone with a writing vocation there was nowhere else for me to go. And if I have to describe the universal civilization I would say it is the civilization that both gave the prompting and the idea of the literary vocation; and also gave the means to fulfil that prompting; the civilization that enabled me to make that
journey from the periphery to the centre; the civilization that links me not only to this audience but also to that now not-so-young man in Java whose background was as ritualized as my own, and on whom—as on me—the outer world had worked, and given the ambition to write. (507)

It was from within “the centre,” that Naipaul certainly fulfilled his writing ambitions, but leaving his birthplace served other purposes, too.\textsuperscript{23} It not only allowed him to view his Trinidadian past from a distance, but in addition it offered him a passage through “many states of knowledge and self-knowledge”. And although he admits that the question of identity was a “more complicated matter” for him than it had been for his parents and grandparents, he claims, perhaps relative to what he feels he has gained, that “there was no problem for me there. Whole accumulations of scholarship were mine . . . I could carry four or five or six different cultural ideas in my head. I knew about my ancestry and my ancestral culture; I knew about the history of India . . . I knew where I was born. . . . I knew about the journey I would have to make to the centre in order to exercise the vocation I had given myself” (512). In other words, he knows from whence he comes and where he is going.

Thus for Naipaul, nationality is but one component of an identity that is truly encompassing, composed as it is of a rich seam of “knowing” . . . a knowledge of ancestry, history, scholarship, cultures. But it was only by breaking free, moving away—in this case to the metropolis—that allowed Naipaul’s identity to surface by giving free reign to an imagination well-served by his underlying scholarship. This is the “universal civilization” to which he belongs and within which he claims a space.\textsuperscript{24} This is a civilization apart from nation, “an elastic idea . . . [implying] a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit. I don’t imagine my father’s parents would have been able to understand the idea”. The last sentence gives us a clue to as to why Naipaul needed to escape from the confines of his Trinidadian present: the only way in which he was to find the writer within himself was
to carve out another identity. Different from the idea that his father and grandfather had of him and for him; different from Salman Rushdie’s idea of identity, different again from that of Ondaatje. And different from Satendra Nandan, whose identity stems from within, in that Naipaul claims an identity from without, from the universal.

Accordingly, it is reasonable to conclude that identity is a fluid concept, dependent to a certain extent on individual levels of self-esteem and running in tandem with—influenced by but detached from—a sense of home and of nation. While in itself this contention does not yet present an answer to what I am exploring here—the reason for the apparent confusion of identity Ondaatje presents within *Running in the Family*—it paves the way for other assertions.

Ondaatje is a consummate writer and storyteller, an author whose textual messages—and even the gaps contained therein—are more likely to be consciously constructed than otherwise. Although it could be said that there is considerable thematic ambiguity in his works, I suggest that this is more deliberate than otherwise. Accordingly, I want to return to the passage analysed earlier. The point that I want to stress is that by placing himself within the half-light of breaking day, Ondaatje stresses an ambivalence between light and dark. There is no real conclusion to *Running in the Family*. No neat ending. It is a work in progress. “‘You must get this book right,’ my brother tells me, ‘You can only write it once.’ But the book again is incomplete.” As readers, we are left to form our own conclusion, to produce our own meanings. This is what Barthes would call a scriptible or “writerly text”, a text which is not a product, but a production which calls as much upon the imagination of the reader as the writer and becomes a “perpetual present”.26
Despite constantly shifting the position from which he writes (indicative of what Homi Bhabha has called “the politics of polarity”), in the final moments of Running in the Family, Ondaatje articulates a clear and unambiguous sense of identity in that the reader is left in no doubt that he belongs to the landscape he describes. But from a distance, he claims emotional attachment to two major, very different, nations. Although there is an apparent paradox contained in the distancing of himself from his birth land in one chapter and reclaiming it in the next, I suggest that Ondaatje is too competent a writer to write himself into a contradiction without good reason.

As in any discussion of representation, it becomes necessary to dig beneath the referential surface. Having rejected the notion of doubled identity as inadequate for my purpose here, and while acknowledging that an inevitable fluidity informs and distorts the concept of identity inextricably linked as it is to the other equally unstable concepts of nation and perception, I need again to turn to theoretical intervention, although this method of reasoning may well have its practical application in the way we approach or interpret literature of this transnational nature.

Accordingly, this is the juncture at which I wish to reintroduce the theory Homi Bhabha calls the “Third Space” which concerns the space between the “You” and the “I” implicit in any literary enterprise. Although this was discussed in some detail in chapter one, a reiteration of the main principles is useful here.
This “Third Space of enunciations” carries a cultural and historical dimension which stands as a precondition for the articulation of cultural difference. Thus the Third Space is the in-between or the interstices responsible for carrying the burden of the meaning of culture. It is within this space that Ondaatje allows himself the liberty to articulate this “freedom from”. Thus the points of apparent disjuncture within the text are his moment of “dialectical reorganization”, or reconstruction. It is his own recognition of himself, of his moment in time and space, of his ‘other’. It is the moment, or the gap, of articulation itself, the collapse of linear time and the rolling of the past into the present. Applying it to the text in question involves recognizing that the process of interpretation is ambivalent and forever changing.

In other words:

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. The pronominal I of the proposition cannot be made to address—in its own words—the subject of enunciation, for this is not personable, but remains a spatial relation within the schemata and strategies of discourse. The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other . . . .

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. In other words, the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson so perceptively describes as being written in homogeneous, serial [sic] time. (The Location of Culture, 36-7)27

Thus one possible answer to Ondaatje’s apparent contradictions suggests that these are nothing other than his expression of a hybrid identity, “caught in the discontinuous time of
translation and negotiation”, the split-space of enunciation. In this “‘politics of difference’
the ‘other’ is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse,
when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously ‘between ourselves’”.28 In other
words, by “exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as
the others of our selves” (The Location of Culture, 38-9).

In this instance, theoretical reasoning has produced a practical answer. It has opened the
path to a further possibility, to “conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the
exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but in the inscription and
articulation of culture’s hybridity. To this end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’—the
cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of
the meaning of culture” (38).29

Acknowledging the contradiction at the site of enunciation suggests a natural ambivalence
and intertextual relationship between the nation of origin and Western culture. Thus a
hybrid identity could be asserted for Ondaatje—which allows him the freedom to be
Sinhalese and Canadian and Dutch and Tamil—for in fact he cannot be the one or even a
combination of two while ignoring the other elements of the colonial background—of the
‘other’ selves—that he clearly sees as Running in the Family.

Plainly, then, this search for an identity for this writer is not pure pedantry. The debate with
which I started this chapter—the attempt to assign an identity to Ondaatje—has a practical
result in that it offers one resolution to a paradox within a critically acclaimed text of
literature. The celebratory closure of his narrative could thus be seen as a part of this
process of understanding that this moment of transit has neither past nor present, nor future. It just is. Ondaatje lives in the “unhomely” world of Morrison’s *Beloved* which defies outdated ideas of cultural designation. He ‘belongs’ in Sri Lanka just as he does in Canada. He ‘belongs’ to the colonial invaders, just as he does to the Tamil workers. As Bhabha states, “The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other . . .” Ondaatje waits in the wings of “homogeneous, empty time” where moments are created by the rhythm of the fan which lends neither a past nor a present to the scene, but instead a sense of simultaneity. Thus, it follows, that the apparent contradiction with which I started this chapter resolves itself. In spite of, or perhaps because of, what is often regarded as his confused and confusing history, Ondaatje’s ancestry renders him simultaneously ‘agent’ and ‘victim’ of colonial hegemony. But lest we think such a mixed genealogy is purely a product of modernity, we should consider an opinion of nineteenth-century Oriental philologist Ernest Renan in his essay “What is a Nation?”

The truth is that there is no pure race… The noblest countries, England, France, and Italy, are those where the blood is the most mixed. Is Germany an exception in this respect? Is it a purely Germanic country? This is a complete illusion. The whole of the south was once Gallic; the whole of the east, from the river Elbe on, is Slav. . . . The zoological origins of humanity are massively prior to the origins of culture, civilization, and language. The primitive Aryan, primitive Semitic, and primitive Touranian groups had no physiological unity. These groupings are historical facts, which took place in a particular epoch, perhaps 15,000 or 20,000 years ago . . . A Frenchman is neither a Gaul, nor a Frank, nor a Burgundian. . . . Race is something which is made and unmade . . . and the leading nations of Europe are nations of essentially mixed blood. (*Nation and Narration*, 14-5)

If we accept the premise that we are all hybrids in one form or another—in many cases not only blends of nationalities, but also of families, religions, cultures and philosophical or belief systems—the process of globalization with its increasingly sophisticated communication systems will only increase that trend. So far as this civilization is
concerned: could it be said that the mythological symbolism of the Tower of Babel in the grand narrative of Western institutionalized religion is crumbling?

**Representing the unrepresentable**

Although a full investigation into the issues of representation is beyond the scope of this thesis, Edward Said’s insistence on the role that this notion plays in Western works about the East demands an exploration of the concept inasmuch as it affects the writers and writing under analysis. Having established a hybrid identity for Ondaatje and, in initial exploration, seen the effect this sense of identity imposes on a small segment of his writing in the final paragraphs of *Running in the Family*, I need at this juncture to look more directly at some of the theoretical assumptions that underlie the issues of representation before examining Ondaatje’s texts in more detail.

I mentioned earlier that I considered Ondaatje’s text to be “writerly”. Since a writerly text is one way of representing the world, I would like now to rehearse some of the possibilities inherent in that term. At the risk of going over familiar ground, I first return to Barthes and his insistence that the writerly text acknowledges the essentially shifting characteristic of representation by leaving the act of interpretation to the reader.\(^{31}\) According to this theory, no longer is the “novel bound by the realities and limitations of the actual world and the laws of probability”.\(^{32}\) No longer is it limited to realism. To the contrary, the contemporary novel portrays an almost celebratory lack of form or structure which results in a merging of fictive constructs with what once was categorized as non-fiction, the neatly labelled genres of biography, memoir and history. And so while the act of *representing* continues to demand both representer and represented—or subject and object—giving rise to an
inevitable transaction between the two that is impossible to fix in stasis, the determinant(s) of meaning is supplied by a third party, the reader, the only boundary now being the reader’s imagination. This is, in essence, what Barthes asserts in **S/Z** when he contrasts the “writerly” text with the “readerly” which for him is the “classic” or conventional text.\(^{33}\) Thus, to use examples from this thesis, Browne’s *A Year Amongst the Persians* might be classified as a readerly text in that, “By participating in the need to set forth the *end* of every action (conclusion, interruption, closure, dénouement), [it openly] declares itself to be historical” (52). In contrast, Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* is writerly in that there is no clear beginning nor end, no homogeneity, no real linearity.\(^{34}\) The reader is invited to participate in the construction of the text and in the making of meaning. In Barthesian terms, one methodology denotes, the other connotes.\(^{35}\) Thus “… the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). In other words, there are no final, no official, no “authorized”, meanings. All becomes subject to reader interpretation.

Barthes’ theories are persuasive in making meaning of contemporary texts and aptly describe the structure of Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* which I will address at greater length later. But as a method of engaging with the problematic of representation, his concentration on reader as producer lacks balance. I therefore want to engage the notion of representation from another angle: that of *mis*representation. This approach assumes a certain degree of deliberation in misrepresentation that is not present in either the *lisible* or the *scriptible*. The difference is that while both the writerly and the readerly in their contrasting ways strive towards a truth—in that for the writerly it is the truths that are produced by or which resonate with the reader, while for the readerly, it is the writer’s
absolute closure of meaning as in: *this is how it was* or the definitive biblical *it is writ*—misrepresentation returns a measure of authority, and therefore control, to the writer.\textsuperscript{36} In other words, as creator of a work, one can *choose* to misrepresent an event, a scene, a situation, or one can do so unconsciously. But either way—conscious or unconscious—there is a gap between what is and what is not. It leaves the writer, his or her motives, and the work, as exposed as any theory of deconstruction could do.

Let me turn to a work of fiction to clarify my point. In Alex Miller’s *The Sitters,*\textsuperscript{37} the artist-protagonist claims with some insistence:

> Portraiture is the art of misrepresentation. It’s the art of unlikeness. That’s why it’s so difficult. . . . You’ve got to avoid the authority of the likeness. . . . You’ve got to reach into the dark and touch something else. The problem is always to visualize the person. Portraiture is an act of faith. In portraiture it’s the shy beast you’re after not the mask. . . . The mistake we make, to look for the perfect image. . . . The longing for a fixed truth resident behind the reality we’ve brought into being ourselves. . . . It takes two to make a portrait. And one of them’s always yourself. (38-40)\textsuperscript{38}

In other words, what Miller is saying is that the production of the work of art—a portrait, a book, a piece of sculpture—is as much a journey for the artist as it is for the reader and any representation carries an inevitable imprint of its creator. As Miller’s protagonist insists, “The portrait’s always the portrait of the artist” (71). Thus, in a subversion of its own foundational truth, *mis*representation can in effect be closer to the ‘real’ than representation, but the truth it uncovers becomes the truth of the creator, of the author or the artist. Thus the writer is returned to the position of producer of the text. Although this line of reasoning does not preclude the voyeur or reader standing as the ultimate producer or arbiter of meaning, neither of Barthes’ categories—*lisible* nor *scriptible*—allows for this mimetic
relationship between subject (writer) and market (reader)—a Marxist “exchange”—which
domines the object (commodity) which is never allowed to constitute itself fully.

In an extension of what Miller is saying above, Slavoj Žižek draws together Hegelian and
Lacanian modes of thought to arrive at a anti-descriptivist conclusion: namely, that Miller’s
“shy beast”, “the ideological distortion”, is written into the “very essence” of the mask itself
(28). In other words:

... ideology is not simply a ‘false consciousness’, an illusory representation
of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as
‘ideological’—‘ideological’ is a social reality whose very existence implies
the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence—that is, the social
effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals ’do
not know what they are doing’. . . . [O]ne of its possible definitions would
also be a ‘formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-
knowledge on the part of the subject’: the subject can ‘enjoy his symptom’
only in so far as its logic escapes him – the measure of the success of its
interpretation is precisely its dissolution. (21)

Interestingly, this last observation of Žižek’s precisely describes the concept contained in
the allegory of Plato’s cave where the illusion is real until knowledge intervenes. 40

Again in Midnight’s Children, Rushdie has Saleem say essentially the same thing: “Suppose
yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up . . . until
your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars’ faces dissolve into
dancing grains; tiny details assume grotesque proportions and it becomes clear that the
illusion itself is reality” (Imaginary Homelands, 13).
Writers, philosophers and critics—as diverse as Barthes, Žižek, Miller, Rushdie, Plato—all have different ways of arriving at what is, in essence, the same conclusion with regard to the hermeneutic possibilities inherent in the text. Regardless of whether the “producer” of the text is reader or writer, the product itself (the text) is never allowed to constitute, or represent, itself fully. It remains in a state of flux. Illusion may be reality, but it is only insofar as it complies with the condition of “non-knowledge”.

Not only is it plain that there is no such thing as “objective reality”, but it is impossible not to agree with critics like Anindyo Roy when they insist clearly and categorically that the notion of representation in terms of objective depiction is a failure.41

However, while in terms of its fallibility it may be a poor tool for objective portrayal, nonetheless representation is the only tool we have for the depiction of anything at all. Without attempts by ancestral and indigenous groups to represent what they considered important to their culture on cave walls or around the girths of vases, on tablets or walls of stone or papyrus, our histories would be even more fragmented than they already are. Specifically, ‘other’ and ‘informant’ Ondaatje may be, but Running in the Family gives us a picture of a pre-Independent Ceylon we would not otherwise have.

To this juncture, I have been discussing representation—and misrepresentation—in terms of a perfect world of neutral power relations, assuming, too, an impartiality in Ondaatje’s portrayal of past Ceylon and present-day Sri Lanka. I have suggested that while representation is most often used as a means for portraying a likeness, misrepresentation is a more deliberate effort to arrive at an essence, and that works of fiction can be described as
writerly or readerly in the way they portray the world, respectively leaving more or less for
the reader to make of the text. But what happens to the notion of representation when it
becomes an apparatus for control? One only has to bring to mind the symbolic
representations of power—in the form of the swastika, for example, or Foucault’s
panopticon—for the notion to take on a more chilling perspective.

Representation’s inevitable relationship with power is the conclusion that Edward Said
draws in his efforts to define the problematic that stands at the core of his Orientalist
concerns. Reflecting on the inability of representation to imitate the “truth”, he concedes
that “the idea of representation is a theatrical one” in that it reaches for the dramatic in its
turn of phrase or choice of subject. But the critical thrust of his argument here is his
insistence that “the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral
fact . . . [and that the] principal product of this exteriority is of course representation . . .”
(Orientalism, 21). Said’s concern, of course, is that the dramatic principles that inform
both the concept of representation and the act of representing will always render any
attempt at representation dubious. Accordingly, it will always be an act of power within
postcolonial discourse and, as such, an infringement of the rights of the indigenous party or,
in the case of Said’s specific discourse, the rights of the Oriental.

When a non-native attempts to write or describe a situation or a people within a country not
his own, Said claims that inevitability the audience will be presented with “a highly
artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient”. In
this way, bearing in mind that language itself is “a highly organized and encoded system
the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as ‘the Orient’” (21).43

In other words, following the line of Said’s argument, Browne’s depiction of Persia is suspect primarily because Browne was an Orientalist and as such his account is “premised upon exteriority . . . on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orients, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West” (21). It is a Saidian tendency to extrapolate from the general to the specific and, as I have already shown, the parameters of Said’s discourse make it difficult for anyone to escape the “orientalist” tag. Thus it would follow that, deconstructed from within the discourse Said has fashioned, Browne’s representation is not only inevitably subjective, but subtly presented with imperialistic hegemonic designs.44

But what about the transnational author? What about the writer who can no longer claim the land of his birth and early upbringing as his normal place of abode, but returns to talk to the natives of that land, to uncover and collate evidence in the form of documentation and interviews, and then departs in possession of the means to write up this information in such a way that it will appeal to an established Western readership? Is not he or she equally culpable of just the point that Said is making? Is this form of writing not exactly just what Said fears: the appropriation and use of an indigenous knowledge by another party? Is this not what upset the Tlingits, the American Indians who objected to their “history” and “law” being displayed as “art” and “artifacts” by the Portland Art Museum?45

More specifically, when Michael Ondaatje writes what is ostensibly an autobiography from the distance of his adopted country about the country of his birth, is he guilty of a late-
twentieth-century form of “orientalism”? What is it about the way in which he represents Sri Lanka that suggests an exteriority “governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient [in this case, Sri Lanka] could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and faute de mieux, for the poor Orient” (21)? In other words, how does Ondaatje portray Sri Lanka? Or would Said’s objection lie not in how he represents his subject, but in the very fact and act of his so-doing? Further, what does this representation say about the author, about the expatriate condition and about literature itself? And, finally, how much basis is there in Arun Mukherjee’s argument that “Ondaatje, coming from a Third World country with a colonial past, does not write about his otherness. . . . [T]here is no trauma of uprooting evident in his poetry; nor is there a need for redefinition in a new context; the subjects that preoccupy so many immigrant writers” (187)?

In an endeavour to answer these questions, I shall return to Ondaatje’s account of family and background in early Ceylon contained in the miscellany of memories he calls Running in the Family. I need to look first at the structure of this book and what informs that structure as well as to ask whether it works as a piece of writing.

The first point I wish to make about Running in the Family challenges much existing critical comment about this text. More than one reviewer has used the phrase “straddles fiction and autobiography” in an attempt to typecast the work, but as I have already suggested, this work is typically contemporary in that it defies attempts to label it in such a simplistic manner. Indeed, what it is not is autobiography since we learn very little that could be said to be ‘factual’, useful or insightful about the life of Michael Ondaatje beyond his familial
connections and a handful of anecdotal memories of a childhood cut short by early entry into an adult world at the age of eleven. Not here the usual writer’s ‘secrets’ spilled, nor the clarity of a traditional linear history. Instead, this text offers a jumble of prose, poetry and journal entries presented as a medley of memories, experiences, impressions, notes and anecdotes which are interspersed, seemingly at random, with historical references and incidents which, in turn, sit alongside poems about Sri Lankan village life and quotes from other writers and poets. There is a breathlessness about the rapid pace with which the writer switches from landscape to landscape. It lacks any real attempts at organization, a storyline, a conclusion, but most of all it lacks the lyrical prose of his other works. Much is made by critics about the notion of ‘running’ in *Running in the Family* and the multiplicity of meaning encapsulated within the title suggesting that the narrative is as much about running ‘in’ as it is about running ‘to’ or ‘from’ or ‘against’, symbolizing continual, but irresolute, motion. In addition to the running to and from, there is a kind of running on the spot punctuated by a self-centred return again and again to the writer himself.

It is pertinent to ask at this point just what Michael Ondaatje was hoping to achieve with this work. In other words, is this no more than a random assortment of memories liberally embellished with fiction, a collection of anecdotes which bears little resemblance to the corpus of his writing, particularly the prose component? Certainly, as an epigrammatic salute or “gesture” to an unavailable father it works as a son’s attempt to connect, albeit posthumously, with a man who was little more than a family figurehead. But in the postcolonial context of my work here, I am concerned with a different type of exteriority, the exteriority that Said has identified, the exteriority that is an inevitable component of hybridity, and that which Mukherjee perceives in the silence with which she claims
Ondaatje treats his “otherness”. What effect does this geographical distancing have on the way in which this writer represents his birth-land?

Thus if I expand on the notion of running in this text, it becomes more than just a characteristic of the work. In addition, the sense of apprehension (running ‘away’, running ‘back’) encoded in the word suggests that it defines the rationale for writing the book. Within this rationale lies the social agency of the author, because while this text ostensibly serves the purpose of providing a family ‘portrait’ and a memorial to Ondaatje’s father, the underlying message is a search for identity which necessitates, encapsulated again within that search, a portrait of Sri Lanka as a fatherland. I repeat an earlier quotation: “But the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues.”

This returns me to Ondaatje’s representation of Sri Lanka, an issue on which his critics are quite vocal and need to be acknowledged. For example, Arun Mukherjee makes much of Ondaatje’s lack of engagement with the political and social realities of Sri Lanka while Kanaganayakam claims that his attempts at representation in Running in the Family are an outright failure (40).

First Mukherjee’s concerns with regard to Ondaatje’s “otherness” need to be addressed and I have two main points to make in this regard. To begin with—although she does not make it clear in which society she locates him as “other” (Canadian or Sri Lankan), her labelling of Ondaatje as an “immigrant writer” would suggest that she connects his “otherness” to the Canadian society in which he resides and that she resents the degree of assimilation that
Ondaatje has adopted. Like Maxine Hong Kingston, like Amy Tan, for Mukherjee, Ondaatje must set himself apart as the “immigrant writer”.48 Secondly, there is a possibility that Mukherjee’s apprehension in this respect comes from a deeper fear: a dread of a betrayal similar to that we observe underpinning the emotion in Said’s work. As a field of study, postcolonialism is to a fairly significant extent dependent on writers from previously colonized countries acknowledging imperial domination and “writing back to the centre” in terms of not forgetting the lessons of the past. Indeed, Patrick Brantlinger goes further. He maintains that a cultural “crisis occurs when an established system of representation is challenged by increasing numbers of people as not representing or as misrepresenting significant aspects of social experience”.49 In other words, a certain amount of vigilance is required to keep alive the differences—\textit{la différence}— that stand at the core of postcolonial discourse for fear that, through apathy, we allow ourselves to slip backwards into an insidious re-absorption of Eurocentrism and a return to imperialistic practices in the form of a neo-colonialism that waits just around the corner.50

While it is not difficult to understand Mukherjee’s disquiet in this respect in that it is well-recognised that creative writers are capable of offering keen and influential accounts of the postcolonial condition, and are thus in one of the best positions to endorse the discourse, all the same I think she is guilty of an essentialist approach. The situation is a great deal more complicated than she allows on the one hand although, paradoxically, correspondingly simpler on the other. As I have already suggested, within the hybrid status I have already established for Ondaatje is inscribed a permanent ‘otherness’. In both a physical and a mental sense, wherever he goes, whatever society he was, is, or will be, part of, he will always be ‘other’. Ondaatje’s case is further complicated by Sri Lanka’s own background of
settlement by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English, not to mention local incursions and race-related eruptions. But the paradox of growing up as ‘other’, always being ‘other’ is that at some point—once the person accepts his or her own lack of belonging—it ceases to matter. Thus ‘exteriority’ becomes naturalized to the point at which it not only becomes a way of life, but where it also becomes the only way of living. In the interview I referred to earlier, Ondaatje referred to his sense of comfort or assimilation within Canadian society. This is Ondaatje’s answer to the diaspora. But this need not necessarily constitute betrayal of or within the discourse. To the contrary, if indeed, as Homi Bhabha claims, hybridity provides a counter-narrative to the traditional canon, then the release of Ondaatje’s work into mainstream discourse does in itself provide a disruption to the narrative of colonial power.

Kanaganayakam, on the other hand, ascribes a nationalism to Ondaatje that the writer himself fails to assert. In his essay, “A Trick With a Glass”, Kanaganayakam claims that Ondaatje “abandons a wonderful opportunity to assert a much-needed sense of belonging” (40-1).51 But the question must be asked: “much-needed” on whose part? Is Kanaganayakam presuming that Ondaatje—who has already expressed his ambivalence in respect of his status of “belonging”—needs this reassurance? Or is it the narrative itself that Kanaganayakam feels would be improved by a stronger sense of nationalistic fervour?52

The answer, I think, lies in the structure of Ondaatje’s text. I suggest that the form of this narrative—its apparently chaotic, splintered arrangement—mirrors not only the nation it describes but also the composite nationality and hybrid identity of its author.53
Further, I suggest that it is precisely by the use of this ostensibly confusing medley of images that Ondaatje’s background is represented, or reflected, in and by the structure of this text. If it appears at times disjointed—if it ducks, dives and weaves its way through a host of anecdotal data, shot through with historical references juxtaposed with pieces of poetry, the whole structure undermining itself, rebuilding, collapsing—the disorganization inherent this structure is in itself representative of the way in which he imagines and thus reconstructs his childhood and his family and his own difficulties with regard to nationality.\textsuperscript{54}

While Kanaganayakam’s main criticism of Ondaatje’s text in this essay is aimed at its lack of realism, its failure to “participate actively in the referential” (39), it is precisely this lack of engagement with the Real that is its strength, that gives this text its writerly status in allowing the reader to engage with the nuances and possibilities within the narrative. This is not to say that the text is free of social agency. Indeed, it is those moments within the text when Ondaatje’s attempts to represent the Real become credible that should signal the alert in terms of the “conditions of possibility” that Žižek claims exist in any attempt at objectivity. Accordingly, it is at this point I will consider the social agency that could be said to inform all objectivism (Žižek, xiii).

In fact, in this book the entire issue of representation is “fraught with questions that emerge out of a complex network of negotiations between writing, reading, and the maintenance or subversion of power” (Heble, 187). This representation or misrepresentation takes the form of preoccupations which drive some significant agencies operating within his texts which are linked to the issues that specifically concern this thesis: the instances that might
constitute the ‘exotic’ within his narratives and the notion of celebratory writing which needs to be examined in relation not only to *Running in the Family* but Ondaatje’s prose work in general. In this respect, I would like to examine the back-jacket reviews of Ondaatje’s book by acclaimed writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Margaret Atwood.

In contrast to Ondaatje, Kingston styles herself as an “immigrant writer” by virtue of the fact that all her novels are built on a retrospective look at a homeland through the eyes of her Chinese mother. An excerpt from her review of Ondaatje’s text asserts: “*Running in the Family* is a beautiful, *luscious* book. Michael Ondaatje has depicted his *extraordinary* family, who delighted in masks and costumes and *love affairs* that ‘rainbowed over marriages’ in a kind of language that makes *glory* of their lives. He has gone on a poet’s journey to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and the reader who travels with him enters a *truly magical* world”. The language Margaret Atwood uses in her review is similarly hyperbolic: “Michael Ondaatje is here at his agile and evocative best. His latest book is an account of an *exotic* and *outrageous* family, a *true* story with all the most exciting qualities of fiction. Brightly coloured, *sweet and painful*, bloody-minded and *otherworldly*, it achieves the status of *legend*” (back jacket, Picador 1984 edition; all my emphases in both quotations).

Why is it that critics and reviewers, be they writers, journalists or judges, feel they have to outdo the writers themselves in the language they use to critique the releases they are asked to review? Even allowing for the normal back-jacket hype, ostensibly this is what has happened here. Words and phrases like “rainbowed over”, “glory of their lives”, “truly magical”, “sweet and painful” and “otherworldly” represent the type of ‘exotic’ writing that Said abhors, adjectives that would be more at home in *Arabian Nights*. Further, taken in
their entirety, neither of the over-written paragraphs quoted above are representative examples of the type of language that Kingston and Atwood normally use. This is important because if they adequately describe what the reader might expect from between the covers of this book, this suggests a similarly flamboyant style of writing on Ondaatje’s part which leads to a host of questions. How, for instance, does Ondaatje represent the Ceylon of his childhood against the Sri Lanka of his cultural maturity? How writerly is this work in its methodology? In other words, does the writerly, in its efforts to avoid direct representation, hint at the exotic?

As in these quotations: “My grandmother died in the blue arms of a jacaranda tree. She could read thunder” (113). Or, “During our visit to the jungle, while we slept on the verandah at 3 a.m., night would be suddenly alive with disturbed peacocks. A casual movement from one of them roosting in the trees would waken them all and, so fussing, sounding like branches full of cats, they would weep weep loud into the night” (136). Or within the confines of “orientalist” discourse, it could mean offering up the mysteries of the East “plain for and to the West” as in this description of the Sinhalese alphabet:

I still believe the most beautiful alphabet was created by the Sinhalese. The insect of ink curves into a shape that is almost sickle, spoon, eyelid. The letters are washed blunt glass which betray no jaggedness. Sanskrit was governed by verticals, but its sharp grid features were not possible in Ceylon. Here the Ola leaves which people wrote on were too brittle. A straight line would cut apart the leaf and so a curling alphabet was derived from its Indian cousin. Moon coconut. The bones of a lover’s spine. (83)
The dramatic intensity and economical beauty of such writing is pure Ondaatje in that similar paragraphs can be excerpted from any of his works. However, there is no denying the fact that this type of description, albeit lacking the saccharined phrases of the two reviewers I have just quoted, still constitutes a theatrical representation of Ceylon that could be construed or read as a “highly artificial enactment” (*Orientalism*, 21). Note the density of the figurative language: the imagery, the similes and the multiplicity of metaphorical references in phrases like “blue arms”, “branches full of cats”, “weep weep”, “sickle, spoon, eyelid”, “washed blunt glass”, “bones of a lover’s spine”. Note, too, the style: Sentences reduced to short phrases, a sparseness of actual words which, paradoxically, increases the possibility of meaning. It takes no large leap of imagination to claim that the subject matter of this selective sample—family (aunt), landscape (jungle), alphabet (language)—along with the succinct style in which it is rendered and the softness of the descriptive language together suggest an intimacy which in turn signifies a sense of relationship that also signals possession. A writerly text this may be but, quite plainly, it is romanticized and it is in this respect that Ondaatje fall precisely into the trap Said describes in *Orientalism*: “The evidence is found just as prominently in the so-called truthful text (histories, philological analyses, political treatises) as in the avowedly artistic (i.e., openly imaginative) text. The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, not the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original” (21).

If Said’s quotation is read against excerpts of Ondaatje’s quoted earlier, it could be argued that Ondaatje not only lays claim to the land and its traditions, but also assumes the intellectual authority that lies at the basis of Said’s “orientalist” argument.
There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed. All these attributes of authority apply to Orientalism . . . (19-20)

I think it is clear from the textual examples I have provided that some of the questions posed earlier in this chapter can now be answered. It is plain that in these examples, particularly in that of his description of the Sinhalese alphabet, Ondaatje has not only re-presented the East, but additionally he has taken it upon himself to speak on behalf of the East. Not only this, but the conscious artificiality of the way in which the language is romanticized to produce a persuasive tone, the choice of traditional topic, the uses of such words as “sickle”, “moon”, “lover” and “coconut” to paint a word picture of the Orient is just the sort of cultural representation that brings forth “orientalist” accusations from Said. In this specific instance, it is obvious that by the use of such gratuitous language which re-informs the reader by re-casting an image of something as basic as an alphabet and its letters, it certainly could be argued that Ondaatje has displaced or made supererogatory “the real thing”, “the sublime object”, the taken-for-granted characters of the Sinhalese script, a metaphor in this case, for Sri Lanka itself.

And these are, of course, not the only instances. By idealizing and romanticizing his place of birth, Ondaatje’s book not “re-creates” Sri Lanka from the alphabet upwards, but the entire structure with its careful juxtaposition of prose and poetry, family and national history, of the catastrophic and the euphoric, lends to the text a sense of immediacy and
dramatic tension. *Running in the Family* is theatre on the page, prose drama, the type of artificial representation that lies at the centre of Said’s calls of “orientalism” and solicits the type of reviews discussed earlier. This is exotic writing at its most blatant: responsible for the correspondingly extravagant language in the reviews and, it must be admitted, useful in attracting a readership.

At this point, it becomes clear that on the basis of the evidence contained in *Running in the Family*, there appears to be no question that—rightly or wrongly—Ondaatje writes from both sides of the cultural divide. On the one hand, he is the informant making full use of his birthright in his perceptions and presumptions about Sri Lanka; on the other, critics are vocal in their claim that he maintains a distance from the political and cultural affairs of the country that equally implies an exteriority.

Thus it must be admitted that Ondaatje is indicted on two counts of “orientalist” writing: not only is he the native informant but additionally, in that it is “premised upon exteriority”, he provides an account that “. . . does the job [of representation], for the West, and faute de mieux, for the poor Orient” (21).

**Ondaatje and empire**

So far I have been preoccupied in ascribing a form of cultural identity to Ondaatje as a means of adjudging how he locates himself in terms of “writing the Orient”, but I have not yet fully addressed his attitude towards empire and the political domination of Sri Lanka, an issue almost, but not quite, inseparable from that of the cultural appropriation I have been discussing. Among the criticisms levied at Ondaatje are those that are directed at the lack of
either political or cultural “involvement” in his home of origin. In their critical engagement with *Running in the Family*, Chelva Kanaganayakam and Arun Mukherjee among others profess their disappointment at Ondaatje’s lack of interest in, or avoidance of, political and cultural issues in this work. Specifically, Mukherjee’s claim that Ondaatje “does not get drawn into the acts of living, which involves the need to deal with the burning issues of his time” needs to be addressed.

At first it seems difficult to refute these claims: ostensibly, at least, the book is unashamedly self-centred, although I think the accusations of solipsism go too far. But there are, however, two major mitigating factors which should be aired in Ondaatje’s defence: namely that although it is tempting to suggest that these particular concerns were not the province of this narrative, a close political reading of the text suggests otherwise; and, secondly, that the omission with regard to the contemporary problems Sri Lanka faces was subsequently redressed in Ondaatje’s latest novel *Anil’s Ghost*, a narrative almost exclusively concerned with the political/cultural factioning in Sri Lanka in the 1980s and early 1990s.

While discussion or acknowledgement of empire does not at first appear to loom large in this text—certainly, in comparison with Woolf’s single-minded emphasis, it is all but missing—there are significant moments in the narrative that hint at a darker side to the exotic, a disgust of the “foreigner” within himself, and subtle—and sometimes not-so-subtle—references to authority figures, power structures and European domination of the East. Sometimes these ‘moments’ become short chapters. Take, for example, the section headed “Don’t talk to me about Matisse”, which encompasses nearly a quarter of the book, and which contain the tensions somehow missed by many critics. It is in the first lines of a
chapter in this section—titled “The Karapothas” and headed by epigrammatic and derogatory quotations from nineteenth and early-twentieth-century travellers to Ceylon (the traditional Orientalists)—that Ondaatje states, “I sit in a house on Buller’s Road. I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (79). Later in this chapter, he enlarges on the status of the early “foreigners”—those other “foreigners”—in Ceylon:

Ceylon always did have too many foreigners . . . the ‘Karapothas’ as my niece calls them—the beetles with white spots who never grew ancient here, who stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the “inquisitive natives” and left. They came originally and overpowered the land obsessive for something as delicate as the smell of cinnamon. Becoming wealthy with spices. When ships were still approaching, ten miles out at sea, captains would spill cinnamon onto the deck and invite passengers on board to smell Ceylon before the island even came into view . . . This island was a paradise to be sacked . . .

[But the] island hid its knowledge. Intricate arts and customs and religious ceremonies moved inland away from the new cities. Only Robert Knox, held captive by a Kandyan king for twenty years, wrote of the island well, learning its traditions. Apart from Knox, and later Leonard Woolf in his novel, A Village in the Jungle, very few foreigners truly knew where they were. (80-3)

The chapter heading, “The Karapothas”, named after the white-spotted beetles who came, “overpowered the land” and just as abruptly left—metonymically associated with foreigners and thus a metaphor for colonialism—is a strong indictment of imperialism in itself. In the text, the strength of words like “obsessive” juxtaposed with “delicate” again illuminates the power structure: the European colonization of Ceylon. The notion of “spices”, too, is inseparable from the realities of trade and plunder. As we read, we become aware of significant modulations in the way in which Ondaatje uses the language. Tension rises with changes of tense and in the passage excerpted above, the tense changes three times in as many sentences—representing the vulnerability of an island represented in its past, present and future as “a paradise to be sacked . . .”
Another significant insight into the anti-imperialist constituent of this text comes from Ajay Heble. In a discussion of Linda Hutcheon’s coinage of the term “ex-centricity”—or the state of being “outside the centre in terms of race, nationality, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, class, or canonization”—he suggests that Ondaatje’s return to Sri Lanka is prompted by “the recognition that he himself is the other” (189). He asserts that Ondaatje is not so much trying to find a lost past as he is “attempting to provide us with a new direction for our reflections on the meaning of postcolonial belonging” and observes, along with other critics, a “tenuousness” in the author’s relationship with Sri Lanka (188-9). An interrogation of this site of interaction—“the state of being ‘different’ in a dominant culture”—forms part of Heble’s response to Mukherjee and Kanaganayakam and is designed to show the manner in which this text, rather than avoiding “burning issues” instead decides to negotiate the conditions of cultural representation in what could be described as a manner which, while undeniably circuitous, is also convincing. While Heble’s essay “Rumours of Topography” deserves to be read in its entirety for a fully rounded explanation of the number of well-argued points he raises, in terms of foregrounding the cultural and political subtleties within the text, one argument stands above the rest. In this instance, Heble claims:

The mechanism that perhaps best enables us to appreciate the cultural politics of Running in the Family is lodged in the complex interplay between three points of orientation: the syncretism of Ondaatje’s forebears; the excerpts from a poem by Wikkramasinha (85-6), and the poems Ondaatje fashions in response. Wikkramasinha’s [poem] “Don’t Talk to Me about Matisse” raises important questions about the politics of cultural representation. Arguing that acts of cultural appropriation replicate and are, indeed, inseparable from systems of political domination, the poem offers a trenchant critique not only of European representations of non-Western culture but also of a government that is perceived to have ruthlessly suppressed the spirit of a potential revolution: “to our remote/villages the painters came, and our white-washed/mud-huts were splattered with gunfire” (86). Painting . . . becomes a metaphor for the murder of the indigenous people of Sri Lanka and adds force to an earlier passage, in which Ondaatje speaks of the whitewashing (my emphasis in this instance) of the imprisoned insurgents’ poetry . . . .(194-5)
I would like to add a further observation to the points that Heble makes here. If, indeed as I have claimed, Ondaatje is not only aware that he is exterior to Sri Lanka, but uncomfortable with this exteriority, I suggest that the issues Heble raises attest to Ondaatje’s uneasiness in this respect. While Heble uses the phrase “cultural appropriation” in relation to the referential in Matisse’s art, I have used the term to refer to Ondaatje’s act in writing about the culture from the hybrid position of being an informant on the one hand and a raider on the other. If a figure like Matisse can be held accountable for representing what is not his to represent, then so can Ondaatje. But there is the all-important *différance* to take into consideration. The difference lies in Ondaatje’s reference to the “powerful and angry” Sri Lankan poet Lakdasa Wikramasinha and the inclusion of Wikramasinha’s poetry within his own work. By excerpting these few lines that refer to Matisse from Wikramasinha’s not inconsiderable oeuvre, Ondaatje is acknowledging the political in the act of writing a book that is so much more than the family history many critics claim. Significantly, this self-reflexivity is the one justification that Edward Said allows as exoneration for acts of cultural appropriation of this nature.

Perhaps Ondaatje’s method of rebelling against empire is too subtle for the majority of his critics? He could have made his point more clearly by including in his text the following violently anti-imperialist note attached to Wikramasinha’s first poetry collection, *Lustre*:

> I have come to realize that I am using the language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth; I have no wish to extend its life or enrich its tonality.

> To write in English is a form of cultural treason. I have had for the future to think of a way of circumventing this treason. (Qtd. in Heble, 193)
Since I am about to suggest that far from being a confused jumble of ideas and impressions, *Running in the Family* is a strategically composed work, and that this “Matisse” section in particular recasts the cultural and political as an imaginative composition, some attention needs to be given to what immediately precedes and follows Ondaatje’s quotation of Wikkramasinha. Thus before this quotation:

. . . Ian Goonetileke . . . shows me a book he put together on the Insurgency. Because of censorship it had to be published in Switzerland. At the back of the book are ten photographs of charcoal drawings done by an insurgent on the walls of one of the houses he hid in. The average age of the insurgents was seventeen and thousands were killed by police and army. While the Kelani and Mahaveli rivers moved to the sea, heavy with bodies, these drawings were destroyed so that the book is now the only record of them. The artist is anonymous. The works seem as great as the Sigiriya frescoes. They too need to be eternal. (85)

On the page immediately following Wikkramasinha’s poetry, Ondaatje responds with a poem of his own, “High Flowers” (87-9), an encoding of a message as cultural as it is political.68 This is a poem which makes much of light and dark and the ‘between-worlds’ condition—the “shadows” that conceal secrets—so that “everything important occurs in shadow”.69 It has at its centre the toddy tapper—the man who moves from tree to tree high above the ground collecting the juice from the flowers of the coconut palms—and his wife, cast as the “woman my ancestors ignored”. The simple life of the village is contrasted with the controlling metaphors of power: “Kings. Fortresses. Traffic . . .”70 Thus we have the poetry of Wikkramasinha sandwiched between two of Ondaatje’s own brief inclusions of political discussion but which “simultaneously calls attention to the potential for art to effect change through its restorative powers” (Heble, 195). This inclusion of multiple voices—a device Ondaatje uses throughout this text—is Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic at its best. It
strengthens any argument by distancing the writer, by allowing the text to talk. It also substantiates my earlier claim that Running in the Family provides an excellent example of a writerly text.

I have concentrated on Running in the Family because it appears to be the one text of Ondaatje’s that critics and reviewers as diverse as Atwood and Mukherjee least understand. Essentially memory writing is like looking backwards down time through a telescope: the scope of vision is restricted, individual images privileged. Because of its failure to tell the whole story, show the whole picture, this is unquestionably a type of misrepresentation, invoking the licence of the artist to depict what he or she sees in an act of imaginative sensitivity. This returns me to my earlier argument where I suggested that misrepresentation was, paradoxically, a method of uncovering the fundamental. As Edward Said asserts “... just as there are no simple dynastic answers, there are no simple discrete formations or social processes”.71

The question that preoccupied me at the start of this chapter was Ondaatje’s own location in relation to this book and I think he makes it clear that the postcolonial “prodigal” returned to Sri Lanka has at heart an ambiguity. Thus what critics refer to as a “hotch-potch” is instead an intentional arrangement of impressions designed to link past and present, a sonata with discords so subtle that they are often overlooked. This apparently random composition becomes in Ondaatje’s hands, a deliberate attempt to reflect instability. It is an unstable text about an unstable past suggesting a similar uncertainty in present and future and as such offers an endless proliferation of possibilities.
With respect, I think the point Kanaganayakam, Mukherjee and, to a lesser extent, Heble miss is that Ondaatje is not aiming for the referential in this work: he is leaving it to us—as readers, critics, scholars—to make the connections, to accept if we will, the lack of a “centred causal logic” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 141).

Mukherjee is right in one respect, however, in her claim that “. . . there is no trauma of uprooting” in his work. But what she seems to miss is that this is precisely because Ondaatje does not experience the sense of rootlessness suggested by Rushdie as one example, Said as another. This is not “immigrant” writing because Ondaatje has not let go. He has not migrated anywhere. He acknowledges—and is impatient with—his “foreigner” status in Sri Lanka, but it is a strangeness, an “otherness” that he experiences that heralds not so much a return as a sense of never having left and which locates itself alongside his indigenous self. The island holds him essentially hybrid, his senses critically alive to its vibrancy, his emotions stirred: “. . . all this Beethoven and rain”. *Running in the Family* is as much an attempt to “narrate the nation” as it is to uncover a family history. From the distance of the diaspora, how else can one write a “language of national belonging”? It is infinitely more complex as Homi Bhabha suggests:

If, in our travelling theory, we are alive to the *metaphoricity* of the peoples of imagined communities—migrant or metropolitan—than we shall find that the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal. Their metaphoric movement requires a kind of ‘doubleness’ in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes *without* a centred causal logic (my emphasis). And such cultural movements disperse the homogeneous, visual time of the horizontal society. The secular language of interpretation needs to go beyond the horizontal critical gaze if we are to give the ‘nonsequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity’ its appropriate narrative authority. (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 141)
The ‘confusion’ that *Running in the Family* engenders for some foregrounds a self-reflexivity that shifts the responsibility of interpretation back to the reader, the interstitial point of interaction, the “You and I” of which Homi Bhabha speaks. However, the points I have made above—namely that while Ondaatje’s writing is demonstrably “orientalist”, this condition is tempered by a cultural concern and awareness that many critics miss—gain emphasis through a broader exploration of his work. Ondaatje’s political self, for example, surfaces clearly in *The English Patient*, a text that has been well discussed, and thus my purpose here is to refer to it only to substantiate my point above. 72

**The English Patient** 73

There are a number of themes that run through *The English Patient*, but for my purposes here, there are two that dominate which in this work are interrelated: namely, the question of identity and how it relates to the politics of empire. The identity crisis personalised in *Running in the Family* emerges even more strongly nearly ten years later in *The English Patient* where a re-structuring of identity takes place in a text which, again, is as much theatre-on-the-page as it is prose.

Central to this drama is Almásy, the anonymous and crippled possessor of a covert past. And key to the identity crisis depicted within this text is that this description can be applied just as aptly to all the main players. Almásy acts metonymically for the other characters in this novel in that his damage—the gaps and silences, the immobility, the reluctance to communicate—applies equally to the other “freak social and cultural displacements” in the form of Hana, Kip and Carravagio. 74 The Villa San Girolamo becomes a metaphor for a space which exists outside geographical and temporal restrictions—in Bhabha’s interstices
perhaps—a space of healing where walls have been smashed and boundaries do not exist. As a result this is an unreal world—a Third Space—protected, for the time period of the story, from war and the structures of power. For the duration of the text, this world shelters the characters gathered there, all of whom exhibit damage from residual marks of authority, the drawing of lines in the sand, which becomes lines on maps and lines through the centre of human psyches. The division between past and present. The distancing of self from self. When Caravaggio asks the patient, “‘Who was talking back then?’” Almásy replies, “‘Death means you are in the third person’” (247).

From a postcolonial perspective, one of the most obvious examples of anti-imperialism in this text—and thus the most often discussed—is the character of Kirpal Singh who is constructed as a non-negotiable challenge to empire: “‘My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said’”. However, more restrained in terms of foregrounding the relationship between postcolonialism, identity and empire is the relationship between Running in the Family and The English Patient. While, ostensibly, these are two entirely different texts with diverse themes and concerns, there are similarities in both structure and thematic treatment that say more about the iniquities of imperial control and authority than Kip’s less subtle attack on the English motifs of etiquette and the old boys’ club: “‘I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I’d be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. . . . But we, oh, we were easily impressed—by speeches and medals and your ceremonies’” (284). For these similarities, I return to a discussion of form and content.
Like its predecessor, *The English Patient* is a work of fragmented narration that reflects back from the irony of its title. And once more that instability is foregrounded in the cultural complexities that live uncertainly amongst its pages. Analogous to *Running in the Family* which searches for connection in “running to, running from”, *The English Patient* proves to be a text of reflection: reflecting to, reflecting from, reflecting and deflecting, running up and down its own threads. Like its predecessor this, too, is a writerly text vulnerable to a number of readings. As D. Mark Simpson suggests:

Like architectural space in the novel, legible space remains resolutely precarious, untrustworthy, explosive and implosive by turns. The resulting instabilities are not strictly commensurate with ambiguity or, for that matter, simply equivalent to evasion. Rather, they signal any number of epistemological crises involving place, space, history, transit, alterity and its manifold confusions. Not least for this reason, the narrative affords provocative means by which to imagine Europe alongside India (and also Canada) caught uneasily amidst colonial and postcolonial roles. Crucially hybrid, *The English Patient* directs its politics past evasion toward reckoning. (217)

At the centre of this “reckoning” is the shifting identity and concealed nationality of the English patient. Almásy’s identity—and by extrapolation his character—is destabilized, its unveiling deferred again and again throughout the narrative, almost belonging within a set of identifying parameters and then breaking free as he moves through the fictions that have been created for him (Cook, 46). This returns me to a point I made earlier in this chapter in relation to Ondaatje’s final words in *Running in the Family*, namely that a desire to capture memory of place rounds out both the moment of experience and identity. This story is as
much a “narrative of identity” as that other text which leaves Ondaatje alone with memories that continue to ferment in the quiet of the morning.

However, the shape that the “narrative of identity” takes in this text is somewhat different. I suggest that, firstly, the “narrative of identity” manifests itself in the co-dependency Almásy forms with most of the characters with whom he comes into contact and, secondly, that this type of reliance replaces his need to belong to a nation or a specific culture. To play out this co-dependency, there are a number of fictions Ondaatje creates for Almásy. For example, for an unstated space of time, he lives with the Bedouins, “his captors and saviours” who dragged him from his burning plane, and who tended his burned body, but who in return demanded recompense for these deeds in terms of his knowledge of weaponry (21). In the exchange between Almásy and the tribe, there is no question of assimilation, no illusion, instead a clear case of co-dependency, a mutual reliance for a period of need. In another co-dependent liaison, he becomes Katharine’s lover until she demands more from the relationship, at which point he withdraws: “What do you hate most?” he asks. “A lie. And you?” “Ownership,” he says. “When you leave me, forget me’” (152). But at the same time, he cannot leave: “He has been disassembled by her” (155). He can neither be with her nor without her. “The minute she turns away from him . . . he is insane. He knows the only way he can accept losing her is if he can continue to hold her or be held by her” (156). She too cannot let go. Before she dies, she insists, “Kiss me and call me by my name’” (173). Again there is a mutual dependence, the neediness of one feeding off the other, each identity reflecting off, but refusing to be assimilated by, the other. In another instance, Almásy does not merely identify with Herodotus, the explorer whom Cicero called ‘the father of history’, he depends on him, believing and living the stories within The Histories, keeping the book
close to him on every reconnaissance, every expedition. Time and again Herodotus emerges in the narrative to provide a tripartite linkage between the explorer, the spy and the lover, weaving them tightly to the multi-thematic concerns of the book: “This is the story of how I fell in love with a woman, who read me a specific story from Herodotus . . .” (233); “What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history—how people betray each other for the sake of nations . . .” (119); “. . . it was more than a commonplace book” (231).

Always in his hour of need Almásy returns to Herodotus. As another example, there is the scene that follows the plane crash in the desert, when Almásy rescues Katharine and carries her to the Cave of Swimmers. He knows she is dying, that he has “her nature tight in his fist”, but now it is her beauty he does not want to lose. He calls on traditions from Herodotus, locating her for all eternity in the place where he last saw her alive, conferring on her a grace that resembles the ritualizing within the last rites and ensures her immortality: “He looked up to the one cave painting and stole the colours from it. The ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes. He walked across the cave, his hand thick with red, and combed his fingers through her hair. Then all of her skin, so her knee that had poked out of the plane that first day was saffron. The pubis. Hoops of colour around her legs so she would be immune to the human. There were traditions he had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal—a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing” (248).

And later, the last time we hear of him alive, his “hand reaches out slowly and touches his book and returns to his dark chest” (298). At the hour of his death, Almásy, the displaced, is alone with his memories—Rushdie’s “Indias of the mind”—just as Ondaatje is when he
leaves Sri Lanka on his “last morning”. Thus the “commonplace book” is vital to this story. Woven into every corner of Almásy’s life, Herodotus becomes the link between the English patient and everything he has ever held important. The irony is that here is a man savagely independent, who eschews the concept of belonging to anyone, anywhere—“We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (261)—who found a way to belong through his addiction to reciprocal dependencies. Just as the insect bite provides a link with Ondaatje’s homeland; so Herodotus links Almásy to a life and a woman he loves. Herodotus is Almásy’s passport to identity or belonging.

Admittedly, this is a psychoanalytical reading of *The English Patient*, but the point I made earlier in relation to *Running in the Family* applies here, too. As in Freud’s psychoanalytic histories which also avoid the effects of normal historical time, this text falls into a category of story-telling where the limiting effect of time is removed and the sociological is privileged in its place. Thus drawing again on Steedman’s distinction between history and case studies—“the case study is not concerned with what really happened” (49)—it could be argued that the fantasy that Almásy carries close to his heart—the fantasy of *belonging without being labelled* or mapped—becomes the “shaping device” for the narrative, allowing the dream or “reconstruction” of desire to be presented as evidence.

I suggest that Ondaatje’s representation of his protagonist in this manner becomes a clever way of sidestepping the “politics of polarity”. In the final analysis, Almásy emerges as the other of himself (*The Location of Culture*, 38-9). 81 And if indeed, as I have claimed, he acts as a metonym for the characters in the villa, the same could be said for his cohabitants.
Returning to Bhabha, it is conceivable that in this [ostensible] “‘politics of difference’ the ‘other’ is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously ‘between ourselves’”. Thus,

As the discriminated object, the metonym of presence becomes the support of an authoritarian voyeurism, all the better to exhibit the eye of power. Then, as discrimination turns into the assertion of the hybrid, the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery. After our experience of the native interrogation it is difficult to agree entirely with Fanon that the psychic choice is to ‘turn white or disappear’. There is the more ambivalent, third choice: camouflage, mimicry, black skins/white masks. (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 120).

In his camouflaged state, Almásy represents a hybridity which, as I mentioned earlier, subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures and becomes a counter-narrative, a critique of the canon and its exclusion of other narratives. In a similar manner to *Running in the Family*, which works through the hybridity of the central character of Ondaatje, *The English Patient* becomes a salutary example of the “English book” criticized.

This brings me to a defining moment in my discussion of this writer. At an earlier juncture I assigned him a hybridism, which made him concomitantly “exterior” and indigenous, a combination of both. But I have yet to establish whether his partial indigenousness gives him an intrinsic right to “write the Orient” and in so doing, excuse the incontrovertibly exotic within his writing. Or, conversely, whether his “exteriority” allows just enough distance to absolve him from the category of native informant? In terms of owning a culture, how has Ondaatje used his intellectual authority to locate himself in terms of the subject matter and the resulting text?
I will begin to answer these questions by suggesting that if I were to insist that this partial “exteriority” disallows him the right to write of his birthplace as he wishes, this would surely reflect a line of reasoning as narrow as that imposed by Said on the Orientalists. Further, it is clear that one of Ondaatje’s own problems with this text was a decision as to the position he should take in writing it. Among the solutions to the paradox that he appears to struggle with internally—“We own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens or invaders”—is that this moment of enunciation takes place in a Third Space and thus eludes “the politics of polarity and emerge[s] as the others of our selves” (The Location of Culture, 38-9).

Accordingly, a question posed at the start of this chapter—in respect of where Ondaatje locates himself in Running in the Family and the extent to which he is either ‘informant’ or ‘other’—is answered: in the case of the transnational author, the distinction collapses. Ondaatje is both ‘native’ and ‘other’ and carries the double burden this hybridity imposes. In his hands, the text reflects this hybridity and becomes writerly lending both the Ceylon of the past and the Sri Lanka of the present a simultaneity and continuity that encompasses the future. In Frank Kermode’s words, this type of narrative experience possesses the authority to “charge the present moment with the intangible powers of past and future”. It is in this way that in this text the colonial moment lives on into the postcolonial and beyond.

Thus, as reader and critic of these two texts, I propose that through the unstable representations of protagonist/author and protagonist in the respective texts I have examined, Ondaatje suggests that the diasporic self may live in many places, but belongs nowhere. The only belonging takes place in Salman Rushdie’s “Indias of the mind”: the
source of the memories and fantasies that Almásy on his death bed, and Ondaatje on his “last morning”, hold close.

Clearly, taken as representative sample of the corpus of his writing, these works are not “orientalist” in terms of showing a bias towards other nationalities, but nevertheless it is equally clear that the language in one text is undeniably exotic and that the plots in both texts blatantly depict colonial life. It is plain, too, that in the case of Running in the Family that Ondaatje plays the informant in exposing and displaying local knowledge for Western consumption.

However, there are, perhaps, two counts on which Ondaatje escapes serious charges of “orientalism”. The first is Said’s own defence of Kipling’s Kim in which he claims some justification in Kipling’s representation of India partly because Kipling was “of” India (in the sense that it was his birthplace and a country to which he returned for seven years as a young adult), but mainly because of his use of the aesthetic in this work in particular. Kim “is after all a novel in a line of novels” [and, as such, contains] “the irony of a form that draws attention to itself as substituting art and its creations for the once-possible synthesis of the world empires. . . . Spatiality becomes . . . the characteristic of an aesthetic rather than of political domination” (229). And so, because he too is undeniably an artist of note, perhaps Ondaatje can be exonerated on the grounds of the aesthetic for his depiction of a colonial way of life.

Secondly, there is again that strong sense of self-reflexivity noted earlier in Woolf’s works that informs these texts—in the obvious struggle for identity, the quotation of the poetry of
Wikkramasinha, the nuances of “High Flowers”, the hatred for the “map makers”—that offers absolution from “orientalist” writing. I quote again from Said: “For if Orientalism has historically been too smug, too insulated, too positivistically confident in its ways and its premises, then one way of opening oneself to what one studies in or about the Orient is reflexively to submit one’s methods to critical scrutiny . . . a direct sensitivity to the material . . . a continual self-examination . . . a constant attempt to keep . . . [the] work responsive to the material and not to a doctrinal preconception” (my emphasis, Orientalism, 326-7).

But finally, although there is, after all, little that could be said to be “smug” about Ondaatje’s work, the line is fine. In alluding to that “insignia of colonial authority and signifier of colonial desire and discipline” (the English book) in his choice of title (The English Patient) for what is, in terms of plot, an unashamedly colonial text, Ondaatje’s work stands on the edge of an uncertain cultural precipice: “Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor . . .” (302).
Notes

4 Michael Ondaatje was born in what was then Ceylon on September 12, 1943. He left eleven years later at the time of his parents’ divorce. He accompanied his mother to England before relocating to Canada in 1962 to undertake tertiary studies that culminated in a Masters degree from Queen’s University, Ontario, in 1967. He currently lives in Toronto.
5 From the SBS TV (Australia) series, The Bookshow, “Expatriate Authors (2)”, 1994.
6 Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 1983), 204.
7 It should be noted that while obviously people are affected in different ways by an experience of translocation or exile, not everyone feels a sense of loss or displacement that has to be “captured” or written out of them as does Salman Rushdie, (see Imaginary Homelands, for example). It is equally legitimate to suggest that in many persons, perhaps stemming from an innate sense of insecurity, there is still this desire to hold onto something of the past. Take, for example, the words of writer/academic Satendra Nandan who claims: “Emotionally—in your sense of place—India is within you. As an individual, you remain an individual . . . in terms of my nationalism, I am Australian, but in terms of who I am, I am Indian”. Recorded during a Krishna Somers Foundation seminar, Murdoch University, Western Australia, February 14, 2003 in which Professors Satendra Nandan and Brij Lal discussed the relationship between their diasporic life worlds and their works.
8 See my later discussion of The English Patient.
10 From the film Mr. 420, cited here from Imaginary Homelands, 11. See my later discussion for the number of different texts in which Rushdie uses this song. For a fuller reference to Mr. 420 (Shree 420, 1955) and Salman Rushdie, see Vijay Mishra, Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 108-9.
12 While representation is obviously an issue here, I address this at some length later in the chapter.
13 A sentiment echoed by Satendra Nandan in his statement: “. . . but in terms of who I am, I am Indian.” See my note 7.
14 This reference to ‘body’ is interesting in view of the wave of current academic interest in the corporeal (usually from a feminist perspective) in literature. Body feels . . . just as the heart as part of the body feels . . . since the skin is as much an organ as the heart.
15 It is a tribute to the skill of the writer that as reader I see, or imagine into being, what is not actually described in the passage. This quote from Zulfikar Ghose’s essay “Going Home” is illuminating: “. . . reality can be composed of absent things, the unseen blazes in our minds with a shocking vividness”. Cited in Chelva Kanaganayakam’s essay, “A Trick With a Glass” in Canadian Literature, 132 (Spring 1992): 33-42.
17 Kanaganayakam, 41.
18 While I am more comfortable with this line of reasoning, an argument could be made for the fact that Rushdie saw the movie in which this song appears at the young and obviously impressionable age of eight or nine years, which supports the psychological claims asserted by Benedict Anderson cited earlier and offers another reason for the quoting and re-quoting of this song in his texts.
21 Murdoch University.
22 It is a cruel twist that displacement is the only way in which to keep illusion intact and I will return to the question of illusion later in this chapter. Meanwhile, there is the marvellous fable that aptly illustrates the point I am making here: a tale of a cat who became a sea captain and whose home port was Boston. During his life on the seas, this cat travelled far and wide, privy to many wonderful sights and beautiful ports of call. But each time he arrived in a new port, he would scan the skyline and assert: “There’s no port as fine as the port o’
Boston”. The moral of the fable is, of course, that his response was the same the day he finally sailed back into his old home port. The reality did not match the illusion created by his memories and once again he stated: “There’s no port as fine as the port o’ Boston”. The sentence—“It’s a mistake to go back”—has become a cliche. Why? Because it involves the replacing of illusion with a reality to which many (of us) would prefer to remain oblivious.

23 Although Naipaul privileges “the centre” over his birthplace, for the purpose of this thesis in this case England is still part of the shadowlands, the place aside, the ‘elsewhere’, from which the homeland is viewed and written about.

24 Naipaul first conceived this notion of a “universal civilization” while travelling among non-Arab Muslims in the Far East and compares this concept “of all that expanding intellectual life, all the varied life of the mind and senses, the expanding cultural and historical knowledge of the world” with the corresponding paucity of their lives imposed on the people by their faith. “I was among people whose identity was more or less contained in the faith. . . . No colonization could have been greater than this colonization by the faith” (512-3).

25 I am thinking here of multi-themed works like The English Patient and Anil’s Ghost.

26 Quoting from S/Z, tr. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). “The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (5).

27 It should be noted that Bhabha has cited Anderson incorrectly here. This phrase should read “homogeneous, empty time” as quoted earlier, which changes the sense of the sentence quite dramatically. Anderson credits Walter Benjamin with this particular idea “. . . in which simultaneity is . . . transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence . . .” (Imagined Communities, 24).

28 Bhabha, Nation and Narration (London: Routledge,1990), 4.

29 The acceptance of the principle of a hybrid identity, however, does not prevent the arising of a hypothetical question with regard to the identity of the next generation. If one accepts that one is forever ‘in between’ what repercussions does this have for the children of migrants? Are they subject to deceptively subtle processes of assimilation by the host nation? If this is so, as one suspects it has to be, this inevitably widens the culture ‘gap’ between generations as suggested in Naipaul’s anecdote about the young Javanese boy and his mother and supported in the work currently being undertaken in social anthropology. Hence this quote from Gardner’s essay which shows a retreat from acceptance of hybridity to a position of intransigence often taken by the elders with regard to their children: “They are not like me, they are more like the English people. They cannot speak [my language], they do not know our ways. They only know what the computer says” (174).

30 Although not strictly relevant at this point, it should however be noted that Renan comes under severe criticism from Said who tends to ignore the legitimacy of his scientific approach to language and rather scathingly concludes his discussion of Renan in the following manner: “Thus did comparatism in the study of the Orient and Orientals come to be synonymous with the apparent ontological inequality of Occident and Orient” (150).

31 Roland Barthes may be losing the following he has had for so long, but the success of recent writerly texts in the marketplace suggests that perhaps we have tried too hard to pin down the ‘slippery’ concept of representation. Rating highly among recently released texts fully deserving of the description “writerly” is Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2003.


33 Of course, the ultimate “readerly” and “writerly” texts are the Old and New Testaments of the Bible respectively. An absorbing interdisciplinary project would be to analyse these books in relation to other key religious texts like the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita.

34 It could, of course, be argued that strictly speaking this is a text that demonstrates linearity in that it traces ancestry from one point to another. There are, however, so many points of departure from what could be construed as the main consideration of this text—departures that feed both backwards and forwards into the present that is the text itself—that a case could be made for the narrative’s circular structure.

35 Although, as Barthes claims, the distinction between denotation and connotation is again unstable. See his discussion in S/Z, 9.

36 I have suggested a difference here, but it’s possible that the point I am making with regard to misrepresentation could exist alongside Barthes’ own analogy of writing and painting. He says: “Every literary
description is a view. It could be said that the speaker [the writer, the voice?] , before describing, stands at the window, not so much to see, but to establish what he sees by its very frame: the window frame creates the scene. . . . [Thus] the writer, through this initial rite, first transforms the ‘real’ into a depicted (framed) object; have done this, he can take down this object, remove it from his picture: in short: de-depict it (to depict is to unroll the carpet of the codes, to refer not from a language to a referent but from one code to another). Thus realism (badly named) . . . consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real . . . . (

S/Z, 54-5). 

37 Quoting here from Australian writer Alex Miller, The Sitters (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

38 Miller is twice winner of the Miles Franklin Award with a number of other highly acclaimed awards and accolades among his writing credits.


40 In this famous allegory, the human condition is portrayed by a group of men imprisoned in a dimly lit cave. They have been there since they were children, their arms and legs chained in such a way that they can only look ahead. Behind the prisoners, further back into the cave and higher up, a fire is burning. In between the fire and the prisoners there is a road and a curtain. Along the road, both behind and above the curtain, wooden men and animals are made to move and talk as in a puppet show. In this way, the part of the cave roof and wall immediately in front of the prisoners is alive with moving, talking shadows. Plato suggests that this life of shadows is the ‘real’ for the men and that if they were freed and allowed to look behind them, the objects that they now saw would resemble ‘so much empty nonsense’, the illusion. And if they looked into the fire, it would dazzle them to such an extent that they would soon turn back to what they were used to and could see more clearly. Further, if one of the men were dragged into the sunshine above, at first he would be blinded by the sun. But gradually as he became used to the world above and the power of the sun to change the seasons and control nature, he would begin to feel sorry for the prisoners and their lack of wisdom in the cave below. If, however, he went back down into the darkness, he would at first be similarly blinded. From The Republic, tr. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 316-325.


43 As usual, Said makes some sound observations, but his line of reasoning is clouded by prejudice. My understanding of the principle of his argument is that it is not the act of representation per se to which he objects, but the exteriority of the person doing the representing. The crux of the matter is that the power dynamic within representation can provide an external force with the opportunity to re-create and re-present in any shape or form something of the personal, some thing, some essence of national pride. From then on, there is nothing to stop this becoming a power-charged exchange and thus an invasion of privacy, a portrayal gratuitous, unwarranted and non-essential, viewed as a betrayal in that the other party possesses no intrinsic right of representation over a land, a culture and a people to which he or she does not belong.

44 Although Said definitely has a point here, I suggest that he goes too far and that the discursive high ground he occupies is designed to muffle the outrage he expresses (and obviously feels) at what can be described as a moral invasion. To deny this would place my argument in a position difficult to defend: What right, after all, does any outsider have to make “the mysteries” of another’s country available to an “exterior” audience? This does beg the question, however, as to whether it is the act of invasion itself or the interpretative possibility to which he objects.

45 See my discussion of the exchange between the Tlingits and the Portland Art Museum in Oregon in chapter five, or for a more comprehensive account of the dynamics involved in this series of transactions, see James Clifford, Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).


47 Whether the son/father connection is made in this book is a moot point. I suggest that at the end of the narrative one is left with the feeling that however hard he tries, the son cannot quite overcome the emotional exclusion of childhood and that the distance remains. Indeed, there is a search for the father figure, but at the end of the day, it becomes a search for self, something much more than the “fictionalized family history” that many critics label it. See Catherine Bush, “Michael Ondaatje: An Interview”, Essays on Canadian Writing, 238.
It should be noted that these writers have used their celebratory status as “immigrant writers” to the full. Both Kingston and Tan were born in America of Chinese parents; both have used their Chinese ancestral connections to write about their parents’ homeland as if it were their own.

Kanaganayakam’s essay, 36.

Crusoe’s Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America (New York: Routledge, 1990), 128.

Heble suggests that the critical responses to Ondaatje’s text that accuse him of failing the test of referentiality are “. . . perhaps best understood if situated within the context not simply of either mimetic realism or even poststructuralism but rather of the emergence of alliances of marginalized or misrepresented groups attempting either to reclaim the past or to map out a space for the possibility of resistance to forms of cultural domination” (187).

Cleverly, the title Kanaganayakam has chosen for this essay on Ondaatje’s connection with south-east Asia is summed up in the title: “A Trick With a Glass”. The glass, of course, is a looking glass, or mirror, and the essence of his argument revolve around Ondaatje’s methods of reflection or representation.

Ondaatje redresses what some critics have claimed as a distancing of himself from Sri Lanka’s upheavals in Anil’s Ghost, a fictional representation based on an historical crisis from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s that involved three separate groups: the government, the anti-government insurgents from the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north.

Anderson’s definition of nation could also be used here to address the microcosm of the family unit. In that they could similarly be bracketed as communities or collectives, both nation and family could be described as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”. “It is imagined,” Anderson claims, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6).

In the same way, it could be said that in writing a book, which in part purports to be a family history, but which is based as much on hearsay as on ‘fact’ and relies on images constructed within his mind, Ondaatje has constructed an image of this “communion”.

Relevant to this discussion of “imagined communities” is Ondaatje’s own language when he talks of his book being “imagined” and stresses the fictional component. “And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologise and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (205-6).

As mentioned earlier, she was in fact born and raised in America.

This intellectual authority stems from the position the author holds with regards to the text: how, for example, he locates himself within the text and the structure he builds to convey his message to the reader, all critical in terms of representation and reader positioning.

Heble claims that this apparent gap or evidence of the failure of referentiality is in itself “part of a renewed struggle for cultural representation” (187).


See Kanaganayakam, 36.

In “Memory, Identity and Empire in Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family”, Paul Jay ascribes this perceived lack of engagement with empire within Ondaatje’s text to the fact that “as an autobiographical text it is dominated by the generic codes of western autobiography . . . the self that emerges in its pages is a familiar one to the western reader: the immigrant returns home, intrigued about his family’s past and the sources of his own identity buried in it . . . Because it follows the forms and conventions of western autobiography it lacks an engagement with, let alone a critique of, empire. The subject of the autobiography seems largely a construction of the west, and so the text is written as western text”. Retrieved electronically from http://home.comcast.net/~jay.paul/ondaatje.htm on 20.1.2004. While Jay makes some valid points here—about the basic story line, for instance, and in that the work does appear to be “largely a construction of the west”—his argument is too simplistic. As I have already argued, while the book ostensibly deals with self, family and identity, its liberal use of the dialogic and its writerly open-endedness disallow such neat categorization.

It seems to me that these three sentences represent Ondaatje’s acknowledgement of an exteriority that he dislikes but is forced to accept . . . somewhat in the manner of a tourist complaining that a place is ‘too touristy’.

Daniel Defoe used the psychological struggles in Knox’s An Historical Relation as a source for Robinson Crusoe (Ondaatje, 82).

Heble (188) attributes the coining of “ex-centricity” to Linda Hutcheon as a term for “the ‘minoritarian discourses’ that have helped to shape postmodern theory and practice (Poetics xi)”.

I suggest that Ondaatje’s relationship with Sri Lanka is one of uneasiness, rather than “tenuousness”. Tenuous suggests a fragile ‘holding on’, whereas I think that the boundaries are for Ondaatje more complex.
For contextual purposes, the complete stanza of Wikkramasinha’s poem as quoted in Ondaatje’s text is as follows: “Don’t talk to me about Matisse...the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio/where the nude woman reclines forever/on a sheet of blood/Talk to me instead of the culture generally—/how the murderers were sustained/by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote/villages the painters came, and our white-washed/mud-huts were splattered with gunfire” (85-6). The reference to the French painter Henri Matisse is significant, both in the instance of Wikkramasinha’s inclusion of the painter in this poem and in Ondaatje’s re-representing (or in Barthian terms, “de-depicting”) of the work in his chapter on “foreigners” and plunder of the East. Although Matisse used a great deal of Oriental imagery in his art, he did not actually visit the Orient. Rather, it is said, that the images he re-presented were copied from the Oriental patterns on his wife’s clothes. Thus, it could be said that his work represented cultural appropriation at its most blatant.

The reference to “whitewashing” is in relation to Ondaatje’s description of the 1971 insurgency when university students were imprisoned on their own campus. When the university was re-opened, the graffiti on walls and ceilings bore witness to methods of torture and suppression. Within days, however, the evidence was “covered with whitewash and lye” (84). The “syncretism” (that Heble refers to earlier) in this passage has been pointed out by a number of critics. In this instance it is, of course, the re-shaping of Ondaatje’s Dutch background into a new “cultural formation” represented by the Burghers. This new cultural group—inevitably aligned with the ruling party—became increasingly alienated not on that score alone, but also by reasons of culture, language and ethnicity in two clear-cut stages: after independence in 1948 and after Sinhala was declared the official language eight years later.

66 Heble cites Yasmine Gooneratne, “Cultural Interaction in Modern Sri Lankan Poetry Written in English” from Only Connect: Literary Perspectives East and West, eds. Guy Amirthanayagam and S. C. Harrex, Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1981), 199, as the source of this valuable quotation, but I have two other points to make here. Firstly, the political nature of Wikkramasinha’s poetry, the balance he strikes in the relationship to language and power and his anathema to the language of the oppressors leads me to suggest that it fulfills Deleuze and Guattari’s criteria of a “minor literature” in Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, tr. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) The main characteristics of “minor literature” are (i) “the impossibility of not writing because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature”; (ii) “minor literature is completely different [from major literatures in that] its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it”; (iii) “the third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature because of the reduced size of the source), there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters... the political domain has contaminated every statement... It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism... The literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come... literature is the people’s concern” (16-8). Interestingly, just before Ondaatje’s own text acts a “relay” point for Wikkramasinha’s message of revolution, he speaks about a revolution of his own, insignificant in act, but significantly placed in this text, his writerly display on the page of representative letters of the Sinhalese script as he writes of a “communal protest this time, the first of my socialist tendencies” just before his discussion of Wikkramasinha (84). The second point I want to make with regard to the specifics of Sri Lankan writing in English comes from another early essay of Gooneratne’s entitled “Cultural Independence and the Writer in Sri Lanka”, Society and the Writer, eds. Wang Gungwu, M. Guerrero and D. Marr (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1981) in which she clearly articulates the problems inherent in writing in English in a foreign country. It is worth quoting from Gooneratne at some length for her insights into the practical side of writing from the shadowlands, interesting, too, to see how the theory of “minor literature” fits in the cases of Sinhala and Tamil writings respectively. “The sustaining hope of the writer in English must lie in the fact that as English ceases to guarantee employment or to symbolize Western cultural dominance in the new Sri Lanka, his audience will be reduced to those few unprejudiced and mentally unexploited readers who can regard English simply as a language, and an exceptionally rich and flexible literary medium. Until the English language comes to be regarded in Sri Lanka as something apart from politics and communal rivalry, as something other and more than a colonial legacy, it is unlikely that Sri Lankan writers in English will be judged on their merits and defects as writers... Moving to the particular problems of writers in the three languages: a writer in Sinhala can reach the great majority of his fellow-Sinhalese (if he is ‘popular’ enough in theme and style), but will be read by few Tamil-speakers or English-speakers within Sri Lanka and by no one outside the island except in translation, and therefore after a lapse of many years. A writer in Tamil will reach
a local minority audience in Sri Lanka, and may also enjoy some reputation on the Indian subcontinent. The writer in English offers his work to a tiny local audience that resents the changing conditions of its way of life and—troubled and uncertain of its own future—fears and despises the mass it does not wish to understand. He writes, on the whole, without the active encouragement of publishers, and lacks any but the most misguided sympathy and admiration from his ‘public’, who respect him for his proficiency in English and do not imagine for a moment that he has any other purpose in writing than the demonstration of that proficiency” (my emphasis, 288).

68 Heble points to the significance of these cultural references physically positioned just off-centre to the middle of the text.

69 See Deleuze and Guattari for more on the significance of what is hidden: “But politically, the important things are always taking place elsewhere, in the hallways of the congress, behind the sense of the meeting, where people confront the real, immanent problems of desire and of power—the real problem of justice” (my emphasis, 50).

70 The reference here is to the frescoes of Sigiriya, “the rock fortress of a despot king”, on which over the centuries anonymous poets have inscribed love poems. Ondaatje’s references to Sigiriya are contiguous to his brief discussion of the Insurgency of 1971 when poems of another sort—“about the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit”—were written on the walls and ceilings throughout the university campus. Again the juxtaposition of the references provides a political comment of its own.


74 In “Destructive Creation: The Politicization of Violence in the Works of Michael Ondaatje”, Canadian Literature 132 (1992): 109-24, Christian Bok suggests that the gaps and silences in Ondaatje’s texts represent an “ultimate act of violence against society, perhaps because such aphasia represents a deliberate abandonment of language, the very means by which socialization is even possible” (112). Thus the very silences, the tentative attempts to communicate, are in themselves political acts. What is Ondaatje himself suggesting in this respect? That while there are no physical boundaries within the villa, emotional walls between nations are more difficult to break down? Thus only when under the influence of morphine can Almásy be persuaded to talk.

75 The significance of maps and boundaries and their relation to empire in this text has been discussed in a number of essays and need no repetition here. However, Rufus Cook in his essay, “Being and Representation in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient”, Ariel 30.4 (1999): 35-49, raises a fresh angle. In suggesting that Almásy “regards distinctions of race and class as ‘walls’ or ‘barriers’ (155) . . . [and that] he wants ‘not to belong to anyone, to any nation’ (139)”, he draws a comparison between the English patient’s “pure zone” (namely, an “embodiment of absence and negation”) and the “heterotopian zone of postmodern writing” explored by Brian McHale in Postmodern Fiction.

76 See D. Mark Simpson, “Minefield Readings: The Postcolonial English Patient”, Essays on Canadian Writing, in particular for the parallels he draws between Ondaatje’s intertextual references and the minefield of “explosive” possibilities in terms of readings and misreadings of the texts that he suggests this presents (216-37). One example is the connection he makes between Kirpal Singh and Kipling’s Kim. In suggesting that Kirpal Singh was “nicknamed Kip in a near echo of [Kipling’s] Kim, and an ironical truncation of Kipling”, Simpson claims that the “sapper’s plot . . . glosses to provocative and ironical effect crucially imperial and orientalizing thrusts in Kipling’s novel. As an Indian in England and then in Italy, Kip must turn the (post)colonial tables on the British Kim in India—but in intensely complicated ways, since Kim’s Irishness signals a historically racialized difference irritating the colonial suture between England and Ireland. In this respect at least, the continual references to Kipling’s Kim suggest that even the ostensibly official cultural and literary face of empire is all too often excruciated in its expressions” (220).

77 See my note 67 in which I cite Gooneratne with regard to Sri Lanka’s attitude towards the English language and, by extrapolation, the English.

78 The irony, of course, lies in that the English patient is not English and that central to the story is the shifting identity and concealed nationality of this character. “‘Who are you?’ whispers Hana. “‘I don’t know. You keep asking me.’ ‘You said you were English’” (5). “‘Caravaggio thinks he knows who you are’” (169). Simpson suggests that the key to Almásy’s ethnic background lies in “Caravaggio’s plea to Kip (‘Of all people
he is probably on your side’ [286], that racially or ethnically the English patient Almásy is by no means white, that beneath [the] carbon lies dark, or at least swarthy, skin” (Essays on Canadian Writing, 236).

Citing J. Hillis Miller, Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), in which Ondaatje’s novel is described as a “self-generated web (25)” of repetitions, re-enactments and representations of representations, Cook claims that in this text “meaning or identity is always deferred or displaced. The English Patient should be regarded, then, not so much as a representation, than as a simulacrum: a system of signs which, in Baudrillard’s words, is ‘never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference’ (Simulcra 6)” (37). Cook’s quotation of Baudrillard from Simulcra and Simulation, tr. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). The metaphor of spider’s web is a good one because it suggests that the narrative is circular, not linear. In this respect, Cook’s comment—that “such a novel takes us into the realm which Edward Said associates with ‘demonic artists’ such as Adrian Leverkuhn, a realm in which the ‘beginning and the end are finally one’ (184-5)” cited by Cook from Edward Said’s Beginnings: Intention and Method (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975)—needs some explanation (48). Leverkuhn was a musician—a sickly man who was indeed reputed to possess “demonic” drives—and whose musical ‘system’ lacked harmony or melody and provided instead a cacophony of sound. Thus the analogy drawn by Cook from Said suggests that the English patient “gradually frees himself from his specific time-bound identity and comes to identify instead with the self that narrates, the self that incorporates in one simultaneous space all the cumulative experiences of lost time” (Cook, 48).

Significantly, it has no clear beginning, no neat end, no homogeneity, no linearity.

See my earlier quotation from the text: “Death means you are in the third person” (247).


Another way of looking at this is to invoke Žižek: “. . . the labour force is not ‘exploited’ in the sense that its full value is not remunerated; in principle at least, the exchange between labour and capital is wholly equivalent and equitable. The catch is that the labour force [here the country and peoples of Sri Lanka] is a peculiar commodity, the use of which—labour itself [writing]—produces a certain surplus-value [a book], and it is this surplus over the value of the labour force itself which is appropriated by the capitalist” (22). Although this does not exonerate Ondaatje from a form of cultural appropriation, it suggests that he is also robbing himself.


Among a number of points Said makes in his interpretation of Kim in Culture and Imperialism, what stands out most clearly is the reasoning that he ignored in Orientalism: the fact that Kipling was a product of the era in which he lived which was, of course, the high point of empire when “the division between white and non-white, in India and elsewhere, was absolute, and [which] is alluded to throughout Kim as well as the rest of Kipling’s work: a Sahib is a Sahib, and no amount of friendship or camaraderie can change the rudiments of racial difference. Kipling would no more have questioned that difference, and the right of the white European to rule, than he would have argued with the Himalayas” (162-3). As I noted earlier, there was an appreciable growth in the awareness of the politics of empire in the twenty years or so that separated figures like Browne and Kipling from that of Leonard Woolf.
Chapter five

AMITAV GHOSH: WRITING THE ORIENT FROM WITHIN

The ‘I’ that I was, was a mosaic of many countries,
a patchwork of others and objects stretching backwards
to perhaps the beginning of time.
What I felt, seeing this was indebtedness.

Charles Johnson

... polyphony requires a plurality of full-valued voices within the bounds of a single work...

Mikhail Bakhtin

Amitav Ghosh appears in the final chapter of my re-reading of “orientalism” partly because he is located at the other end of the continuum from Browne in a temporal and geographical sense, but more importantly, for the ethnographic perspective he provides in respect of the “orientalist” debate under review here. This is a figure who knows the rules of the postcolonial discourse in which he writes; one who is self-reflexively aware in his writing style; a writer whose text is informed by a dialogism that forms an intrinsic part of his discourse; and one who is, after all, an Indian writing—in the main—about his ‘own’ part of the world. Taking these factors into consideration—and especially in view of the fact that
his works take place in the wake of Said’s *Orientalism*—one suspects that Ghosh is avowedly anti-“orientalist” and that he cannot be condemned for “orientalist” practices. Or can he? An examination of *In an Antique Land* provokes a number of questions.³ Is even Ghosh vulnerable—in the slippages in his text, perhaps, or in his silences, or in his approach or choice of subject matter—to similar charges of “orientalism” that appear in the texts of the other writers I have been exploring? More specifically, despite his efforts to the contrary in this work, does Ghosh function here as a “seeing-man . . . he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (Pratt, 7)?⁴ Has he absorbed so much from the metropolis, that he too has become elitist, an “autoethnographer” involved in “partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror”? Or does the way he constructs himself as James Clifford’s “participant observer”, for example, absolve him from such discriminatory practices?

It is precisely because *In an Antique Land* is a text which deliberately crosses the boundaries of race, religion and culture that it provides an ideal focus for exploration against which, once again, I invoke the work of a number of theorists and experts in their fields to ascertain whether the simple fact of writing about another’s race and culture could still be said to constitute a form of cultural pillage. Specifically, I want to use Bakhtin on dialogism and James Clifford on ethnography and the ‘native informant’ in this critique of Ghosh.⁵

But firstly I want to establish where Amitav Ghosh locates himself in respect of his work—as a writer generally and of this book in particular—since, again, this has implications for how he represents the life worlds he writes about. Applying a nationality and a sense of
culture to Ghosh is ostensibly a great deal simpler than the difficulties I faced with many of
the other writers that appear in this thesis. Although over the past few years, he has been
residing in New York, and despite the fact that his childhood and early adult years were
considerably more peripatetic than the other figures I have been discussing, Ghosh is
proudly Indian.\(^6\) Not for this writer, the doubled identity of Rushdie, the hybridity of
Ondaatje, the universality of Naipaul, the cultural assumption of Browne. Unlike the
character in “Mera Joota Hai Japani” to whom I now apply an element of tension in the
form of a confession—a prefacing with a silent ‘but’ in the last line of the stanza that causes
a certain indeterminacy that I am able to read back into the statement, “My heart’s Indian
for all that”—Ghosh celebrates his Indianness. He carries his race as nationality. It flutters
before and above him like a standard, and he writes from that foundation. Of the corpus of
Ghosh’s work, it is *In an Antique Land* that appears to scrutinize this identity within
nationality.\(^7\) Contrary to my declaration in the first paragraph of this chapter, in this instance
Ghosh is *not* writing about his own part of the world—at least not primarily—but
significantly it is in this very act of dislocation that the fundamental nature of his Indianness
is found.\(^8\) In other words, this clear sense of nationality comes from the displacement that
living in the “Antique Land” of Egypt provides. It is in writing about village Egypt that
Ghosh privileges a cosmopolitan India that in this text acts as the metropolis.

Before looking more deeply into this question of dislocation, let me first explore the
organization of this text in terms of content and structure. Like Ondaatje’s *Running in the
Family*, critics vie to find a way to describe this narrative.\(^9\) And so while it has been
variously described as an autobiography, a semi-autobiography, a travelogue, an historical
piece of writing, a work of fiction, a “double helix”, I suggest that it is none of these . . . and
yet all. But because this strikes at the heart of what I am going to discuss here, it is worth quoting what Ghosh himself has to say about the generic construction of his work:

Well, essentially, I haven’t written in so many genres. I mean, I’ve written novels, and I’ve written nonfiction—my reportage. And frankly, I don’t even think of them as different genres in some way. I know that the institutional structure of our world presses us to think of fiction and nonfiction as being absolutely separate. And in some sense they are. I mean with nonfiction there is a domain of fact to which you have to refer and by which you are necessarily constrained. But I think the techniques one brings to bear upon nonfiction, certainly the techniques that I’ve brought to bear on nonfiction, essentially come from my fiction. . . . In the end it’s about people’s lives; it’s about people’s history; it’s about people’s destinies. When I write nonfiction, I’m really writing about characters and people, and when I’m writing fiction, I’m doing the same thing. So that shift isn’t as great as it might appear to be.

At one point in my life I was doing anthropology. But I realized very early on that anthropology was not of interest to me in the end because it was about abstractions, the way you make people into abstractions and make them into, as it were, statistical irregularities.

And in the end my real interest is in the predicament of individuals. And in this I don’t think there is that much different between fiction and nonfiction.10 (World Literature Today)

However, while Ghosh’s work may well be based on the “predicament of individuals”, In an Antique Land is a diagnostic text that takes this interest to another level, that of a social, cultural, political and economic analysis of a people and a location. Thus while Ghosh appears to claim a liberal humanist approach in this text particularly, this is deceptive as his writing is inevitably tempered by an ethnographical training that probes below the surface to add the type of cultural complexity that is emphasized by the lengths so many critics go to in their attempts to categorize the work. This is no seamless narrative. It is as much about social ethnography as it is a disjunctive text, a multi-level discourse, an amalgam of fiction, history, anthropological input, manuscript fragments, autobiographical incident and pure speculation, the blending and juxtaposition of which highlight the degree of self-reflexivity Ghosh has brought to the work.11 Above all, it is a socially and politically conscious text.12
Accordingly, I think that more important than a debate as to what constitutes fiction or nonfiction in this instance is that this is a narrative primarily concerned with the concept of dislocation or displacement. In this text, most of the main characters leave their birthplace for social, economic or political reasons and while some return, others do not. There is no question of assimilation; to the contrary, the narrative works to point up the differences in culture and traditions between nations.\textsuperscript{13} By setting himself apart from his birthplace—from writing about India from the distance of another continent and another time—is how Ghosh best emphasizes a commitment to the sense of Indianness that I mentioned earlier.\textsuperscript{14} The moral of the text seems to be that it is through the act of dislocation that one arrives at a truer sense of place and self.

In terms of structure, this is achieved in two ways. On the one hand, his establishment of the twelfth-century Indian slave as a parallel protagonist results in a text that is split into two narratives which has the effect of constantly relocating reader attention. On the other, as controlling narrator, Ghosh places himself—the Ghosh of the text—in a state of permanent flux. He re-constructs a picture of his own life as the Indian ethnographic postgraduate undertaking field work in an Egyptian village; concomitantly, he is always apart from the village. As “participant-observer”, he always remains the outsider, the one who arrives and departs.\textsuperscript{15} Juxtaposed with the main story, a sub-narrative pieces together a mosaic of the existence of the slave who leaves his homeland of India for tenure in Egypt. By forging this rather tenuous connection between the slave and himself, Ghosh produces a text, which in Clifford’s words, maps “older connections between India and Egypt, trade and travel relations which preceded and partly bypassed the world’s violent polarization into West and
East, empire and colony, developed and backward” (Routes, 5). The story of the slave serves both a literary and political role, which I discuss at length later in this chapter.

Meanwhile if, in its constant shift between cultures, this text could be described as “a twentieth-century ‘poetics of displacement’”, a number of questions present themselves (Predicament of Culture, 10). For example: How does Ghosh find himself in the eyes of the ‘other’? On whose “screen” does he place his own “projected desires”? Does the act of viewing himself and his nation from an Arab perspective serve to reinforce his Indian identity? In particular, it is significant that while there is repeated reference to both the Hindu and Muslim religions throughout the text, it is only in juxtaposition with one another that either gains clarity. Ghosh claims that to “write about one’s surrounding is anything but natural: to even perceive one’s immediate environment one must somehow distance oneself from it; to describe it one must assume a certain posture, a form of address. In other words, to locate oneself through prose, one must begin with an act of dislocation”. Thus while in Egypt, he researches the story of the slave in the Alexandrian archives; once he has left Egypt, he writes his own story into his research.

Since critics often conflate the two, this is the point at which a clear understanding of the difference between anthropology and ethnography clarifies and exemplifies what Ghosh is trying to achieve with this text. Stating that before the late-nineteenth century, there was a definitive division between the ethnographer as a “describer-translater of custom” and the anthropologist as “builder of general theories about humanity”, Clifford updates—and re-inflects—this distinction by claiming that a “clear sense of the tension between ethnography
and anthropology is important in correctly perceiving the recent, and perhaps temporary, conflation of the two projects” (28). He says:

Modern ethnography appears in several forms, traditional and innovative. As an academic practice it cannot be separated from anthropology. Seen more generally, it is simply diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation [my emphasis] . . . . A modern ‘ethnography’ of conjunctures, constantly moving between cultures, does not, like its Western alter ego ‘anthropology’, aspire to survey the full range of human diversity or development. It is perpetually displaced, both regionally focused and broadly comparative, a form both of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct. (9)18

Thus, by situating himself in rural Egypt and his co-protagonist in India, with this text Ghosh aptly fulfills Clifford’s ethnographic criteria of “constantly moving between cultures”, of “perpetual” displacement where the acts of “dwelling” and “travel” merge to become one. Or, as John Docker puts it, In an Antique Land works precisely because it “tests and permits the reversal of the usual relationship between ethnographer and informant in the Western anthropological project.” He claims, “In this tradition . . . Western anthropologists might confide doubts, lack of knowledge, puzzlement, bafflement, difficulties of research, chagrin of incomprehension, sense of defeat, to their private notebooks and diaries and in letters home. But in the published scholarly account they will strive to appear imperturbably objective, as if their ethnography is the impersonal unfolding of the total truth of the observed society, garnered from informants’ data scientifically sifted”.19 This is a far cry from the vulnerability that Ghosh displays in not only locating himself as “the object of his informants’ curious gaze” but in transcribing the events and emotions that transpire. As an ethnographic venture then—as a project of “participant observation” where Ghosh is but one of the characters in his own story—this text works as an efficient example of contemporary ethnography.20
From the perspective of Edward Said’s “orientalist” theories, though, it is not so neat. In fact it would seem that Ghosh becomes indicted by all three definitions Said applies to his re-fashioning of the term.\textsuperscript{21} These are by now well known, but they bear repeating here because of their specific application to this text. Said states that: (i) “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist . . .”; (ii) “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’ \textit{[most of the time, but note, not exclusively]} . . . a very large mass of writers . . . have accepted the basic distinction between East and West \textit{[or in this case East and East]} as the starting point for elaborate theories . . . concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind’, destiny . . .”; (iii) “. . . Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient . . . \textit{[B]y making statements about it, authorizing views of it . . . European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self}” (\textit{Orientalism}, 2-3).

Let me look more closely at these assertions in relation to Ghosh’s text. That Ghosh as author fulfills the first definition is obvious and needs no further amplification; it is the way in which the author and his text realize themselves in an amalgam of the second and third definitions that interests me most here. It is plain that this text, both in the way it is structured and in its subject matter, creates a very distinct division between two nations—Egypt and India—and that one of those nations (the one to which the author happens to belong) is structured as dominant.\textsuperscript{22} In other words Ghosh, as a representative of India, has
constructed himself as educated, knowledgeable, and altogether epistemologically superior
to the villagers amongst whom he dwells. And note, too, the qualities ascribed to the Indian
slave who was literate in an era when literacy was uncommon and whose relationship with
his Jewish “master” could not be said to fit the typical master/slave binary. Contrast this
with the manner in which the village and the villagers as ‘other’ are portrayed, held back by
either lack of education or lack of money or both. Consider the words of Zaghloul, the
weaver, who contrasts the city and the educated (the elite) with the villagers (the subaltern):
“... don’t forget you’re a fellah [villager] ... love is for students and mowazzafeen and
city people ... for us it’s different ...” (In an Antique Land, 217). Although Zaghloul here
is using the ‘them’ and ‘us’ differentiation to refer to the division between city folk and the
peasant, the very fact that Ghosh has aligned himself with the elite speaks for itself.23

In another example, the account of the acquisition of a brand-new diesel water-pump by one
of the villagers, again illuminates the power dynamic written into this text. This machine is
one of few to reach the area and a source of great pride to its owner, whom we know only as
Mabrouk’s father. Significantly, the machine was made in India. Ghosh has been invited to
inspect and comment on the pump while Mabrouk’s family looks anxiously on.

“Makana hindi!” I said to Mabrouk’s father, with a show of enthusiasm.
“Congratulations—you’ve bought an ‘Indian machine’!”

Mabrouk’s father’s eyes went misty with pride as he gazed upon the
machine. “Yes”, he sighed. ... “You must take a look at it and tell us what
you think.”

“Me?” I said. I was aghast; I knew nothing at all about water-pumps ...

“Yes!” Mabrouk’s father clapped me on the back. “It’s from your country,
 isn’t it? I told the dealer in Damanhour, I said, ‘Make sure you give me one
that works well, we have an Indian living in our hamlet and he’ll be able to
tell whether we’ve got a good one or not.’”
I hesitated . . . [but a] quick look at the anxious, watchful faces around me told me that escape was impossible: I would have to pronounce an opinion, whether I liked it or not.

A hush fell upon the courtyard . . . a dozen heads craned forward . . . I went up to the machine’s spout . . . peered knowledgeably into its inky interior, shutting one eye . . . nodding to myself, occasionally tapping parts of it . . . Then . . . I fell to my knees and shut my eyes. When I looked up again Mabrouk’s father was standing above me, anxiously awaiting the outcome of my silent communion with this product of my native soil.

Reaching for his hand I gave it a vigorous shake. “It’s a very good makana Hindi . . . Excellent! ‘Azeem! It’s an excellent machine.”

At once a joyful hubbub broke out . . . (72-3)

There are several ways of interpreting what is going on here. A mainstream reading might focus on the part the machine plays in the subsequent acceptance of Ghosh by the villagers, and imply that it exists purely as a device to move along this narrative of cultural bias. However, the tension built into this passage would suggest that there is a greater complexity: that the incident of the “makana hindi” describes an encounter between two cultures and thus introduces what Mary Pratt would call a “contact zone”.25 Since “contact zones” are by definition circumscribed by notions of power, a more heretical reading would suggest that this “zone” is not a neutral area, but the location of a transcultural exchange of authority. 26 The introduction of the notion of a contact zone destroys the ingenuousness of the first reading and the scene above now gains a political imperative that offers two diametrically opposite interpretations. I have already suggested that it is a site of exchange of authority between one culture and another. The question now becomes: In which direction is the authority flowing? Who gains in authority from this exchange? Is the incident of the “makana hindi” now one of “anti-conquest” where “strategies of innocence are constituted in relation to older imperial rhetorics of conquest”? Certainly Ghosh constructs himself as the “innocent” in this exchange. If so, does this make him a “seeing-
man” who seeks “to secure his innocence” at the same time as he asserts his metropolitan hegemony (Pratt, 7)? If this is indeed the case, this interpretation would suggest that by dint of elevating the imported machine—and, by extrapolation, his own knowledgeable self along with it—Ghosh only increases the gap between the elite and the subaltern. But this analysis suggests too complete an innocence on the part of the villagers and this is not necessarily the case. As a process of exchange, an act of transculturalism calls on notions of “copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices”. It is an interactive mode, a transaction, which involves the subaltern just as it does the elite. Invoking Ranajit Guha in his discussion of the peasant, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes “that instead of being an anachronism in a modernizing colonial world, the peasant was a real contemporary of colonialism . . . Theirs was not a ‘backward’ consciousness—a mentality left over from the past, a consciousness baffled by modern political economic institutions and yet resistant to them. Peasants’ readings of the relations of power that they confronted in the world, Guha argued, were by no means unrealistic or backward-looking” (Chakrabarty, 13). This line of reasoning gives the power back to the subaltern. Ghosh cannot escape the test to which he is put. He is hemmed in by a circle of villagers. Tension mounts . . . we are not aware just how much until the releasing words, “At once a joyful hubbub broke out . . .” Thus a further, equally acceptable, reading of this scene would suggest that it is Ghosh who is on trial and that it is the villagers who act as arbitrators. But because these readings tend to cancel each other out in terms of a power relationship, I suggest there is still more to the significance of this machine.

Taken out of context as a piece of textual analysis it presents two sides to the relations of power, but in its appearance twice more in the narrative, the “makana hindi” offers yet
another reading: this time as a symbol of modernity and ultimate destruction. It provides the
means for forward movement in the somewhat contentious thesis of the “uneven
development” of the subaltern, but in this text the speed of that propulsion leads to
damaging consequences.\textsuperscript{27} For clarification, let me return again to the text. The importance
of the machine, of modernity, of the power dynamic, only becomes clear once the villagers
gain these machines in their own right: in a liberal view of this exchange it provides a
counter-opportunity to impress. In other words, the “thesis of uneven development . . . sees
these differences as negotiated and contained—though not always overcome—within the
structure of capital” (Chakrabarty, 47). For a time, with the acquisition of material goods,
the subordinated ‘other’ draws level: “Following his [Abu-‘Ali’s] instructions, they filed
obediently through the guest-room, carrying in turns a TV set, a food processor, a handful
of calculators, a transistor radio . . .” (298). The villagers’ acquisition of Western goods not
only provides an excuse to invite Ghosh into their homes and into their community; it also
offers an opportunity to impress him with their new refrigerators, television sets and
renovated houses. In “converting differences into sets of preferences”, the levelling effect of
this show of modernity permits friendship with someone who can now be perceived, and
treated, as a peer and not as elite (Chakrabarty, 48).\textsuperscript{28} The subordinate draws level through
the attainment of a capitalist lifestyle. But it becomes impossible to discuss any transition to
capitalism without reference to Marxian thought—thus providing yet another method of
analysis which can exist in parallel and not necessarily at counter-point with the more
liberal view expressed above—and there is no clearer way to put this than to refer to
Chakrabarty’s critique of Marx in which he states:\textsuperscript{29}

My reading of Marx does not in any way obviate that need for engagement
with the universal. What I have attempted to do is to produce a reading in
which the very category ‘capital’ becomes a site where both the universal
history of capital and the politics of human belonging are allowed to interrupt each other’s narrative. . . . Capital brings into every history some of the universal themes of the European Enlightenment, but on inspection the universal turns out to be an empty place holder whose unstable outlines become barely visible only when a proxy, a particular, usurps its position in a gesture of pretension and domination. And that, it seems to me, is the restless and inescapable politics of historical difference to which global capital consigns us. (70)30

If I were to apply this reading to the two scenes from the text described above, my interpretation of what Ghosh is saying gains yet again in complexity. Signals within the text now point to Abu-‘Ali’s capitalistic opportunism in sending his four sons into the inevitable danger associated with a war zone to take advantage of the employment prospects in Iraq that had become available during the Gulf War. Abu-‘Ali is portrayed as a bloated capitalist machine, the “image of an engorged python”, the sons as the “abstract labour” component (297).31 “Capital’s power is autocratic, writes Marx. Resistance is rooted in a process through which capital appropriates the will of the worker” (Chakrabarty, 59).

The moral of this text becomes all the more sinister. Indeed, capitalism in the thin disguise of money and what money can buy dominates the chapter Ghosh has titled “Going Back” which covers his two subsequent returns to Egypt. As he goes from one house to another on his second visit, he not only finds Nashawy changed to the point where “it looked as though the village had been drawn on to the fringes of a revolution”, but also finds that the change in the villagers is as marked: “It was not just that . . . so many of the old adobe houses had been torn down and replaced . . . something more important had changed as well, the relations between different kinds of people in the village had been upturned and rearranged.
Families who at that time had counted amongst the poorest in the community . . . were now the very people who had new houses, bank accounts, gadgetry. I could not have begun to imagine a change on this scale . . .” (321). That Marx’s oft-quoted dictum—“to each according to his needs”—is fast becoming abused by an influx of wealth is often illuminated in this chapter just as the insidious nature of greed is foregrounded. For example, when the sacrificial Nabeel leaves for work in Iraq, he is initially missed for himself alone. But as time goes by, the family becomes dependent on the increasing sums of money he sends back home. When, one day, he suggests building his family a house in absentia by remitting money for its construction “they called him back immediately” and the project was started without delay, but the aid soon gets taken for granted. Nabeel quickly becomes a money machine. Although he has avoided the deadening impact of “factory” work, per se, he has nevertheless become absorbed rather unhappily into a system just as unrelenting. In the last pages of the book, on Ghosh’s third and last visit to the village, he again enquires about Nabeel and in this exchange the capitalist implications are clear:

“Why didn’t Nabeel come back with you? What news of him?”

“He wanted to come back. In fact he thought that he would. But then he decided to stay for a few more months, make a little more money, so that they could finish building this house.” . . .

“And besides,” said Fawzia, “what would Nabeel do back here? Look at Isma’il—just sitting at home, no job, nothing to do . . .”

“But still, he wanted to come back. He’s been there three years. It’s more than most, and it’s aged him”. (351-2)

In the last line of the book: “Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History” (353).

A genuine sense of unease for the subaltern manifests itself in the narrative, but along with this apprehension, can a sense of responsibility also be determined? Although the “makana
hindi” fulfills a number of functions—as a sign of respect and knowledge, an icon of capitalist desire, a representation of modernity, of ‘progress’, and as a symbol for “the world’s most advanced machinery . . . [the] guns and tanks and bombs” of chemical and nuclear warfare (350)—and even though it acts as a conduit for a flow of authority back and forth in terms of transcultural exchange, in the end it amounts to an indicator of metropolitan power. And it would appear that this power, this authority, is consciously held by Ghosh. If this statement needs further amplification, it can be found by returning once again to the image of Ghosh on his knees in front of the “makana hindi”? Does this not raise the machine to the status of idol, suggesting a superstition among the villagers despite their strictly Moslem upbringing? And does not this superstitious nature once again return them to peasant status? This is illuminated by an argument that takes place at the end of the narrative with the Egyptian official’s reply to Ghosh: “In the villages, as you must know, there is a lot of ignorance and superstition; the fellaheen talk about miracles for no reason at all. You’re an educated man. You should know better than to believe the fellaheen on questions of religion” (340). Again there is a contrast between knowledge and ignorance, the metropolis and the periphery. Ultimately it is not just the “Indian machine’s” function as a symbol of metropolitan power, but Ghosh’s close identification with it that burdens him with a sense of responsibility.

This gives rise to a number of questions. By what set of ‘European’ values and standards are the Egyptian villagers being judged? What capitalist judgement is encoded in the exchanges that take place in the “contact zones”? What of the official’s insistence that village superstition will disappear with “development and progress”, those symbols of Western authority? As late as 1990, success is measured by moving to the “outside”, a discourse of
freedom which becomes, eventually, a trap. The “Western” values and standards that have been inscribed upon the villagers show the transculturation taking place as the subjugated subjects engage with the “transculturating elements of metropolitan discourses” (Pratt, 143). I refer back to my argument earlier in which I claimed that the machine acts as the dominant factor in the “contact zone” just as in Pratt’s defining space of “colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of . . . radical inequality . . . A ‘contact’ perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and ‘travelees,’ not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (6-7). This, it would appear, is what is happening here. Despite a reading that could suggest that the power is returned to the subaltern, at text’s end I suggest that Ghosh’s selection of material objectifies the village and its people leaving us with an image of backwardness, of not measuring up, with a reductive view of the native and the “essentializing discursive power” of what is, still, a metropolitan discourse (Pratt,153). In “a parodic, transculturating gesture”, Ghosh returns his discourse to its context of origin, the capitalist metropolis. And so, just as Ghosh’s text ‘fits’ Clifford’s definition of ethnography, so too does it leave itself open to charges of “orientalism”.

Accordingly, what concerns me at this point is Said’s argument quoted earlier: the clear “ontological and epistemological distinction” that Ghosh draws between the elite and the subaltern, the theories he puts forward in an admittedly subtle way “concerning the Orient [or, more exactly, village Egypt’s interaction with the rest of the world, specifically Iraq].
its people, customs . . . destiny”. It concerns me, too, that there is a power relation written into an “authorized” view of this nature, which has been compiled by a foreigner who carries, after all, the accreditation of an ethnographer.33 Clifford, for example, claims that the “development of ethnographic science cannot ultimately be understood in isolation from more general political-epistemological debates about writing and otherness. . . . If ethnography produces cultural interpretations through intense research experiences, how is unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account? How, precisely, is a garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes circumscribed as an adequate version of a more or less discrete ‘other world’ composed by an individual author?” (24-5).

Is this proof that Ghosh is not as ‘avowedly anti-“orientalist”’ as I suggested he might be at the beginning of this chapter? That his text is not as innocent of “orientalist” practice as it first appears? On the face of it, it would certainly seem so. But it remains unlikely for a number of very good reasons that Ghosh would write an “orientalist” text. Quite apart from his training in the “new ethnography”, he is fully aware of hegemonic power structures and would be highly unlikely to write a text that colluded with any form of Eurocentric behaviour. Thus it could be construed that the line of argument I have been following here is, in fact, a resistant reading to this text. Certainly, postcolonial discourse would deem it so. Otherwise, why would Ranajit Guha select an episode from *In an Antique Land* for reprint in *Subaltern Studies*?34

The key may well lie in the historiographical dimension of this text which I have not so far discussed.35 Let me return to one of the reviews of *In an Antique Land* in which Bruce King
claims that *In an Antique Land* “could be seen as a better-written, reader-friendly, improved version of the self-conscious contemporary anthropological study in which the author deconstructs his expected story, puts the cards or documents on the table for critical inspection, and discusses the dangers of constructing the ‘Other’”. An examination of what King is saying in this review provides a good place to challenge my own argument at this point.

I need to look first at the somewhat fragile link of the two Indians overseas which not only serves as the *raison d’être* for the book, but also apparently provides Ghosh with sufficient connective tissue to give him the “sense of entitlement” that he needs to sanction his “right” to be in Egypt at all (*In an Antique Land*, 19). In the context of analyzing the motives underlying the text, how this relationship works to assuage Ghosh’s conscience on the matter is not as important as his recognition—and the voicing of that recognition—of the fact that as a non-national he is trespassing on foreign territory. This double link—insofar as the slave provides him with a “right” to research the slave’s life in Egypt and that the scholarship that enabled him to do so was provided by “a family of expatriate Indians”—is mentioned only once in the text and never fully explained. It exists as a partial disclosure. But treated as a gap, or silence, it gains stature within the book and becomes intrinsic to the meaning and, therefore, the final argument. This provides the first clue that Ghosh is fully aware of the difficulties of representation—or “the dangers of constructing the ‘Other’”—and also points up a nationalist disposition discussed earlier in that he does not choose to research or write under a broad Oriental umbrella (as, of course, does Said). Ghosh makes it clear that he is Indian, not Egyptian, and in writing about Egypt, he makes obvious his understanding that he is as vulnerable to charges of “orientalism” as any other traveller on
alien ground. However, the Saidian thesis provides that Ghosh is vulnerable to charges of “orientalism” on two counts: both in studying another culture and writing about it. Said’s insistence on this point is non-negotiable: “For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact” (Orientalism, 11). While it could be argued that Ghosh is an Oriental—which, in this instance, overrides his Indianness—and is, after all, writing only about another country within that sphere, I think that his words—“I knew nothing then about the Slave of MS H.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement”—foreground his need for justification “to be there” (In an Antique Land, 19). This further begs the question as to why—if Ghosh feels he needs a reason to provide an “entitlement” to write about another area of the Orient—Said deems himself free to use the entire region, in particular India, for his study, research and authorial purposes. There is an irony here. But somewhat paradoxically, this ‘admission’ on Ghosh’s part only strengthens his position. Thus, what is at first perceived as a weakness gives life to the text and becomes its strength.

In the first instance, I suggested that the slave acts as a parallel protagonist in this text. But now, in an inversion of this notion, I propose that the reconstructed “Bomma” drives an historiographical research project that exists alongside Ghosh’s ethnographic representation of the subaltern. As such, for my purposes here, I will assign him an opposite role to that of the main character: that of antagonist. In terms of historical or narrative importance, the
significance of the slave is doubtful. As Clifford Geertz comments, the slave’s story is indeed “a wandering, parabolic tale, derived from searching for incidental references and uncertain clues in documents difficult to find, difficult to read and even more difficult to interpret”.39 At the end of the sequence of events we know little about Bomma other than his reconstructed name, that he existed as part of the entourage of a Jewish merchant called Ben Yiju during the seventeen years Yiju spent in Mangalore (a small port on India’s southwestern coast) and that he then left India for Egypt with his Jewish ‘master’.40 However, in terms of the postcolonial discourse within which I am deconstructing Ghosh’s text, the appearance of the slave is politically crucial because he opens up the grand narrative of the European archive. By this I mean the “chronicling [of] the shifting relations of domination and subordination between Europeans and the rest of the world”, a point I return to later in this chapter.41

My argument is this: If I am correct in my assessment of Ghosh’s élitist representation of himself alongside the subaltern, the existence of the slave and the ensuing research opportunity provides him with something more than a locative “right to be there”. I believe that the dialectic he sets up between the “two Indians abroad”—the ‘antagonism’ I mentioned—provides an opportunity for somewhat more than an “entitlement” to research and to write up Bomma’s story, the account of which is slight from any angle. Instead I suggest that Ghosh has extended this “sense of entitlement” to his politically sensitive representation of Egypt and the villagers amongst whom he resides. In this way, those sporadic and seemingly arbitrary segments of text interleaved with, but separate from, the main story then gain significance in providing evidence fundamental to the thesis of this
chapter: to prove, or disprove, his anti-“orientalism”. It presents Ghosh with the chance I have not yet allowed him—to present his side of the “orientalist” story.\(^{42}\)

In this respect, I need to return to the beginning of the text, the start of the slave’s story—“[T]he slave of MS H.6 first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942” (\textit{In an Antique Land}, 13)—in order to examine the methodology Ghosh employs in his research.

Having just won a scholarship at that time, serendipity plays a part in his choice of research subject in that his initial interest is sparked by a letter he came across in “a library in Oxford in the winter of 1978” (19).\(^{43}\) At that stage Ghosh had never heard of the “chamber known as the Geniza” in the synagogue of Ben Ezra where he was to spend much of his time looking for evidence of Bomma’s existence. And although there are glimpses of discourse in the preceding pages, this is the point at which one realizes how implausible the imperialist attitude I attributed to Ghosh earlier becomes. I quote from a “History” segment that in this text is placed in juxtaposition to the historiography with which Ghosh traces the slave’s story:

In the eighteenth century, a new breed of traveller began to flock into Cairo, Europeans with scholarly and antiquarian interests, for whom Masr [Cairo] was merely the picturesque but largely incidental location of an older, and far more important landscape. By this time Europe was far in advance of the rest of the world in armaments and industry, and on the points of those weapons the \textit{high age of imperialism} was about to be ushered in. Masr had long since ceased to be the mistress of her own destiny; she had become a province of the Ottoman Empire, which was itself enfeebled now, \textit{allowed to keep its territories only by the consent of the Great Powers}. The Indian Ocean trade, and the culture that supported it, had long since been \textit{destroyed by European} navies. Transcontinental trade was no longer a shared enterprise; the merchant shipping of the high seas was \textit{now entirely controlled by the naval powers of Europe}. It no longer fell to Masr to send her traders across the Indian Ocean; instead, the geographical position that had once brought her such great riches had now made her \textit{the object of the Great Powers’ attentions}, as a potential bridge to their territories in the Indian Ocean. . . . she was also gradually evolving into a new continent of \textit{riches for the Western scholarly and artistic imagination}. From the late seventeenth century onwards, \textit{Europe was swept by a fever of Egyptomania} . . . the study of Egyptian antiquities passed from being an esoteric and
Let me pause for a moment. Besides describing a number of historical enterprises—naval ventures, the diminution of the Ottoman Empire, merchant shipping and a lust for the “exotic” in the form of oriental antiques—in which Cairo is located at the centre, the mood and intent behind Ghosh’s message of “the high age of imperialism” is made quite clear. Words and phrases such as “Egyptomania”, “the Great Powers”, “controlled”, “consent”, “Western scholarly and artistic imagination” and the repetition of “Europe” have a strong resonance with the terms used by Edward Said in particular and the postcolonial canon in general. What Ghosh is describing is an unremitting exercise of power in the “contact zones” within which the games of supremacy—Pratt’s “asymmetrical relations of power”—are played out. It is textual segments of this nature, admittedly brief and comparatively few, that allow Ghosh to state quite clearly where he is located in terms of metropolitan authority. There is a centrality to this rendition of the imperial vision that is presented in quite a different way in the story of village Egypt.

Thus, it is the presence of the slave that opens the text up to the articulation of events that takes place in the Geniza, the small and circumscribed, but significant, example of a “contact zone” in which this conflict is acted out, and which—standing as it does as a symbol of scholarly “Egyptomania”—achieves the status of a major player in this text. Attached to the Synagogue of Ben Ezra—the centre of the Jewish diaspora in the Fustat quarter of Old Cairo—from its completion in 882 it was used as a storehouse for all manner of documents both printed and written which included sacred texts, scrolls and books as well as “letters, bills, contracts, poems, marriage deeds and so on” (94). When the Ben Ezra was demolished in 1890 and a new synagogue erected in its place, a cooperative effort
between the officials of the synagogue and the antiquity dealers of Cairo resulted in the sale of the remaining rabbinic documents to libraries all over the world. But the “freshly-charted field of scholarly enterprise” to which Ghosh refers starts in earnest, in respect of the Geniza of Ben Ezra, around 1854 with the first of a number of visits by Jewish scholars who evidently displayed various levels of unscrupulousness in their rapacious gathering of the contents which were progressively sold to libraries and museums around the world. By World War I, the Geniza had been totally emptied of all documents. Today, these collections—some private—exist throughout Europe, the USA and Canada, notably as the Taylor-Schechter Collection at Cambridge University, in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University and throughout the Jewish diaspora.

Before commenting on Ghosh’s representation of the Jewish plunder of the contents of the Geniza, I would like to quote from James Clifford’s account of an incident which took place in a “contact zone” on the other side of the world. Clifford describes an occasion in 1989 when he was invited by the Portland Museum of Art in Oregon to participate in a discussion concerning the updating of the museum’s Rasmussen Collection which had been originally assembled in 1920. This collection consisted of objects relating to the Tlingit tribe and the director of the Institute “had taken the unusual step of inviting a representative group of Tlingit authorities” to the meeting (Routes, 188).

During this meeting, selected objects from the collection—“a raven mask, an abalone-inlaid headdress, a carved rattle”—were brought out and presented to the elders for comment. Clifford’s remarks are significant: “The curatorial staff seems to have expected the discussions to focus on the objects of the collection. I, at any rate, anticipated that the elders
would comment on them in a detailed way, telling us, for example: this is how the mask was
used; it was made by so-and-so; this is its power in terms of the clan, our traditions, and so
forth. [But] In fact, the objects were not the subject of much direct commentary by the
elders, who had their own agenda for the meeting. They referred to the regalia with
appreciation and respect, but they seemed only to use them as *aides-mémoires*, occasions
for the telling of stories and the singing of songs” (188-9).

At no time did the elders address the objects directly. To the Tlingits, these objects were *not*
“primarily ‘art’. They were referred to as ‘records,’ ‘history,’ and ‘law’, inseparable from
the myths and stories expressing ongoing moral lessons with current political force” with an
overall emphasis on Tlingit land rights, a current, highly controversial, issue (191). The
objects were left at the margin, decentred, becoming instead a narrative of tribal history,
inextricable from the history of the tribe. This consultative experience lasted three days,
leaving the staff of the Portland Art Museum with a dilemma. The Tlingits were but one of
a number of tribal groups with a claim to different objects within the collection. To address,
consult with and present the stories of each in a fair and like-minded manner would be
unwieldy and beyond the capacity of museum staff. It was clear that the collection could not
be updated quite as simply as anticipated. It was also obvious that the objects could no
longer be viewed in isolation purely as museum pieces with a past tribal “context”, but
instead were part of the forging of a relationship that gave voice to the tribe’s “ongoing
stories of struggle” (193). Clifford makes the point, however, that the Tlingit’s demands
were not in the shape of a commercial transaction, but as a bid for reciprocity with the
“intent to challenge and rework a relationship. The objects of the Rasmussen Collection,
however fairly or freely bought and sold, could never be entirely possessed by the museum.
They were sites of a historical negotiation, occasions for an ongoing contact” (194). What
Clifford is establishing here is the Tlingits’ imperative: their concern was not in establishing an identity, nor were the objets d’arts in themselves of any great importance in their agenda. The fundamental issue lay in being heard, in asserting a value for their community with its current concerns and issues that was placed above and beyond a collection of tribal artifacts from the past. Thus, for a space of time, the place of meeting at the Portland Art Museum becomes more than an area for discussion, it becomes a “contact zone” in which Pratt’s “asymmetrical relations of power” are at work, and where the “organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship—a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull. The organizing structure of the museum-as-collection functions like Pratt’s frontier. A center and a periphery are assumed: the center a point of gathering, the periphery an area of discovery” (192-3).

If I apply this rationale of “contact zone” to the contents of the Geniza, viewing it now in the light of “museum-as-collection” so that the documents are reduced to the chamber in which they were stored, the accusation of stealing that underlies Ghosh’s part-personification of the Egyptian capital—“Now it was Masr, which had sustained the Geniza for almost a millennium, that was left with no trace of its riches: not a single scrap or shred of paper to remind her of that aspect of her past”—sustains his argument (95). But it is a weak argument. Of his own admission, the documents lay unrecognized for most of the eight centuries they lay in the chamber and the chances of their survival at the time Ben Ezra was torn down and rebuilt were slim. While it could be argued that the accountability for what would have been, after all, a hypothetical loss of documentation lies with the nation in whose care they are placed, how far should that responsibility be taken? By Ghosh’s own admission, the collection was left in total neglect and in “its home country . . .
nobody took the slightest notice of its dispersal” (95). Should the headless “Masr” that Ghosh attempts to personify have assumed a higher sense of responsibility and greater control over the material? And in the absence of a national curatorial body, if that responsibility were to devolve from the state to the individual, would it anyway have been returned to the cosmopolitan community that populated Cairo at that time—the Jewish leaders of the community, the rabbis, the Cairene antiquity dealers, Egyptian officials, sentries and curators—some, perhaps many, of whom, it would appear, benefited in any case from the transactions?

But there is a more important issue that needs to be decided here. Is it enough to assume Cairo, or Egypt, as the owner of the material?\(^47\) Surely the question—To whom do these documents actually belong?—begs reflection? Do they belong to Cairo? Or do they belong to the Jewish diaspora? It is, after all, well documented that the majority of Jews living in Egypt by the end of the nineteenth century were immigrants from other lands, that there was only ever a small number of indigenous Jews in Cairo and that, by the end of World War II, there were few if any left in the city at all. The word ‘diaspora’ itself was, after all, coined to describe the scattered colonies of Jews after the Babylonian exile. Since these documents were all purportedly written in Hebrew, a case could surely be made for their return to the diaspora? Ghosh’s claim that in “steal[ing the] manuscripts from his fellow Jews in Palestine” the Jewish collector “was merely practising on his co-religionists the methods that Western scholarship used, as a normal part of its functioning, throughout the colonial world” produces a worn polemic that reverberates with that of Said, but which as an argument damages his defence (\textit{In an Antique Land}, 84). For the most part, if not
exclusively, it would appear that the documents did indeed find their respective resting places in the metropolitan museum, “the historical destination for the cultural productions lovingly and authoritatively salvages, cares for, and interprets” (Routes, 193). Not, indeed, in specific Jewish collections, nor in Israel, but in the diaspora.

However, the purpose behind my discussion of “museums as contact zones” is to illuminate how Ghosh uses this way of thinking as a device to position himself in the anti-“orientalist” debate. Thus, somewhat ironically, my point lies not in the strength of Ghosh’s argument, but in the fact that the argument exists in the first place. The point at issue with which I started this portion of my debate was an elitism on Ghosh’s part that I read into certain segments of the text. I would suggest that the very fact that Ghosh uses with such passion—in a text that is comparatively mild—a similar argument to that of Said proves quite conclusively his attitude towards Western power structures. Against this reading, Ghosh’s several and somewhat arbitrary demonstrations of what could be construed as superiority provide instead opportunities for a candor that gives the text its seminal integrity.

**Dialogic encounters**

But there is another device that Ghosh calls on in his shaping of this book—a literary technique which has become equally at home among the more recent ethnographic methodology—and something that the Russian theorist Bakhtin terms the “artistic key” of polyphony (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 13).\(^{48}\) Although I discussed Bakhtin more broadly at an earlier stage, some of the principles bear revisiting here for their pertinence to the way in which Amitav Ghosh represents his “heroes”. In his discussion of Dostoevsky’s work, Bakhtin claims the Russian writer was responsible for creating a totally new
novelistic genre by destroying the established forms of the basically monological European novel and replacing it with a polyphonic counterpart in which the characters’ “astonishing inner-independence . . . is achieved above all through . . . freedom and independence vis-à-vis the author in the very structure of the novel, or, more precisely, through their freedom and independence in relation to the usual externalizing and finalizing authorial definitions” (9-10). He argues that critics reduced the voices of Dostoevsky’s heroes to “a systematic monological whole, ignoring the essential plurality of unmerged consciousnesses, a deliberate part of the author’s intention” (4). They fail completely, he says, to understand that the characters are not mere instruments or vehicles for the author’s own philosophies and ideas, but instead are constructed as “free people who are capable of standing beside their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even of rebelling against him” and even responsible for, sometimes, causing a collision of wills. Critical interpretation of Dostoevsky’s work failed in that it was based upon “a single word, a single voice, a single accent” instead of being observed as part of an artistic whole and an important step forward in the tradition of the novel (37). Bakhtin actually says (or, more correctly, Emerson and Holquist’s translation, The Dialogic Imagination, says): “Everyone interprets Dostoevsky’s final word in his own way, but they all interpret it as a single word, a single voice, a single accent, and therein lies their basic mistake. The unity of the polyphonic novel which stands above the word, above the voice, above the accent remains undiscovered” (37). The way these characters celebrate their freedom is through language: they are given voices in a plurality of registers that sit alongside, and sometimes in contention with, that of the author.

James Clifford draws this notion of the dialogic forward from when it was coined in the 1920s to the anthropological present and suggests that what Bakhtin says of language can be
applied equally to cultures and subcultures in that the history of the novel has a relevance to the process of evolution in ethnographic practices. In a “process complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer . . . one must bear in mind the fact that ethnography is, from beginning to end, enmeshed in writing. This writing includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form” (The Predicament of Culture, 25). Thus, the freedom and independence given to the characters in written works does not mean the disappearance of the hero from the author’s plan, but rather “introduces him as a free man into the strict and calculated plan of the whole” and can be applied equally to fieldwork where a group of indigenous people are being interviewed or asked for their opinions.

In this respect, Clifford suggests a “utopia of plural authorship that accords to collaborators not merely the status of independent enunciators but that of writers [too]”, but acknowledges that in practical application that this has its difficulties and that such sharing, while desirable, may be designed to remain utopian. With no clear indicators of leadership, sense of ownership or responsibility, plural authorship can lead to problems with intellectual property and of professional jealousy. In practice, it was discovered the attempt at a multifaceted authorship brought up questions of authority that were difficult to resolve. Without a leader, projects quickly faltered (51). Therefore, although ethnography is becoming increasingly an area in which “authenticity, both personal and cultural, is seen as something constructed vis-à-vis others” and while the way in which opinions, experience and information is translated and transcribed in ethnography today differs markedly from the practices of twenty years ago, in reality a certain amount of “indirect style” is inevitable (274). In what I have quoted above, it is easy enough to overlook the tone—and thus the
significance—of the word “minimally” and yet the point that Clifford is making—that the “experience” component of what is actually written down is but one small constituent of something much larger—is significant. And that something “beyond the control of the writer” includes not only the cultural and religious sensitivities of the subjects, not only the ideological proclivities or political sympathies of the author, the discursive restraints of the age in which he or she writes, the methodological affiliations of the academic or publishing institution, but a whole host of other probabilities and potentialities. And that is before we have arrived at the process of interpretation at the text’s final destination: the reader. To circumvent these separate issues without losing the integrity of the text is a challenge. Clifford uses the word “enmeshed” advisedly.

How then does this “plurality of equal consciousnesses” work in Ghosh’s text? In other words, in what way and for what purpose does Ghosh bring this “genuine polyphony of full-valued voices” to his text?

I suggest that this technique works for Ghosh in a number of ways. Firstly, we have to remember that Ghosh was an ethnographic research student at the time this text was conceived. He was living and working in a land and among a religious and cultural group alien to him. He was also fully aware of the ideological consequences of representing that group in any written form. In the writing of this text, Ghosh closely follows the principles celebrated in modern ethnographic practice by allowing his characters a set of strong discourses juxtaposed with his own which are deliberately designed to present self-consciously by contrast. From a stylistic aspect, in this work particularly, the deliberate use of polyphony in this manner appears at times heavy-handed and awkward. But the
underlying effect is somewhat more subtle because it is what Ghosh actually achieves that is important here. Accordingly, this is where the device succeeds: not simply to “write” the life of village Egypt, but to allow the villagers “the plurality of full-valued voices”. Three short excerpts, all of which show a defensive Ghosh under local verbal fire, are typical of the exchanges that take place between Muslim and Hindu in this text and serve to clarify the point I am making here. The first is part of an exchange that takes place on a doorstep and portrays a hesitant Ghosh arriving at the house of a teacher he has been asked to visit only to find the person he seeks is absent.

Then, all of a sudden her eyes focused brightly on me, and she stretched out a thin, bony finger and tapped me on the shoulder. “Tell me,” she said. “Is it true what they say about you? That in your country people burn their dead?”

“Some people do,” I said. “It depends.”

“Why do they do it?” she cried. “Don’t they know it’s wrong? You can’t cheat the Day of Judgement by burning your dead. . . . You should try to civilize your people. You should tell them to stop praying to cows and burning their dead.” (125-6)

In the following excerpt, Ghosh is juxtaposed with the Imam:

I repeated again that I was greatly interested in learning about folk remedies and herbal medicines, and I had heard that no one knew more about the subject than he. I had thought that he might perhaps be flattered . . .

“Who told you those things? He demanded to know, as though I had relayed an unfounded and slanderous accusation. “Who was it. Tell me.”

“Why, everyone,” I stammered. “So many people say that you know a great deal about remedies; that is why I came to you . . .”

“Why do you want to hear about my herbs?” he retorted. “Why don’t you go back to your country and find out about your own?” (191-2)

And in a third example, again Ghosh places himself in confrontation with the Imam. Again he portrays himself as tentative and defensive. Yet again the Imam’s voice is crisp and clear. Once more, Ghosh vests the authority in his adversary:

“Tell me,” he [the Imam] said, “why do you worship cows?”
Taken by surprise I began to stammer, and he cut me short by turning his shoulder on me.

“That’s what they do in his country,” he said to the old shopkeeper. “Did you know? They worship cows.” . . .

“And shall I tell you what else they do?” he said. . . . “They burn their dead.”

Then suddenly he spun around to face me and cried: “Why do you allow it? Can’t you see it’s a primitive and backward custom? Are you savages that you permit something like that? Look at you: you’ve had some education; you should know better. How will your country ever progress if you carry on doing these things? You’ve even been to Europe; you’ve seen how advanced they are. Now tell me: have you ever seen them burning their dead?”

. . . I found myself becoming increasingly tongue-tied.

“Yes they do burn their dead in Europe,” I managed to say . . .

The Imam turned away and laughed scornfully. “He’s lying,” he said to the crowd. “They don’t burn their dead in the West. They’re not an ignorant people. They’re advanced, they’re educated, they have science, they have guns and tanks and bombs.” (235)

I have chosen examples that include a religious refrain deliberately because that this is an argument that occurs repeatedly throughout the text with only subtle variations and, accordingly, its analysis provides scope for added hermeneutic possibilities. Meanwhile, there are two points that I want to make at this juncture. The first is to address the unarguable “plurality” of voices illuminated in the examples above. Ghosh the author achieves a democratic ‘right to be heard’ by juxtaposing his Muslim characters with Ghosh the Hindu student ethnographer—sometimes in a jocular context, at others in a mocking or confrontational mode—the scenes themselves lending a particular and “full-valued” cadence to the tones his adversaries adopt. This, for Clifford, is the “new ethnography”—the voice returned to the native, the site of negotiation. The new ethnography allows the community speaks for itself. It is no longer spoken for. The existing presuppositions and assumptions of indigenous identities have given way to processes of negotiating between
often-conflicting demands for collective self-representation. This way of approaching anthropology resonates in the theories of Homi Bhabha whose redefinition of culture similarly returns the power to the ‘native informant’. Ghosh takes on the dual role of a participant in village life and observer-recorder of that particular life world.

In this way, although Ghosh is still the protagonist of this text, he constructs himself to appear as but one part of the “calculated plan of the whole”. As a consequence, his use of the Bakhtinian principles of the dialogic is a balancing gesture that allows him to appear disadvantaged beside his characters in what Said would call a “contrapuntal” shift to the ‘elitism’ I foregrounded in an earlier portion of this discussion. This without doubt strengthens Ghosh’s position. Although his description of village life unquestionably provides an “authorizing view” of what one might expect from a location in rural Egypt, he is not just the ethnographer writing up his observations, he participates, too, in the text. Secondly, by using such terminology as “tongue-tied” and “stammered”, Ghosh guarantees that the defense of his own (Hindu) position presents weakly in contrast to that of Islam. In this respect, in spite of its repetition of certain key themes in the Hindu and Muslim religions, Ghosh’s arms-length approach in this book appears to be one of denial, when nothing could be further from the truth. For example, in discussing the controversial Lojja (Taslima Nasrin) in another essay, Ghosh says: “I . . . read Lojja not as a book about Hindus in Bangladesh but rather as a book about Muslims in India. It helped me feel on my own fingertips the texture of the fears that have prompted Muslim friends of mine to rent houses under false pretenses or to buy train tickets under Hindu names. In short, it has helped me understand what it means to live under the threat of supremacist terror” (“The Fundamentalist Challenge”, 26). But in In an Antique Land, the repetition of the Hindu
versus Muslim argument is a means to that end only and thus becomes important only for its
dialectic qualities. The debate—appropriately in this context—never reaches a conclusion.

Therefore, it would seem safe to conclude—in that it provides a way around ‘writing village
egypt’—that Ghosh’s use of multiple voices provides another way of escaping the
“orientalist” trap. The “multiple subjectivities and political constraints” beyond the control
of the writer are in fact ‘controlled’ in that their voices separate out and are given value and
recognition in the clamour of the whole.

In this text, however, there is what could be termed an extension of the principles of the
dialogic and I return now to my earlier reference to the Geniza as a ‘major player’ in this
text where I was foreshadowing an even more important theoretical stage than that of the
“contact zone”. Clearly inert, the Geniza becomes a ‘player’ or character by virtue of being
given a voice. The documents that it contained become one issue, the treatment of the
chamber itself another. It is important to point out a subtlety here in terms of the use of
literary devices. By refraining from any attempt at personification in giving the Geniza a
voice, Ghosh avoids sentimentalizing or romanticizing his subject.50 The Geniza simply
becomes another significant participant in its own drama.

But this again presents difficulties. While in itself the long-overdue acknowledgement of a
site which has been overlooked by history in much the same way as the slave is a worthy
act, there is an element of sanctimonious self-righteousness evident. After all, in charting
the historiography of the Geniza, in taking advantage of the preserved and sorted documents
that were virtually inaccessible for centuries, is not Ghosh reaping the rewards for the very
actions he has condemned? If this is so, there would appear to be a degree of hypocrisy emerging in Ghosh’s account. The question then becomes: In whose currency is charting the life of the Geniza less invasive than the removal of its contents? Does the view of backwardness that Ghosh encounters in Egypt lead him to “radically ‘dialogue’ possibilities of knowledge and cognition, that is, in-mix self-centered perceptions with other-oriented perceptions to actualize a different world, script a different historiography” (Radhakrishnan, 8)?51 While Ghosh’s anti-colonial motive is clear, the result can be diametrically opposite. The point is that giving a voice to the subaltern does not in itself change either the rhetoric or the actuality. In this construction the periphery still looks up to the metropolis with its “guns and tanks and bombs”. By contrasting East with West in this way, Ghosh keeps alive images of a powerful and progressive West.52 Despite his efforts to construct it to the contrary, is Ghosh’s book still a victim of the grand narrative?

One way of answering this question is to invoke some of the reasoning of Dipesh Chakrabarty in his discussion of “minority histories”.53 Although Chakrabarty makes a distinction between Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the word “minor” and his own interpretation of that word, in the end the nuances of the term as it applies in the literary world and as Chakrabarty relates it to history amount to the same thing, that is “plural ways of being in the world” (101). Thus, by staying with “the heterogeneity of the moment when the historian meets with the peasant” Ghosh is staying with the difference between two gestures (108). On the one hand he historicizes a short, but telling, period in the life world of an Egyptian village in which the alterity of the peasants is foregrounded. On the other hand, his historiography of the slave brings the past into the present to the point where manuscript H.6 becomes part of the historicity of Ghosh’s stay in Egypt. “[T]aken together,
the two gestures put us in touch with the plural ways of being that make up our own present”. In other words, the presence of the archives in the form of the slave in the world of the village “help bring to view the disjointed nature of any particular ‘now’ one may inhabit . . . a disjuncture of the present with itself” (108-9). Thus the Bomma I described earlier as being on a similar elite level to that of Ghosh resists historicizing in that he also becomes subordinated, in this case to the grand narratives that belong to the world of archival and academic institutions.

And so while Clifford Geertz arrives at an essentialist reason for Ghosh’s sketchy representation of Bomma, ascribing it to “his natural reticence, his wish to stay apart and self-possessed” which lends his book “a sense of incompleteness”, I suggest that the story of the slave is a deliberate attempt to subvert the main story line, to provide yet another subaltern who, this time, is a fellow Indian (“A Passage to India—Amitav Ghosh in an Antique Land”). Among my suggestions for Bomma’s role in this text—parallel protagonist, antagonist—I now offer another theoretical possibility and suggest that the shadowy presence of the slave functions as Ghosh’s literary alter ego placing him between worlds, in neither the world of the village Egyptian nor of the cosmopolitan Indian, but some place apart. The “sense of incompleteness” Geertz perceives further supports my claim that this book is concerned with disjunctures and indeterminancies, of “plural ways of being”, of human difference. But this “sense of incompleteness” is also a feature of history writing as opposed to autobiography. For example, in “History and Autobiography”, Carolyn Steedman claims: “The practice of historical inquiry and historical writing is a recognition of temporariness and impermanence, and in this way is quite a different literary form from that of autobiography, which presents momentarily a completeness . . . which lies
in the figure of the writer or the teller, in the here and now, saying: that’s how it was; or, that’s how I believe it to have been” (48). The introduction of the slave provides Ghosh with von Humboldt’s tentative “bridge of understanding” over the gap between the cultures of the Hindu and the Moslems. It places him, too, in Homi Bhabha’s “third space”, the borderland which has become “a zone of contacts—blocked and permitted, policed and transgressive” (Routes, 8). Thus the incompleteness that Geertz senses becomes what Clifford would call a “crucial site for an unfinished modernity . . . a view of human location as constituted by displacement as much as by stasis” (Routes, 2).

To look more deeply at this notion of displacement, I return at this stage to the confrontation between the Imam and Ghosh at a point midway through the text which, in context, takes place within a growing crowd just as in the earlier scene of the “makani hindi”. An extension of the quote excerpted earlier ends, “At that moment, despite the vast gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling, he and I, we were travelling in the West . . . in the end, for millions and millions of people on the landmasses around us, the West meant only this—science and tanks and guns and bombs” (236). For me, this is a critical passage in In an Antique Land, one that surely is more alarming than “depressing”. Clifford’s comment on this scene—that the fact that the only common ground Ghosh can find with the Imam is that “‘they are both traveling in the West’ . . . [is a] depressing revelation for the anticolonial anthropologist” (Routes, 5)—strikes at the heart of the matter but does not go quite far enough. What is the purpose behind this exchange in an Egyptian village square? Why this example of power play that is posited on points of religious difference, but ends somewhere “in the West”? And why use this scene as such an early climax? Its location midway through the text belies its function as a climax, but the
narrative never regains its tension. The next two segments of the book—Ghosh’s return to his comfort zone in Mangalore and his eventual return to Nashawy—have their high points, but more in the nature of a lengthy conclusion than anything else. What happens when discrete differences in culture disappear into the category of European thought or when cultural practices are naturalized in the name of social science? Have both Ghosh and the Imam absorbed the “idioms of the conqueror”? It would appear to be so, but since this contradicts many of my claims so far, let me strive for another interpretation that will provide a rationale for what appears such an early climax.

The key I think lies in a longish sentence a little further down the page which becomes crucial in deconstructing this text. Pondering the heated exchange, Ghosh walks away: “We had acknowledged that it was no longer possible to speak, as Ben Yiju or his Slave . . . might have done: of things that were right, or good, or willed by God; it would have been merely absurd for either of us to use those words, for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development” (237). In this thought process, it is the notion of the “dismantled rung” that most interests me. It seems to me here that Ghosh’s hypothesis claims that but for that “rung”, that step that no longer exists, the understanding between men of different cultures would have been forged in a different space, a different language, from that of the language of power. The West’s insistence on “Development”, on materialism, on reaching ever upwards towards the metaphor of war, has destroyed the means whereby an “Imam and an Indian”—two people in the maelstrom of humanity—may once have connected and communicated. “God” as metaphor for righteousness is placed in binary with the Western “Development” of authority and relentless control.55 A ladder allows for no lateral movement of thought or body: the choices are restricted to up or down,
in or out. The “understanding” that Ghosh and the Imam arrive at is prescribed by language and delineated by a Western set of values which are the symbols of an imperialistic mindset not yet dead.\(^{56}\)

If the passage is read in this way, it does indeed become a metaphor for “unfinished modernity”. In a literary sense it is deflected from its status of climax and becomes one of the sites of conflict within the narrative which leads naturally to the scene discussed earlier where the inhabitants of Nashawy filed proudly and “obediently through the guest-room, carrying in turns a TV set, a food processor, a handful of calculators, a transistor radio”.

It is clear what Ghosh is trying to do in this work. His own anti-imperialist position is not in question. He comes from a solid understanding of the problems inherent in representation and is certainly no “seeing-man” despite his travel within, and subsequent representation of, foreign lands. To the contrary, he makes every effort within the obvious restrictions of a narrative medium to reduce his status as author to that of fellow character so at least the appearance of authorial power contained in what is still a master discourse is minimized. While there is an honesty akin to that of Browne in his rendition of the villagers and village life, Ghosh is fully aware of the ideological processes that underpin his text in terms of psychological engagements and linguistic registers. That much is patently obvious. But in terms of the controlling argument of this thesis—the impossibility of representing another culture without incurring charges of “orientalist” practice—it would appear to be equally apparent that despite the unarguably high level of self-reflexivity he brings to the text, in spite of his awareness of contemporary ethnographic sensitivities and his use of the dialogic, and although he attempts to use the slave as a link back to a world as yet unfettered
by capitalist demands, his frame of reference remains the West. This may be a realist text that claims to be mimetic, but deconstruction finds ruptures that imply other than realism.

Take for example this statement that follows his impassioned exchange with the Imam quoted earlier: “I felt myself a conspirator in the betrayal of the history that had led me to Nashawy” (my emphases, 237). Placed only two-thirds through the book, it is not immediately clear, even in context, exactly what Ghosh means by this statement. A deconstruction returns us again to Bomma, the search for whose history provides the “sense of entitlement” in terms of Ghosh’s stay in Nashawy, and the genuine sense of guilt that Ghosh feels in aligning himself with the West in the East/West binary that stands at the core of his argument with the town’s holy man. As conspirator, Ghosh is colluding with the power-base; as slave, the Bomma with whom he has formed a connection remains a part of the disempowered East. The implication embedded in this statement is that through Bomma, Ghosh has ‘betrayed’ the greater cause. In invoking the discourse of power earlier in the argument, he has become complicit with the master race. As I have already discussed, to be a slave in the twelfth century was something quite different from entrapment in the pernicious slave trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and thus it has to be admitted that the link Ghosh makes between Bomma and the subordinated races that the slave symbolises is fragile. But nonetheless the connection in the connotation of a relative lack of power resides in the fact that Bomma’s status, for all their friendship, was obviously lower than that of his master. Certainly the intention overrides such essentialism and resonates with earlier passages containing descriptions of the European mercantile trade and the possession of the “high seas” by the “Great Powers” (80).
Thus, taken in spirit rather than in essence, I suggest that this sense of ‘betrayal’ becomes closely aligned to the “sense of entitlement” that Ghosh feels so strongly. The linkage gains clarity if I quote more fully from the epigraph from Charles Johnson’s Middle Passage that heads this chapter: “The ‘I’ that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backwards to perhaps the beginning of time. What I felt, seeing this was indebtedness. What I felt, plainly, was a transmission to those on deck of all I had pilfered, as though I was but a conduit or window through which my pillage and booty of ‘experience’ passed” (162).58

I use this passage merely to emphasize the emotions and depth of Ghosh’s reaction when he is forced to realize that he is still “travelling in the West”. The emotion of Johnson’s protagonist captures Ghosh’s endeavours in reaching backwards through history, his “sense of entitlement” or “indebtedness” to the slave for his experience in Egypt, and the realization that once this experience is ruptured by the introduction of the East/West binary that he too has colluded with the dominant outlook of the West. In other words, his reconstructive twelfth-century study is only feasible because of the earlier scattering, collecting and preserving of the documents from the Cairo Geniza, the “pillage” he so soundly condemns.

I suggest that along with the anger of the young ethnographer is a measure of disappointment in himself when he realizes that he is the beneficiary of an earlier Western greed, that his “sense of entitlement” rests on the information he is obtaining from the documents retrieved from the chamber, that by making use of stolen goods, he has betrayed Bomma and, it follows, all others at the margin. Despite Ghosh’s self-conscious dialogism,
despite his position of “writing the Orient” from his location as an Oriental, there proves to
be no escape from the “orientalist” gaze.\textsuperscript{59}
Notes


2 Bakhtin discussing the appearance of “certain germs of polyphony” in the works of some of the great European writers (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, tr. R. W. Rotsel (Np: Ardis, 1973), 28. With regard to Shakespeare’s plays, for example, he asserts that the essence of polyphony—the “plurality of full-valued voices”—applies “only in relation to his work as a whole, and not in relation to the individual plays”. In each play the hero’s voice still dominates.

3 This edition of *In an Antique Land* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).


5 Although Clifford uses this term freely, I continue to find this an unfortunate combination of words. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is characteristically forthright: “I think of the ‘native informant’ as a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man—a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation” (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.

6 Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956 and grew up in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, Iran and India. He graduated from the University of Delhi before studying anthropology at Oxford for which he received a PhD in 1982.

7 I used this term advisedly, not in the sense of imparting an essentialism to Ghosh, but rather as descriptive of the cultural identity he places in juxtaposition to the Egyptian world of this text. Or as Edward Said puts it in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), “... we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations (although part of their enduring appeal is that they seem and are considered to be like essentializations) but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions ...”. (60). Or for another interesting opinion on Indian nationality, see Spivak, “Strategy, Identity, Writing”, *The Post-colonial Critic*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York and London: Routledge, 1990). In particular: “‘India’, for people like me, is not really a place with which they can form a national identity because it has always been an artificial construct. ‘India’ is a bit like saying ‘Europe’. When one is talking about a European identity, for example, one is obviously reacting against the United States. ... ‘Indian-ness’ is not a thing that exists. ... The name India was given by Alexander the Great by mistake. The name Hindustan was given by the Islamic conquerors. The name Bharat, which is on the passport, is in fact a name that hardly anyone uses, which commemorates a mythic king. So it isn’t a place that we Indians can think of as anything, unless we are trying to present a reactive front, against another kind of argument” (39).

8 See my earlier discussion of Žižek and of the essence existing in the mask itself.

9 Although texts that defy easy categorization into fiction and non-fiction have become not only acceptable but, dare I say, ‘trendy’ over the last ten years, in the early 90s when most of the reviews of *In an Antique Land* appeared, critics and publishers were more comfortable with the idea of genre-specific texts. In this period, one of my own novels was declined by a major publishing house because an otherwise favourable review from one of its readers suggested that the book might be “hard to place because it falls between genres”.

10 From an interview between Ghosh and Frederick Aldama in *World Literature Today* 76.2 (2002): 84.

11 In his discussion of reader responsibility in “The Fundamentalist Challenge”, *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 1995): 19-27, Ghosh claims that the only way an author can “protect” the interpretation of political matters in his book “is not to write about such matters at all. We who write fiction, even when we deal with matters of public significance, have no choice ... but to represent events as they are refracted through our characters. ... It must be in some part the reader’s responsibility to situate the event within broader contexts, to populate the scene with the products of his or her experience and learning. A reader who reads the scene literally or mean-spiritedly must surely bear some part of the blame for that reading” (26).

12 In “Trapped by Language: On Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*”, Brian Kiteley suggests that the “reason Ghosh has to bust genres, has to violate the traditions of several genres, is political, at heart. Anthropology and field work, would not allow him to include the sweeping historical research so necessary to this book ... necessary because it is personally so important to Ghosh himself, as he tries to find some ancient analogue to his own sometimes bewildering experience. A straight historical text would also not allow for the field notes
or the soul-searching . . . And a travel book would force Ghosh to ask the question: who is he writing this book for? Travel narratives have a target audience of home, back home, implicitly the hordes of imperial colonizers or, in modern times, the equivalent, tourists . . . temporary homesteaders”. This essay retrieved electronically on 28.4.2004 from http://www.du.edu/~bkiteley/ghoshtalk.html

13 I do, however, take Spivak’s point here: “We must know the limits of the narratives, rather than establish the narratives as solutions for the future, for the arrival of social justice, so that to an extent they’re working within an understanding of what they cannot do, rather than declaring war”. From The Post-colonial Critic, 19.


15 I suggest that while the communities may be “imagined” (see my earlier discussion of Benedict Anderson), Ghosh uses the two main settings of Egypt and India as a geographical reality.


18 Clifford expands on this theme of perpetual displacement in a later text: Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century. For the sake not only of consistency but because the methodology Ghosh employs here is ethnographic rather than anthropological, I have used the term ethnography throughout this chapter in all instances except when quoting directly.


20 Although Ghosh did not go on to make it his profession, his studies, thesis and field work in ethnography suggest that this text is written with full knowledge of twentieth-century ethnographic practices. This progress notwithstanding, one is forced to question how far ethnography has really progressed in terms of its representation of another culture?

21 I am re-quoting Said here for purposes of clarity.

22 For elucidation of my argument, I extrapolate from Chakrabarty’s proposition—“For capital or bourgeois, I submit, read Europe or European”—by re-casting Egypt as the East and India as Europe. See Provincializing Europe (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 30.

23 Ghosh has inverted part of the old imperialist narrative where “the ‘Indian’ was always a figure of lack” (Chakrabarty, 32).

24 In the excerpt quoted, note the change in capitalization in the word “Hindi”, used I suggest to denote the acceptance of the “Indian machine” into the Egyptian community.

25 Pratt uses the term “contact zone” in “an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect” (7).

26 Pratt claims that “transculturation . . . [a term first used in the 1940s by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz to describe Anglo-Cuban culture, incorporated in literary studies in the 1970s by Uruguayan critic Angel Roma, and now used to] describe[s] how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for. Transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone” (6). We see this in our own nation where indigenous people re-fashion or appropriate Western goods and artifacts to fulfill their own requirements. The “makana hindi” serves a dual purpose here. Not only does it illuminate the gap between the metropolis and the periphery, but it also acts as a symbol of modernity and herein gains another reading.

27 See Chakrabarty’s description of the origins of the concept of “uneven development”, the genesis of which he claims comes from “Marx’s use of the idea of ‘uneven rates of development’ in his Critique of Political Economy (1859)” (12).

28 In one way, this fulfills the traditional novelistic convention of man rising to and overcoming the challenges presented; in another, Ghosh’s rather abrupt discarding of the crippling of spirit he demonstrated so often in the first half of the text does tend to jar somewhat.
29 Chakrabarty claims that Marxist philosophies “constitute one of the founding moments of historical thought. To revisit them is to rework the relationship between postcolonial thinking and the intellectual legacies of post-Enlightenment rationalism, humanism, and historicism” (47).
30 It is a disquieting manifestation of metropolitan discourse that material possessions are so validated and imbued with such power. It brings to mind a newspaper report of some fifteen or so years ago prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre when China was going through the Four Modernizations. The report took the shape of a small paragraph in a Hong Kong English-language newspaper describing the ferocious mobbing by Chinese peasant women of a streetside sales stall. The merchandise? That age-old symbol of wealth and allure—lip colour—in its Western capitalist guise as cylinders of lipstick.
32 In drawing our attention to the difference between “History and history” in this text (198), Chew (citing Young 1990, 3) claims that the capitalized History provides for “the construction of knowledges which all operate through forms of expropriation and incorporation of the other” (207). An extrapolation of this theory can be applied to the “makaná Hindi”. See my note 24.
33 See Clifford’s discussion of the conventions in the development of ethnographic principles (The Predicament of Culture, 21-54).
35 What Guha actually says is: “The dominant groups will therefore receive in these volumes the consideration they deserve without, however, being endowed with that spurious primacy assigned to them by the long-standing tradition of elitism in South Asian studies. Indeed, it will be very much a part of our endeavour to make sure that our emphasis on the subaltern functions both as a measure of objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role” (Selected Subaltern Studies, 1988, 35-36).
36 From a review by Bruce King in World Literature Today 68.2 (1994): 430.
37 As I have explained earlier, I follow Chakrabarty’s principles of extrapolating from specific centres of dominance to a more general elitism.
38 I do not use the term ‘antagonist’ here to mean “anti-hero” so much as to illuminate the balance the slave’s story brings to the narrative.
40 Ghosh’s explanation of the term ‘slavery’ in medieval times is of interest: “. . . the terms under which Bomma entered Ben Yiju’s service were probably entirely different from those suggested by the world ‘slavery’ today: their arrangement was probably more that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood. . . . In the Middle Ages institutions of servitude took many forms, and they all differed from ‘slavery’ as it came to be practiced after the European colonial expansion of the sixteenth century. In the lifetimes of Bomma and Ben Yiju, servitude was a part of a very flexible set of hierarchies and it often followed a logic completely contrary to that which modern expectations suggest (260). S. D. Goitein claims, “As far as our actual information from the Geniza records is concerned, the male slaves, who normally acted as business representatives, are referred to . . . as respected merchants and, in case they served also as personal factotums, were greeted in letters as other members of the household, sometimes with the honourable epithet ‘the elder’” (A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza 142). Cited in 1492, 1. See also Jack Goody’s essay “Slavery in Time and Space”, ed. James Watson, Asian and African Systems of Slavery (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
42 Although it is not immediately obvious since there are no notations in the text, it is significant that the slave’s story represents the scholarly segment of this work as the extensive notes at the rear of the volume attest. It is only fair to note, too, that Ghosh was very young at this point, twenty-two years of age and “a little more befuddled by my situation [the rapid succession of events in leaving India, winning a scholarship and finding himself on the way to Egypt] than students usually are” (19).
44 Interesting is Ghosh’s research on the etymology of the word Egypt in which he says “Like English, every major European language derives its name for Egypt from the Greek Ἑγύπτος, a term that is related to the word ‘Copt’, the name generally used for Egypt’s indigenous Christians” (32). Interesting, too, are the biblical and imperialist connotations he attaches to the word. Although Ghosh uses the word Masr for Egypt, in a somewhat cryptic note to his chapter “Lataifa”, he states: “The name is Misr, properly speaking” (359).
An interesting point that Ghosh fails to raise in his fairly detailed exposition on Ben Ezra is the number of names affixed to this site. While Ghosh claims it was also known as the “Synagogue of the Palestinians” (54)—perhaps a less overtly Jewish name in terms of this discourse—the Jewish community asserts that it was originally called “the synagogue of the men of Israel” and that it subsequently became known as the Synagogue of Elijah the Prophet and then the Ben Ezra. Later still it attracted the name of the Maimonides Synagogue after one of the most famous Jews of the Middle Ages, the physician-philosopher Moses Maimonides” (Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, http://www.bh.org.il/Communities/Synagogue/cairo.asp).

Various sources cite different building dates for the synagogue from the ninth to eleventh centuries, the more definitive date of 882 being placed on it by the Nahnum Goldmann Museum. Evidently it was built on the remains of the basilica of a Coptic church that had been sold to Jews. A Jewish place of worship it may have been—although Ghosh is at pains to point out the religious diversity of the congregation—but that its architecture remained true to its Coptic roots is borne out by its description in 1884 by “British historian and archaeologist, A. J. Butler, as a small and somewhat simplified version of a Coptic basilica” (In an Antique Land, 54). Although this point, too, is contested. See In an Antique Land, n. 54, 361-2.

That the documents no longer exist in Cairo is one argument. Another pertains to the physical remains of the Ben Ezra built c. 1025 now in museums in Cairo, Paris and Jerusalem (In an Antique Land, 54).

Ghosh makes much of removing the distinction between Masr and Egypt, 32-3.

Although I discussed Bakhtin’s theory of the novel at some length in chapter one, his understanding of dialogism bears revisiting here for its relevance to the way in which Ghosh represents his characters in this book. In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Bakhtin examines the responses of a number of critics in relation to the some of the main characters that people Dostoevsky’s novels, critics who have been doing much as I have here, analysing certain parts of the book, certain characters, certain words, without considering the text as a whole.

I refer here to a religious “debate” that is never realized in this text. In each of the many instances in which religion is mentioned, the references are superficial and brief. By this I in no way suggest that the subject of religion is not important to Ghosh. His lack of defence only underscores the futility or inappropriateness of addressing the intricacy of such essentials in a work of this nature. In a significant article titled “The Fundamentalist Challenge” he examines the state of religious extremism in global society and sees it as endemic across all major religions. He concludes “that religious extremism today has very little to do with matters of doctrine and faith . . . its real texts are borrowed from sociology, demography, political science, and so on” (26).

He does not, however, apply the same control when it comes to Masr.

R. Radhakrishnan makes a good point in “Globalization, desire, and the politics of representation” published in Comparative Literature 53.4 (2001): 325-33: “. . . in a world structured hierarchically between East and West, developing and undeveloped nations, is the longing of the West for completion from the East somehow considered not as drastic as the longing of the East for completion by the West? . . . [If] the West is looking to the East for spiritual enhancement and enrichment and the East is looking to the West for technological advance . . . [W]hich of these two needs for completion would be considered more dire? In a world-historical situation where materialism and technology are valorized more than spirituality and matters ‘interior’, it is inevitable that oriental dependency would position itself in a weaker position within the global structure”.


Chakrabarty would disagree here and claim that, taken together, the way in which Ghosh has refused to “historicize” the villagers and his way of treating them as figures “illuminating a life possibility for the present . . . put[s] us in touch with the plural ways of being that make up our own present. The archives thus help bring to view the disjointed nature of any particular ‘now’ one may inhabit; that is the function of subaltern pasts”. From Provincializing Europe, 108. In his discussion of writing the histories of “suppressed groups”, Chakrabarty also makes the incontrovertible point that “History has not been the same since Thompson and Hobsbawn took up their pens to make the working classes look like major actors in society” (98).

See my earlier discussions of the way in which Deleuze and Guattari have applied the term “minor” to a certain kind of literature. Chakrabarty’s use of the word as he relates it to history has both similarities and differences with the former, in particular: “Just as the ‘minor’ in literature implies a ‘critique of narratives of identity’ and refuses to ‘represent the attainment of autonomous subjectivity that is the ultimate aim of the major narrative’, the ‘minor’ in my use similarly function to cast doubt on the “major”” (101).


The capitalized D of “Development” signals the appropriateness of a Marxist reading of this passage which would re-cast this argument in an economic mode. In her discussion of the brief appearance of the phrase “The
Asiatic Mode of Production” in Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, tr. S. W. Ryazanskaya (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 21, Spivak argues that this phrase is the “imaginary fleshing out of a difference in terms that are consonant with the development of capitalism and the resistance appropriate to it as ‘the same’. . . . It operates both Eurocentric economic migration as well as the financialization of the globe through “Development” and economic restructuring. The fact that this crucial item could not just be foreclosed as unimportant but took on a special kind of importance when ‘the different’ wanted to become agents within ‘the same’ richly testifies to this”. From *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 79.

But possibly we ask too much of narrative. It may be that we try to seek answers where there are none. Perhaps instead the subtlety that Ghosh achieves—the “pointing to an absence”, to the missing “rung”, rather than presenting a solution—is what Gayatri Spivak would applaud as a method of asserting that there is a “need rather than the way to tell the truth . . . [which] really asks for . . . a transformation of consciousness—a changing mind set. It’s in that sense [an] . . . ideological project. To develop a mind set which allows one not to be nervous about the fact that what one is saying is undermined by the way one says it, radically. Not just make that apology and then business as usual, but actually to present us with that problem which is the familiar problem of every practice, and say the point is not to produce such an analysis that you will make a nice solution and everything else will be excluded, but to forge a practice which takes this into account” (my emphases).56 It is interesting to speculate as to how Edward Said would have handled the scene I have been discussing. Less subtly than Ghosh, one suspects, but at the end, does it matter? As I will be arguing in my concluding chapter, whatever the shortcomings of *Orientalism*, its importance lies in that this picture of an overarching West—a message of hegemony long-suppressed and with a “need” to be expressed—is presented. Perhaps, as Spivak suggests, what is important is that one’s “truth” is out there; beyond that it is the task of the “responsible reader” to imbue that “truth” with the interpretation it deserves.

56 See Gilroy for the notion of “The Black Atlantic” where the mercantile sea was one of free movement for all except the black slaves, but here provides “the opportunity to reconceptualise so that capitalist, racial slavery becomes internal to modernity and intrinsically modern” (220).

57 Cited in *The Black Atlantic*, n. 92, 251. I am of course aware that Johnson is referring specifically to the “‘creolised’ double consciousnesses” of African Americans in the quoted passage and that Ghosh’s past in no way replicates the “mosaic” Johnson describes (*The Black Atlantic*, 221).

58 In this case the “orientalist gaze” becomes a question of accountability. As Radhakrishnan suggests in his discussion of Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*: “It is in the context of a creative and diasporan rethinking of the politics of proximity and distance that Ghosh uses the phrase ‘imagine with precision’. The phrase dramatizes a valuable tension between the rigor invoked by the term ‘precision’, which denotes a certain representational fidelity as well as accountability. . . . Precision operates as a form of global accountability as well as connectedness that functions as the ethical a priori that sanctions the attempt of every location to name and understand itself. Precision becomes the ethic as well as the narrative aesthetic whereby the story of every self is committed not to violate the story of the other. Precision is honored as that radical alterity without which the narrative of humanity degenerates into the history of warring nations, militarized boundaries, and homes that reek with hatred of the other”.


Conclusion

HOW ANDREA LEVY “WRITES” THE WEST

This [fictional] representation must be such that it induces the proper sense of horror at the utter difference, the utter shapelessness, and the utter inhumanity of what must be humanized.

Frank Kermode 1

...a questioning of the colonial past is intractably tied to the crisis of securing identity in an age of collapsing boundaries.

Simon Gikandi 2

For a discussion that will draw together much of what I have said in preceding chapters, I turn now to writer Andrea Levy whose latest novel, Small Island, is a recent winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction and, as a work of art, highly deserving of a place among the works listed in this thesis. 3 However, the pre-eminent merit of both Levy and her book to this study lies in her twenty-first-century interest in the tensions of “empire”, tensions that not only provide the thematic focus for this novel, but which, to borrow a phrase from Simon
Gikandi, are “intractably tied” to the issue of identifying critical relationships between self and place.

Andrea Levy was born in London of Jamaican parents who immigrated to Britain on the SS *Empire Windrush* in 1948 and who were among the first West Indians to respond to Britain’s call for help to re-build England after the war. *Small Island* functions as a tribute to those men and women who took every sort of post-war menial job available, from street sweepers to porters, cleaners, drivers and, later, nurses. Many of the migrants were ex-servicemen who had already fought on behalf of Britain who were attracted to England primarily because of high unemployment in the Caribbean. However, as Levy emphasizes in her novel, England was so different from their homeland that it held an almost dreamlike allure. That this attraction was fundamentally based on illusion is demonstrated in the desire expressed by her protagonist in *Small Island*: “I did not dare to dream that it would one day be I who would go to England. It would one day be I who would sail on a ship as big as a world and feel the sun’s heat on my face gradually change from roasting to caressing” (9). Thus, like all migrant experiences, the readjustment had its difficulties and *Small Island* is about the hurdles its characters progressively face and largely overcome.

However, this theme is not new for Levy. The issue of being black in a country where people still harboured a seventeenth-century fear of people of different races is so strong that it has provided the subject matter she grapples with in most of her earlier semi-autobiographical books. She has been described as a “literary pioneer” in that when she first approached mainstream publishers, they were hesitant or disinterested in her work because “there weren’t many black people writing”. Now, four novels later—all of which have been
critically acclaimed—she not only locates herself as a black British writer, but revels in both parts of her identity—the black and the British, reflecting the confidence she has gained in the process. She calls herself “the bastard child of Empire. I’m the bastard child Britain doesn’t want to acknowledge”. Since her clearly stated “black British” identity holds an element of challenge, this is the point at which I want to start my own process of exploration of this writer and her latest book.6

The first point to make, then, is that Small Island, too, is a book about identity, but that it illuminates an identity inextricably tied to politics. The second is that since she lives in one country, but acknowledges her roots in another, she has a lot in common with several figures in this study, not the least of whom is Said himself. However, unlike many of the other writers I have discussed, there is no ambiguity of identity in either her latest work or in her own assertions. I suggest that Levy’s celebration of her “black British” identity is not based on an assertion of “doubled identity” as is Rushdie’s “British Indian” for example. Where I maintained that Rushdie’s claim to a British nationality was in part a move for ‘political correctness’ and that while he was comfortable in a British role, his heart lay in his homeland, one does not get that feeling from Levy.7 Not for her are the “Indias of the mind”. Neither is the essence of what Levy means by “black British” found in Ghosh’s Indianness, nor in Browne’s Englishness for that matter. Although she writes of Jamaica with empathy, her descriptive passages of the island and its people are distanced; Rushdie’s “sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” is almost completely missing.8
But neither is being British a cause for pride. She is forthright in interview. “All my books have been about trying to understand who I am and the position I’m in,” Levy says. “When I say I’m English, its [sic] not an act of patriotism, its [sic] almost an act of defiance” (The West Australian, May 1, 2004). This sense of rebellion and unwillingness to compromise that comes through so clearly in her work lies at the base, I think, of what makes her a great writer. However, it again illuminates the importance of identity in determining authorial agency.

Writing for Levy is a self-avowedly political act and the emotions that underpin these words are those that emerge in Small Island. It is clear that Levy’s quip of “bastard child” is no joke, and that it is not by chance that her first three books have been about “trying to understand who I am” (The West Australian). But although Small Island has this placement of self in a diasporic setting as one of its major themes, central to this novel is the confusion faced by both black and white against the setting of a fading empire. In post-war 1948, a ‘shadow’ of itself the once-powerful British Empire may have been, but the bewilderment caused by issues of race and prejudice lingered on. That this ‘bewilderment’ manifests in a fictional polemic every bit as uncompromising as that of Edward Said is what I want to examine here.

This is a novel that openly explores, and exploits, issues of race and so it is appropriate that the characters are drawn from the small islands of England and Jamaica. In this representation of the metropolis and its periphery, Small Island links the lives of four main characters, each of whom alternates as protagonist, thus foregrounding four different points of view. The novel opens with the world view of an Englishwoman, appropriately named
Queenie\textsuperscript{10}, and closes with the observations of the Jamaican Hortense. The contrasted experiences of these two women and their husbands, Bernard and Gilbert, English and Jamaican respectively, provide both theme and plot.

I look first at the prologue since this constitutes the first of several important chapters clearly grounding the novel in a setting that celebrates empire in a flashback that shows a young Queenie on a visit to the Empire Exhibition.\textsuperscript{11} It is not by chance that such a marked symbol of nationalism, in this case the British flag, is privileged in the opening paragraph when Queenie states:

I thought I’d been to Africa. Told all my class I had. Early Bird, our teacher, stood me in front of the British flag—she would let no one call it the common Union Jack: ‘It’s the flag of Empire not a musical turn.’ And I stood there bold as brass and said, ‘I went to Africa when it came to Wembley.’ It was then that Early Bird informed me that Africa was a country. ‘You’re not usually a silly girl, Queenie Buxton,’ she went on, ‘but you did not go to Africa, you merely went to the British Empire Exhibition, as thousands of others did.’ (\textit{Small Island}, 1)\textsuperscript{12}

The introduction to Britain’s colonies continues over these first few pages as Queenie describes her visit to the “Empire in little”, the different exhibits each offering a typically clichéd précis of the country it represents.\textsuperscript{13} The climax to this outing is a ride on the “scenic railway” where Queenie’s father gives his daughter her first lesson on empire as she looks down on the ‘colonies’. “As we hung right at the top—the twinkling electric lights below mingling with the stars—Father said something I will never forget. He said, ‘See here, Queenie. Look around. You’ve got the whole world at your feet, lass’”(6).
The main narrative continues this investigation into the politics of power by progressively introducing the other three main characters to the drama and switching back and forth between two temporal frames. There is the time “before” which places characters in roles either in homeland Jamaica or in scenes from World War II both overseas and in Britain, and in a post-war “1948” during which much of the novel’s current action takes place. When her husband Bernard signs up as an RAF serviceman and does not return at war’s end, Queenie takes in lodgers, one of whom is Gilbert with whom she had shared a wartime friendship. The lives of the two couples are further entwined when Gilbert brings his new Jamaican wife, Hortense, to England. As for many migrants of that era, the reality of her new country for Hortense is a life that consists of eating, sleeping, bathing and eating in one small room at the top of Queenie’s house, a far cry from her idealized childhood imaginings of “a big house with a bell at the front door” (9).

That this novel succeeds so well is due to a number of different reasons, not least the three-dimensionality of the characters, in particular the Jamaicans, which is a point I will return to later this chapter. But in the context of this thesis, two techniques stand above the rest. Firstly, it is the underpinning of warfare, in its many forms, that lends the narrative the tension it maintains to the last page. Secondly, as reviewers have noted, Levy’s phenomenal mastery of dialect, both British and West Indian, turns this book from what could be read as a dark story of different levels of endurance into a story that makes one laugh out loud. Entertaining it certainly is. But as I have mentioned, and more importantly for my purposes here, Levy’s stated passion is an illumination of the inequities of empire and her use of dialect is but a tool in this respect. The different ‘languages’ are designed to interconnect with the hierarchies of war, whether these battles are fought on racial,
domestic, social or military fronts. Hence, notions on the politicality of language discussed in earlier chapters bear repeating: “Language is never neutral, always politically charged and packed with the intentions of others.” In this novel, the disjunctions that occur as a result of these interconnections between the different war zones and language operate as signposts to a colonialism which, in the time warp of the novel, is not yet post- and yet stands sentry at the gates of a threatening neo-colonialism. I return to my earlier discussions of Bakhtinian dialogism at this point where the “hero” or, in this case, several heroes are introduced as free spirits “into the strict and calculated plan of the whole” while the author stands back from a totalizing role.15

In other words, in order to represent her own political anxieties, Levy allows this polyphony of “full-valued voices” to disagree, argue or fight. The characters, ostensibly at least, are free to present their own opinions in a similar manner to Ghosh’s alter ego and the Imam in chapter four of this thesis and in line with the “unmerged consciousnesses” in Dostoevsky’s novels (6).

In this way, this novel provides an excellent example of a number of discourses that combine to operate as an “aesthetic object . . . an internal dialogization [that] becomes one of the most fundamental aspects of prose style and undergoes a specific artistic elaboration” (The Dialogic Imagination, 284). According to Bakhtin:

> ... internal dialogization can become such a crucial force for creating form only where individual differences and contradictions are enriched by social heteroglossia, where dialogic reverberations do not sound in the semantic heights of discourse (as happens in the rhetorical genres) but penetrate the deep strata of discourse, dialogize language itself and the world view a particular language has (the internal form of discourse)—where the dialogue of voices arises directly out of a social dialogue of ‘languages,’ where an alien utterance begins to sound like a socially alien language, where the orientation of the word among alien utterances changes into an
In her essay on the uneasiness of colonialist engagement with the other, Elleke Boehmer suggests that these different discourses have a correspondence with Bakhtin’s notions of “intentional” language. In this way, they provide “a helpful model for thinking about how the voice of colonial authority may open out to other voices, and begin to question itself” (98).

At the height of empire . . . the colonial world view, its conviction of European superiority and leadership over other races, in many ways corresponds to Bakhtin’s description of the monologic utterance, sufficient to itself, aware of other utterances, if at all, only as ‘objects’ exterior to its internal commitments and concerns [The Dialogic Imagination, 285-6]. However, where this closed and self-sufficient ‘voice’ is confronted by another world of meaning, in such a way that the other world cannot be ignored . . . what results can be described as that Bakhtinian disturbance which comes about when an utterance addresses itself to others. A ‘qualified relationship to one’s own language’ emerges; the authoritative language begins to regard itself, often with disruptive effect, as if from elsewhere or ‘through the eyes of another language’ [355-62].

As an example of such a “Bakhtinian disturbance”, note the tension generated between two early scenes from Small Island. In the first, we are privy to Hortense’s thoughts as she unpacks on her first morning in England: “So cheerless. Determined, I held my breath but still I could hear no birdsong. The room was pitiful in the grey morning light. . . . I opened my trunk. The bright Caribbean colours of the blanket . . . leaped from the case. The yellow with the red, the blue with the green commenced dancing in this dreary room. I took the far-from-home blanket and spread it on the bed. Miraculous—it was then I heard a bird sing. Oh, so joyful. Finding colour through a window its spirit rose to chirrup and warble” (187). A little later, Queenie, the landlady, knocks and after a number of mutually ineffective attempts at communication, spies the blanket: “‘Where did you get that thing?’ she said, pointing at my blanket. ‘It’s so bright. You need dark glasses for that.’ It obviously amused
her. She began to giggle. ‘Did you bring it over with you?’”. And a little later, Queenie asks, “‘So how long have you and Gilbert been married, then?’ The barefaced cheek of the question sucked all the breath from me. Did she want to know all my business? I just look on her and wait. Soon this white Englishwoman must realize she is talking ill-mannered to me. But she say it again. This time in that slow way, as if I did not grasp her meaning the first time. But she tricked me. If this woman was to realize that I am an educated person then surely I would have to answer her enquiry. Cha” (188-9).

In order to juxtapose the differing world views of the Jamaican and the Englishwoman, I have passed over a number of exchanges by both parties as they endeavour to understand each other, but nonetheless there is enough quoted here to show that these “utterances” aptly demonstrate what Boehmer has called “Bakhtinian disturbance”. Queenie and Hortense are speaking, they both think, the same language. However, this “language” not only highlights the differences between each, but includes the reader, too, in its “double-languageness”. Within a few pages, two clichés are compared and contrasted. Hortense’s native love of colour and song sits alongside Queenie’s English mind, symbolizing an anxious (and in its reference to “dark glasses”, blind) imperialism, which is further represented as grey and drear as the gloomy room and the wintry day outside.

It is the questioning of this nature which filters through this book that makes the narrative so solidly postcolonial. It is as if Levy has taken the work of the figures in this thesis—of people like Woolf and Ghosh and Ondaatje—and edited out any tendency to “orientalist” failings. Queenie’s voice becomes objectified, her character distanced. Bakhtin’s “double-
“You might think you can do it now,” I told him [Bernard], “while he’s a little baby saying nothing. But what about when he grows up? A big, strapping coloured lad. And people snigger at you in the street and ask you all sorts of awkward questions. Are you going to fight for him? All those neighbours . . . those proper decent neighbours out in the suburbs, are you going to tell them to mind their own business? Are you going [to] punch other dads ’cause their kids called him names? Are you going to be proud of him? Glad that he’s your son?”

“Adopted, that’s what we can say,” he said, so softly. . . .

“Bernard. One day he’ll do something naughty and you’ll look at him and think, The little black bastard, because you’ll be angry. . . . You’ll be angry with him not only for that. But because the neighbours never invited you round. Because they whispered about you . . . Because they never thought you were as good as them. . . . And all because you had a coloured child.” (431)

In retrospect, from a distance of over fifty years, it is easy to forget—or, as I suggested in my introduction, for many of us never to know—quite what discrimination of this particular nature entails. Hence, I quote from a review of Small Island by coloured British M. P. Paul...
Boateng: “It is . . . [post-war Britain] of which I have some childhood recollection. The wonder with which complete strangers would pat my curly hair in the streets of fifties London. The repeated questions to my white mother ‘Is he yours?’ The defiance, born of sometimes bitter experience, of her reply ‘Of course he is!’ Just daring them to say what some certainly thought. How could she?”

Without detracting from the sincerity of Boateng’s recollections and experiences, the problem, as I have discussed at some length elsewhere in this thesis, is of course that what is under discussion here is a work of fiction. To empathize with characters in a novel is part of a search for harmony and accord, for reassurance in the experiences of the other, a hunt for proof that there is such a thing as “solidarity of trial”. When we find satisfaction in what we search for, we announce that what we have read or witnessed or experienced is ‘the truth’, instead of realizing that this metaphorical representation is part of the author’s overall plan. Levy’s work may contain elements that have the appearance or the resonance of reality, but neither are these individual episodes real, nor is the story—by virtue of its being a story—true. Terry Eagleton offers this example: “In his novel Doctor Faustus, Thomas Mann pauses to pay homage to a real-life individual, a man whose actual existence we might well take his word for. But there is still nothing to stop us from choosing to take this reference fictionally. Even if a novel states actual facts, it does not somehow become truer. Once again, the fact that we know this is a novel ensures that we do not scrutinize these statements for their truth-value, but take them as part of some overall rhetorical design”.

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It is timely to repeat my earlier arguments on fictional representation in a different way, this time drawing on the theoretical positioning of Frank Kermode.\textsuperscript{23} As Kermode so rightly claims: “What makes the triumph [of believing we have found ‘reality’] difficult is that it has to take account of the world as we experience it; we have such a loving-hating affair with reality, we ‘keep coming back to the real’; and this continually impoverishes us because it is at odds with such concords as we have achieved” (166). What interests me in particular is his discussion of British agent Christopher Burney’s \textit{Solitary Confinement} which begins when Burney is first captured in occupied France but continues as “a study of those notions [of solitude and confinement] as they become real” (156). “‘Down on the bedrock,’ he [Burney] writes, ‘life becomes a love affair of the mind, and reality merely the eternally mysterious beloved’” (157). Thus, Burney has to invent everything, even time itself: “‘One does not suffer the passing of empty time, but rather the slowness of the expected event which is to end it’” (160). Without time, the passage between life and death ceases to have meaning. So Burney invents a clock from “the shadow cast by a gable on a wall which he can see through the fretted glass of his high window. Time cannot be faced as coarse and actual, as a repository of the contingent; one humanizes it by fictions of orderly succession and end” (160). This inventiveness gives shape, and thus, meaning to days which otherwise would have none. In those extreme circumstances, too, I suppose when one has only one’s mind for company, the notion of a time span that is circular and not linear provides some measure of comfort in its reminder of the cyclical nature of life, of the bigger picture, as it were.

To return to the epigraph that heads this chapter, while events based in the real—the shadow cast by the gable on the prison wall, for example—can provide the substance for the
representation, the art of the novelist lies in the shaping and honing of these events so that they represent more than they do, so that they move a fictional narrative—as the imagined clock moves a life—in a circle from beginning to ending and back again.

How does Levy create this circle? Let us revisit for a moment the last line of the final scene of the prologue when Queenie’s father provides the young girl with a paradigmatic view of Britain’s “empire” from the top of the big dipper at the Wembley exhibition grounds, at the point when he murmurs: “‘You’ve got the whole world at your feet, lass’”. We are told that until disabused some years later, Queenie believed that she had indeed visited the colonies. In between the story turns and turns, but in an impassioned penultimate chapter, the situation is soundly reversed. The adult Queenie—named, we remember, for Queen Victoria—gets down on her knees in front of Hortense and Gilbert: “I pleaded to Hortense, turned to her. I was on both my knees now. ‘Take him and bring him up as if he was your son. Would you, would you, please?’” (430). In the tension between metropolis and margin, the position is now inverted. The power play in the “Game” has been overturned. The final chapter is given to Hortense who knocks on Queenie’s door to say goodbye, and knows she is there, waiting, behind the door, but unable to speak. Queenie is effectively silenced.

This is a superbly crafted work of fiction. But it is fiction. The scenes are constructed from a word here, a sight there, and their relevance to reality is in a “free imagination [that] makes endless plots on reality” (Kermode, 164). In what she writes, Levy does not represent the real, but it is a sign of her high art that she makes it appear as if she does so. In this respect, Kermode relates an anecdotal description of Wordsworth’s conversation with a poor leech-gatherer. The landscape, the light and the general surroundings in which this meeting took
place, led naturally to Wordsworth’s wish to capture this “scarecrow figure” in a poem, not only as a figure but for his wordiness, too, much of which was “tedious” but necessary (170). How then to arrest this scene in fictional representation and hold the audience, make the poem work? Wordsworth’s way around this dilemma of representing the real—getting the message across—was to construct the persona as a young poet. The old man “appears at a dream-like moment when the poet’s mind and the morning landscape suddenly darken. His tedious talk is not attended to, although it is reported in the poem, until a movement of the poet’s mind convinces him that this may be a peculiar grace, a leading from above” (171).24

The point that I am making here is that the empire that Levy creates in the pages of Small Island is not in either shape or form the empire that was. The shape the fiction takes, however, is strong enough “to stir up fearfulness [that we] continue to live our lives locked in the legacy of Empire” (Boateng). Therefore, I need to move from an analysis of content to a discussion of form in order to unpack how Levy delivers and structures the narrative to create this effect. As I have mentioned, the four separate points of view that make up the narrative ostensibly constitute a dialogic approach; in this case four heroes or anti-heroes are each given ample opportunity to present their individual viewpoints. If I were to follow through on the principles of dialogism as discussed in my chapter on Ghosh, it could be argued that the characters that sit on either side of this black and white binary each have ample opportunity to present their point of view. Which, in the course of the narrative, they do. This does not, however, prevent the narrative from being “angled”.25 By this I mean, that although each of the four is given a place in the narrative from which to speak, the novel is not only more “inward” in its treatment of the Jamaicans, Gilbert and Hortense, but
there is also more collusion between the narratives of these two; they are linked in a way that creates a synergy not present in the voices of the others which are designed to present singly and coldly in contrast. Although there are aspects of individual character construction that demand this treatment—Bernard, for example, is presented as a silent character from the start, a somewhat clichéd Englishman whose ability to communicate is not improved by his war experience—this silence effectively alienates us. Nor, for that matter, do we ever really feel close to Queenie. While I acknowledge that this is to some extent part of the characterization, at the same time, the fact that one set of characters is designed to appear weakly against the other results in “angled” presentation. This type of bias is still, in the context of what I have been discussing here, “orientalism”.

Andrea Levy—from the location of her defiantly black British status—not only “writes back” to empire, she constructs “empire”. She writes England. In Levy’s case, “black” is both qualifier and signifier. The feelings of being “out of place” in *Small Island* are without nostalgia and countered by a stony determination to belong. I repeat a criticism by Arun Mukherjee quoted earlier: “Ondaatje, coming from a Third World country with a colonial past, does not write about his otherness. . . . [T]here is no trauma of uprooting evident in his poetry; nor is there a need for redefinition in a new context; the subjects that preoccupy so many immigrant writers”.26 Unlike Ondaatje, Levy does not fall into these traps. To the contrary, her books explore the issues of uprooting and the trauma of migration. But the identity she so clearly claims, too, is of a different nature. I suggested of Ondaatje’s work that *the diasporic self might live in many places, but belong nowhere*. The same could be said of many of the writers discussed in this thesis. We can hypothesise that even Browne, so comfortable with his Englishness once safely back in England, may have had to re-
examine his identity had he decided to remain in Persia. And Edward Said, until almost the end of his life, confessed ambivalence with regard to identity. Levy is different in that she unquestionably belongs. In fact, in complete contradiction to these other figures, the strength and clarity of purpose that informs Levy’s work asserts an absolute and uncontroversial right to belong. Levy is less subtle than Ondaatje, but politically, her story is more powerful. However, even Levy’s clear-cut sense of belonging to the culture she represents does not, finally, save her from charges of “orientalism”. In using the “highly organized and encoded system” of language she has re-written the story of “empire”.

To return to Boateng’s review: One can understand and empathize with his sentiments of fear, just as he has in turn identified with the events represented in the novel. One can see here, too, the current postcolonialist apprehension of a return to colonial practices in the guise of neo-colonialism. There is only one question that remains and perhaps it has no answer. How helpful is this stirring up of fearfulness of an empire, which in the way of all empires, has come and gone? This is the question that postcolonialism needs to examine. While admitting that it provides the conflict that makes a good story, my own fear is that a keeping alive of difference in this manner promotes hate and division where there could be support. Simon Gikandi asks, “Shouldn’t narrative function as the mechanism that transcends ugly histories and realities? Must a narrative of postcolonial futures realize its authority by confronting the colonial archive?” (200).
In this study, I have examined selected works of a number of theorists, scholars and literary figures in an endeavour to challenge those of Said’s claims and definitions that have proven to be the most compelling and influential. The works I have included are drawn from two separate timeframes: that of the high empire Said so directly attacks and of an early postcolonial period that confirms an emerging awareness of power politics in race relations. While I would still argue that the key definitions of Said’s brand of “orientalism” are too severe in that it is hard to support a serious claim that people like Browne, Woolf, Ondaatje or Ghosh fit the separate elements of these descriptions, ultimately, as I have shown, there remains the impossible bind of extricating any of these individuals, Levy included, from charges of “orientalism”. This only illuminates, I think, the incongruity of his argument.

On the face of it, then, Said’s hypothesis would appear to be so cleverly constructed that it provides a catch-all for any attempt at cross-cultural representation. But, paradoxically, it is in the very audacity of this thesis that Said’s own argument becomes entangled. In one of his statements quoted earlier, he maintains, “I grew up as an Arab with a Western education. Ever since I can remember I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being completely of either one or the other”.29 In belonging to neither, whatever Said writes, he writes about the other. Thus, I contend that everything that Said writes about “one or the other” is “orientalist”. The discourse that appears to serve his argument so well finally undermines itself.

Ironically, Said’s “orientalism” belies the apparently rigid parameters that enclose it and which would appear to restrict it, and in fact the converse holds. To wit, the discourse proves so expansive, so inclusive, that the definition does indeed reflect back to his very
first classification: “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient . . . either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist”. Accordingly, in their process of attempting to represent another culture, the figures that appear in this thesis—whether writing from their different locative positions of academia or the diaspora, from their own heartlands, or orientals writing about other orientals—are all “orientalists”. In other words, it is impossible to research or write about a culture other than one’s own without becoming a part of the “orientalist” drama. And even if one promotes one part of an identity at the expense of the other as I have demonstrated in the case of Levy, if there are slippages in the narratorial discourse which suggest bias, this too constitutes a type of “orientalism”. Significantly, this reading of “orientalism” clearly separates the term from those of “colonialism” and “imperialism” with which it still tends to be used synonymously.

However, my concerns with Said go beyond the pages of this thesis to a sense of unease with regard to the discursive power structures that he himself has put in place. I return to questions raised in chapter one and my earlier speculation as to whether his dialectic of ‘me and them’ and his repeated insistence of the Western manipulation of the East only increases the gap he calls “the imperial divide”. It cannot be denied that Said has illuminated areas of power play that were previously glossed, suppressed or even hidden. It is to be applauded that he has indubitably raised awareness of the dangers of such political and socially biased game-playing. But, nevertheless, it is also clear that the power behind the rhetoric of Said’s “orientalism” is such that it contributes to a “divide” between the descendants of colonizer and colonized that may not otherwise have been so marked.
Thus, as this study draws to a close, I suggest that the somewhat muddled agendas of the “imperial divide” of the past have given way to a more deliberately constructed racial divide of the present. The lessons of the past must not be forgotten, but nor must the power of literature be underestimated. I confess to being troubled by the broad-brush assertions that Said makes because I see them as retrogressive. His theories are rooted in a looking back at the past instead of moving towards the sort of future envisaged by theorists like Bhabha, Chakrabarty and Gikandi and historians like MacKenzie and Amanat. If Said’s theories are recycled in the form of popular fiction of this nature with its capacity for widespread dissemination, the possibilities exist for a continuing racism as dangerous and unwelcome as that acted out by the imperialist practices of empire. This type of literature emanating from the shadowlands of cross-cultural writing is, I believe, the legacy of Edward Said to literature.

Finally, there is an addendum to what I have written here in the form of a book review stumbled upon in an airline lounge at Changi airport in Singapore. The book under review is titled *Japan’s Cultural Code Words: 233 Key Terms That Explain the Attitudes and Behaviour of the Japanese*. It is compiled by a Frenchman, Boyé Lafayette de Mente, and I quote from the second paragraph by Asian reviewer Siswati Samad:

To western eyes, De Mente writes, the Japanese are initially perceived as being exquisitely mannered, accommodating, gentle and even cute, but ‘can only be described as barbaric a short time later’. This behaviour is in part due to the traditional dual character of some Asian cultures that denied ‘them the inherent human aspirations for individuality and personal freedom, and forced them to think and behave in ways that were unnatural’. This results in an internal conflict between their natural instincts as they cope with the demands of their society. (20)
That such condescension still exists in the form of “the West writing the East”—in this case, a work implicitly endorsed by the Asian reviewer—again illustrates the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural representation. It only serves to emphasize my argument that, under the terms of Said’s discourse, it is impossible to write across cultures without being “orientalist”.
Notes

4 See Levy’s use of Winston Churchill’s famous line—“Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few”—as the final epigraph of this novel.
5 In interview with Bron Sibree, The West Australian (1.5.2004).
6 Levy’s adamancy that her British identity is not in any shape or form allied to feelings of “patriotism” can be admired for its lack of hypocrisy, but it makes me hesitate to suggest she is of British nationality.
7 She writes of Jamaica, but her emotions are saved for the country of her own birth.
9 Small Island is exemplary for my purposes in that its central themes, which revolve around notions of race, identity and empire, are those examined throughout this work.
10 Christened Victoria, but always called Queenie (195).
11 See my note 16 in chapter two.
12 Discussion of flags, whether in fact or fiction, is rarely innocent. See, as one example, the flag-raising ceremony in aboriginal playwright Jack Davis’ No Sugar. Or, as another, the ongoing controversy with regard to Australia’s national flag. Or see Paul Gilroy, There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack (London: Hutchinson, 1987).
13 What stands out most in a twenty-first-century reading of this scene is the sheer number and variety of colonies that constituted the British Empire.
14 By ‘warfare in its many forms’, I mean the separate microcosms of racial insults, marital arguments as well as the larger picture of world war. It should, however, be noted that there is also a great deal of class-based warfare identified in this novel, glossed over for my purposes here.
16 The observations of Elleke Boehmer were made in regard to Leonard Woolf and Yeats, but they have as much pertinency here. See Elleke Boehmer, ‘“Immeasurable Strangeness’ in Imperial Times: Leonard Woolf and W. B. Yeats”, Modernism and Empire, eds. Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 93-111.
17 See Boehmer’s gloss of Bakhtin’s notion of “double-languagedness” in novelistic discourse—that is, utterance which is intentionally hybrid because it both takes into account and is directed towards a listener” (“Immeasurable Strangeness, n. 23).
18 See my discussion of Ghosh’s disappointment, in himself as much as the Imam, in chapter five when he realizes that they are both conforming to a set of Western values, that they are both “travelling in the West”. Amitav Ghosh, In an Antique Land (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 236.
19 Although Paul Boateng was born in London, he spent much of his childhood in Ghana where his father was first a lawyer then a member of Nkrumah’s government. After the military coup of 1966, Paul returned to the UK in his mid-teens. He was the first person of African descent to be elected to the British Parliament and appointed to the Cabinet as Chief Secretary to the Treasury in 2002. This web-based review titled “Oi darkie, show us your tail” was written by the Rt. Hon. Paul Boateng and was retrieved electronically from http://www.orangeprize.co.uk/2004prize/winner/review.html on 25.6.2004. The Race Relations Act was passed in Britain in 1976. It outlawed racial discrimination across a number of critical fields—among which housing, employment, training, education ranked highly—and while there have been a number of amendments since, the original Act stands as a pioneering effort to improve race relations in Great Britain. This information http://www.britainusa.com/sections/other/_show.asp?Sarticletype=2&other_ID=442&i=151
20 I am indebted to Frank Kermode for this phrase.
21 See Bakhtin.
22 After Theory (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 90.
23 From The Sense of an Ending. See in particular the last two chapters, “Literary Fiction and Reality” and “Solitary Confinement”, 127-80.
24 This particular poem was titled “Resolution and Independence”. For interesting detail on how Wordsworth came to write this poem, see Kermode, 169-72.


30 My emphasis, *Orientalism*.

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