

**(Re)Configurations of Power and Identities in Twenty-First Century  
Fiction**

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**I declare the work presented in this thesis is my own**

**Abstract:****(Re)Configurations of Power and Identities in Twenty-First Century Fiction**

My dissertation is interested in exploring dialectical relations that reveal complex power (im)balances in recent fiction. In my close reading of five novels published since the year 2000, I reflect on the postmodern legacy in the twenty-first century, after the declaration of the death of metanarratives and the concomitant emergence of marginalized voices in late twentieth century. How has fiction in recent years engage with persistent macro narratives in the light of emergent voices? What are the new questions and/or positions that are opened up, recurring issues that are unsettled, or even promises unfulfilled, in these writings with regards to the ‘maturation’ of formerly disenfranchised identities?

There are three main areas of contention that I will analyse in my reading of the novels: gender relations, diasporic and local identities, as well as the role of scientific thought in present-day representations of identities, particularly its narratives of Darwinism, genetics and reproduction. They are compelling issues as, despite the postmodern drive to collapse margins and center, they represent instances of recurring peripheral and dominating narratives; indeed, even as familiar power dynamics are challenged or undermined, new ones are born. I will examine in individual chapters the novels’ portrayal of both old and new structures of opposition and power within the discourse of two formerly disenfranchised voices: the female and the colonized/decolonized. Following this will be a chapter on the literary reflection on the hegemonic role of science in our society today. These chapters, as well as areas of overlap within and among them, reveal the ever-increasing complexity and interconnectedness of power relations that demand the intellectual skill, dexterity, and concentration akin to that of a

tightrope walker to achieve a nuanced understanding of individual and collective identities in the twenty-first century.

**Table of Contents:**

Introduction -----	6
<b>Section I: Identity and Power Relations in Feminist Fiction ----- 16</b>	
Chapter 1     Sarah Hall's <i>The Carhullan Army</i> : Radical feminism in the twenty-first century -----	23
Chapter 2:    Margaret Atwood's <i>Oryx and Crake</i> : Capitalising on the female body -----	56
<b>Section II: Ambiguous Identities in Fictional Narratives of Decolonised States ----- 76</b>	
Chapter 3:    Michele de Kretser's <i>The Hamilton Case</i> : Who is the colonizer? Who is the colonized? -----	85
Chapter 4:    Michael Ondaatje's <i>Anil's Ghost</i> : Distance and gesture -----	104
<b>Section III: The Metanarrative of Science in Twenty-First Century Fiction -- 145</b>	
Chapter 5:    Margaret Atwood's <i>Oryx and Crake</i> : Interrogating nature, bodies and genre -----	154
Chapter 6:    Ian McEwan's <i>Saturday</i> : Medicine, literature and sympathy ---	193
Conclusion -----	237
Bibliography -----	241

## **(Re)Configurations of Power and Identities in Twenty-First Century Fiction**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The arrival of the second millennium, as with any pronounced start of a time period, promised fresh beginnings and hopeful resolutions of past quarrels, arguments and debates. The long twentieth century has witnessed astounding technological, medical and scientific progress, the extension of human life span, improvement in living standards, and increased opportunities for education. Even so, it was also the century of two world wars and countless civil and regional conflicts right up to the dawning of the second millennium. Moreover, as the world shrinks with advancements in the arenas of telecommunication, travel and media, as we are forced to assimilate ever-increasing number of ideas and viewpoints from near and far, it is a constant effort to make sense of the old and new, the micro and the macro, the dominant and the marginalized. This might explain why, much as we have been told of the undesirability of thinking in polarity and antithesis, we have yet to successfully shed this penchant for such approaches and modes of thought, and this has implications for the ways in which former ideological constructs are viewed and negotiated today. From a literary point of view, I seek to offer, in this dissertation, a reply to Mary Romero's questions about the millennium:

How does the peculiar marker called the millennium highlight ideological constructs, uniting some communities and separating others? What does it reveal about individuals, communities, and nations within the world system and the emergent global economy? (2000:1013)

In particular, with the last significant intellectual movement of postmodernism some thirty years behind us, and with no alternative yet to fill its big shoes, how do contemporary writers narrate issues such as identity, relationships and power structures in our world today?

Postmodernist artists after the mid-twentieth century privileged multiplicity, pluralism and heterogeneity, sweeping aside traditional boundaries to allow for previously submerged voices to be heard. As much as this can be viewed as a positive step towards the erosion of hitherto unequal power relations and misogynistic practices, the inclusive stance of postmodernism appears to have lost steam in the last two decades of the twentieth century. A large part of this

state of development can be attributed to apparently unreconciled tenets within its approach: Dan Dervin observes that postmodernist agendas was headed towards ‘self-collision’ when it focuses on ‘a politics of identity’, even as it tends towards ‘disparaging essentialism as naïve fundamentalism (1997:6). Indeed, for Robyn Wiegman, ‘the discussion of identity throughout the 1990s’ has been characterised by ‘intellectual exhaustion’, with the main contributing factor being ‘the failure of any individual identity rubric – race, gender, sexuality, nation, or ethnicity – to function in isolation’ (2000:805). For my dissertation, my critical reading of five contemporary novels published from the year 2000 onwards encompasses these two critics’ views of the shift in our understanding of identity in the twilight of the twentieth century (and postmodernism itself) and the dawn of the twenty-first: the (still) insistent recourse to essentialism for feminist and postcolonial narratives in the face of a myriad of other forms of selves surfacing within and without these discourses, and especially complicated by how biotechnology and science/genetics in recent years have transformed the ways in which we see the human body at the most basic level.

The exploration of dialectical relations that reveal complex power (im)balances in recent fiction will thus be my main concern here; I am interested in the imagining and portrayal of the ‘maturation’ of formerly disenfranchised identities, especially with respect to its unresolved tussle with dominant discourses such as scientific legitimacy, patriarchy as well as politically influential nations. The five novels to be discussed are: Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (2007), Michelle de Kretser’s *The Hamilton Case* (2004), Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), and Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000). Specifically, I read these texts with the following questions in mind: How do these writers approach and re-imagine feminist and postcolonial ideologies: are they still marginalized discourses or do power relations within and without pose new questions, or even resurrect issues that hitherto were thought to have been laid to rest? How do these authors view the hegemonic scientific beliefs and practices prevalent in our lives today: who are those with authority and influence in the face of genetic and biotechnological ascendancy; conversely, who are those disempowered and cast aside? In what ways are major and minor identities on the local, regional and global scale (re)presented by these writers recently?

In dividing my dissertation into three major sections of Feminism, Decolonisation, and Science, I wish to impose a kind of order in my critique of the ways in which the five novels interrogate the issues of identity and power, although I am fully aware this is certainly an artificial demarcation as the authors address these big topics as interconnected and complexly structured. The common focus for all of them, however, can be said to involve the tensions, confrontations, and maneuvers resulting from the meeting and clashing of previously disempowered identities (women, racial minorities, lower economic class) with dominant and powerful presences (Euro-American Caucasian males, global institutions and influential economies/countries, scientific metanarratives, capitalism). In short, we can note that contemporary writers are fully engaged with the struggle between homogeneity and heterogeneity in their imaginative narratives, and have attempted to rethink how we, in this period (after postmodernism, at the beginning of the second millennium), can elicit meaning and understanding in the face of mounting conflicts and confusion over the intersection of different selves at any one time.

For Section I, I will reflect on Sarah Hall's interest in the female collective identity in chapter 1. In her novel *The Carhullan Army*, she addresses what some feminist critics have noted at the end of the twentieth century – the sense that, with a tendency towards 'orthodoxy', 'the future of feminism is in doubt' (Segal 2000:16). Through her narrative centering on a community of outlawed women living away from the main cities, Hall examines the possibility of revitalizing the political energy of second-wave or radical feminism; this can be interpreted as her attempt to inject a renewed focus on the women's struggle in the face of the aftermath of postmodernist dispersion and dilution of the term 'woman'. Enlisting recent interests in environmental health, ecology, and the fear of depletion of raw materials and energy sources, the writer postulates the return of misogynist attitudes when the social fabric is severely tested and threatened. At the same time, the flip side of such a resort to radical identity politics is a straying towards essentialism and isolationism, as represented by the community of the Carhullan women. By referring to both past female heroes such as the Amazonian women warriors as well as to the recent development of feminist utopian/dystopian science fiction, Hall's novel looks to tradition and the future in her exploration of contemporary female identity, revealing the faultlines and debates within the

feminist movement as it moves away from the influence of the inclusive stance of postmodernism in recent years.

In chapter 2, I read Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* in the light of the recent phenomenon of a growing number of privileged women reaping the benefits of past civil rights advocacy but who display absolutely no interest in the feminist struggle today (Skeggs 2000). The novel's female characters reflect real economic differences among women worldwide, and can be seen as a response to the difficulty of radical feminism in delivering its dream of emancipation to all women despite its inclination towards universal identification, as explored in Hall's work. Atwood offers the reader two sets of female characters: on the one hand, Oryx the Asian child-porn actress who later became the protagonist, Jimmy's, lover, as well as Jimmy's Filipino nanny Dolores; on the other hand, his mother and her contemporaries, the women scientists working for profit-oriented powerful biotechnological and pharmaceutical companies. Yet, this is not a clean dialectical comparison, for among them the author also explores the relevance of third-wave feminism where former practices deemed exploitative or discriminatory by earlier feminists – for example, pornography – are recently transformed into 'matters of personal style or individual choice' (Orr 1991:34), thereby effectively assimilating such acts into the social realm and removing their controversiality. It is Atwood's refusal to adopt simplistic representations of women's status and role in the millennium that allows an in-depth and effective critique of the various challenges facing them, and the impossibility and impracticality of simply reaching out for past solutions in order to make sense of the power dynamics inherent in our world today. Interestingly, both Hall and Atwood have employed futuristic settings for their novels, pointing clearly to the underlying 'inherent utopian inclination' of all feminist debates up till today (Goodwin 1990:1). When pitted against reality, however, this dream of unity and emancipation throws up questions that both authors, as I will show in my discussion, attempt to respond from a variety of positions that update women's concerns and issues in our current time. When *The Carhullan Army* and *Oryx and Crake* are read together with Atwood's seminal work *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is possible to arrive at a fuller understanding of the change in focus on issues that have captured feminists' attention over the last thirty years; this section will be the bridge linking the two primary texts in chapters 1 and 2.

The main topics in Section II of my dissertation concern the postcolonial world's lingering metanarratives; specifically, I am interested in how the recent fiction of decolonization are engaged with continuing power struggles amongst different groups and communities locally, regionally and internationally. In view of the tremendous battles and suffering undergone in the process of achieving independence in former colonies, what strikes me is that both the authors whom I will be studying in this section – Ondaatje and de Kretser – have structured narratives that are *still* primarily preoccupied with internal strife (racial, ethnic, economic, political) as well as the experience of negotiating with external pressures (immigration, international welfare organizations, global trading partners, consumer societies) in a relatively newly independent country, Sri Lanka. The local and the global, in other words, remain forces to be reckoned with in such decolonized narratives and experiences. In my selection of *The Hamilton Case* and *Anil's Ghost* as texts to be studied in this section, there was no initial intention to adopt Sri Lanka as the formerly colonized state as a backdrop. Rather, it was a happy coincidence that these two novels were among my reading list of possible primary texts. While their approach towards their subjects and their writing styles differ tremendously, there is a similar inclination to reflect on the conflicting narratives of identity, agency and empowerment in these societies towards the end of the twentieth century. In addition, my decision was also shaped by the fact that Sri Lanka acts as a microcosm of larger sprawling continents that underwent decolonization around the same time, namely India and Africa; this allows for a detailed study of colonial and postcolonial competing narratives and identities on a scale suitable for this dissertation.

In chapter 3, de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case* opens up the by-now familiar relationship of colonizer/colonized in her homeland Sri Lanka at the turn of the previous millennium, in order to re-imagine the power tussle not from the perspective of the white colonial masters or the subservient colonized but from that of a native who has thoroughly imbibed his masters' culture, customs and belief in their superiority. In so doing, she reveals the virulent racial and ethnic discrimination practiced by the local population upon one another, often worsened in the struggle after independence for economic and political ascendancy. The frequent resort to originary accounts in a bid to appeal politically to particular segments of the population, the manipulation of exotica (objects and tales) for

economic benefits, the often futile efforts to delineate clearly one's identity in the furious rush of historical upheaval and global events – all these are held up to the light in de Kretser's novel and examined with a view towards complicating notions of selfhood, as well as interrogating the legacy of postmodernist multiplicity and heterogeneity within such a fragile community as Sri Lanka's in the aftermath of the turbulent transition to an independent country.

Moving from de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case* to Ondaatje's *Anil Ghost* allows for a continued commentary in my discussion on Sri Lanka's national identity at the end of the second millennium, some forty years after independence has been achieved. In chapter 4, I examine the novel's representation of the interplay of public issues such as political unrest, ethnic conflicts, and the lingering practice of imperialistic dominance (neocolonialism) within the nation, as well as private struggles with personal identity, family history and psychological trauma as a result of the civil war plaguing the country after the departure of the British colonizers. While power relations are still structured along the lines of western hegemony (trade, scientific knowledge, human rights), Ondaatje simultaneously (as with de Kretser) focuses on a protagonist who has adopted the hegemonic ideology but at the same time, offers an alternative viewpoint in the form of the native Sri Lankans who negotiate daily with the effects of civil unrest in their country. Ultimately, as with de Kretser, the author's preoccupation is not with unearthing a single relevant narrative, but to allow conflicting voices and perspectives to emerge and interact so that the personal and the local have as much space and legitimacy as the globally influential and dominant. Departing from the postmodern celebration of the multiple at the expense of the collective, the author highlights the strengths and shortcomings of both sets of voices, thereby revealing inherent nuances and complexities in positions of marginality and centrality.

Both Ondaatje and de Kretser employ the use of the detective story genre in their narratives, and there is certainly significance in this shared sense of the relevance of such an approach. Sam, the protagonist in *The Hamilton Case* who embraces and strives to adopt his colonisers' identity, admires Sherlock Holmes. It is thus not surprising that he jumps at the chance to try his hand at unraveling a mysterious murder involving Tamil plantation workers, their Burgher supervisor, and European owners. For Anil in Ondaatje's work, she insists on uncovering the

truth behind a skeleton found in a government-protected site at the height of the civil unrest in Sri Lanka. If we take into account Gillian Beer's proposal that the crime fiction genre reflects a need to 'secure origins', a striving towards an explanation of 'how things came to be' in the process of 'revisionary backward reading' that is the hallmark of these narratives (1996:118-9), we can extend this view towards the decolonization experience, where the search for originary identities and the process of nation-building more often than not involve an exhaustive 'revisionary backward reading' of the country and its peoples. For Sam, who insists on truths and nothing else, who is tortured by suspicions of his birthright and the gulf between his racial/ethnic/national identity and his preferred Eurocentric lifestyle and perspectives, his affinity for Sherlock Holmes reflects a desire for order and coherence that is lacking in his world. The gulf between his desires and reality explains the questionable conclusion he draws with regards to the murder investigation, blinded as he is by racial prejudices against his people and in favour of the Europeans. In Anil's determined efforts to identify the skeleton she has named Sailor, we can also discern an attempt at handling the unsettling turmoil of a country wrecked by localized conflicts over ethnic identity, as well as the protagonist's own troubled status as a westernised Sri Lankan who has not been home for the last fifteen years. Therefore, the genre of the detective fiction in these two novels facilitates the exploration of decolonized and neocolonised identities, power dynamics, and authoritative voices legitimising particular worldviews.

In *Anil's Ghost*, there is also a concern with how we perceive ourselves and others: Anil's initial 'long-distanced gaze' that she thinks is an objective approach towards her homeland, the restored statue of the Buddha at the end of the novel whose gaze traverses the paddy fields to fix on the horizon – all these forms of perceptions are Ondaatje's reference to the importance of our awareness of the constructedness as well as the span of one's reading and interpretation of identities. This is a salient point when we think of the supposed impartial scientific gaze that Anil attempts to maintain in her role as a forensic anthropologist, and which is subjected to Ondaatje's questioning in the face of human emotions. This will therefore provide a link to Section III, where my dissertation analyses precisely this topic: the metanarrative of science, and how its influence and power presumes the rational, factual and objectivity as superior

attitudes and approaches, from the days of Charles Darwin to our current moment. Empowered by its close relationship with capitalist funding and technological enterprises, the role of science in the twenty-first century exceeds C.P. Snow's days when he waded into the public consciousness with his 'two-cultures' debate. Reading critically Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as well as McEwan's *Saturday*, Section III will re-examine the debate on the importance of science and the humanities in our societies today as represented by these two authors, with the attendant conflicts over saliency as well as questions centering on the ways in which genetics and biotechnology have redrawn our understanding of what it means to be a human being now. How we see nature – its role, its meaning – will also be thought through here.

Chapter 5 will therefore consist of a reading of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* with a focus on how the supposed distance between science and the arts is in fact an unprofitable way of thinking and comprehending our world. By subjecting the grand narrative of scientific progress to a thorough interrogation, Atwood reveals how it also reaches for mythical and fictional images, as well as imaginary states in its legitimizing account of its workings. In a way, it is an update on Snow's dialectical perception of these two disciplines. The author plays with narrative perspective and authority in the novel, allowing the readers to laugh at the protagonist's self-pity at being the last man left alive, as well as to sympathise with his rage at the one responsible for his plight, his best friend Crake. While neither disciplines emerges as the clear winner in this clash – Atwood privileges neither – she indicts the scientific community for assuming *carte blanche* in imposing its perceptions and assumptions on the world in her dystopic narrative. In addition, the author's interest in the discipline of genetics in the novel – specifically the scientific manipulation of organisms and the natural environment at the cellular level – also reminds us of Darwin's theory of evolution in *The Origin of Species*; Atwood examines the consequences of man's intervention in nature in her narrative, in particular the protagonist's perceived role and function in a ruined Garden of Eden.

In my decision to read McEwan's *Saturday* alongside Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, I wish to move from a discussion that includes a renewed look at man's relationship with nature in the face of the runaway influence of science and technology today, to that which rethinks man's relationship with his fellow men.

Effectively, this can be seen as a shift of focus from Darwin's evolutionary theory in *The Origin of Species* to his later work *The Descent of Man*, a continuing discussion on the influence of the hegemony of science today with regards to our views and responses to our physical and social states. Perowne, the protagonist, is a familiar figure to many contemporary western readers: a working professional with a loving family and an unthinking assumption of his place in this world. Socially, economically, physically, he is in his prime and is thus all set for his life to come crashing down when he is involved in a minor car accident. The other comes too close for comfort for him, and forces him to assess his scientific mindset, his preferred position as a disinterested observer, and the need to take his place with his fellow human beings. My critique of this novel extends further, however: I wish to think through McEwan's narrative in its portrayal of its protagonist's ability to empathise with the other, to truly understand the implications of his privileged position. Here, I will enlist Darwin's view of the function of compassion and sympathy, Matthew Arnold's idea of civilization in *Culture and Anarchy*, as well as Thomas Eakin's painting 'The Gross Clinic' discussed in Beer's text *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounters* (1991). These intertextual references expand the scope of discussion, permitting a detailed and nuanced review of the implications McEwan's portrayal of such a character.

In attempting my work here, I am fully aware of the audacity in taking on the humongous topics of feminism, postcolonialism and the discourse of science all within one dissertation. What I have set out to do is not to examine all of them in minute detail, or all of my chosen fiction titles from all three perspectives. Rather, I hope to read these novels such that they illuminate angles or directions from which our blind spots, unacknowledged discriminations, and silenced presences can be assessed or understood more thoroughly. Long after postmodernist discourse has celebrated their demise from the mid-twentieth century onwards, we are still haunted by lingering power relations and dominant narratives. These five novels are by no means entirely representative nor exhaustive in their approaches towards how power and identity intertwine and interpellate each other in the early twenty-first century, but they can be a part of the effort in thinking through how asymmetrical power distribution has far-reaching implications for both the dominant and subsumed identities.



## Section I: Identity and Power Relations in Feminism

### Introduction

As the second millennium settles into its stride, the inclination for reflection and assessment in the last years of the twentieth century – while not entirely having run its course – now incorporates questions about the direction of major discourses in the years to come. Feminism is without exception in exhibiting this contemplative stance as a way of understanding the current – and the future – condition of women’s lives by taking stock of past achievement as well as contemporary trends. This is especially pertinent when feminist critics themselves urgently point to ‘a solid orthodoxy at the close of the twentieth century’, which indicates that ‘the future of feminism is in doubt’ (Segal 2000:16); the emergence of privileged women reaping the benefits of past civil rights advocacy is somehow countered by their displaying absolutely no interest in feminism, and their being concerned only ‘in themselves and will promote only their own interests’ (Skeggs 2000:123). Indeed, it is this recent re-focus on old as well as current power struggles that I perceive as preoccupying feminism today; that is, it appears women’s rights are ironically threatened by the unslain ghosts of patriarchy and conservatism as well as contemporary perception of their obsolescence. These twin views are explored in detail in recent literary works focusing on women’s lived experience. My critical reading of Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* (2007), and Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) in the following two chapters examine how key moments or beliefs in the history of feminism are re-lived and re-imagined alongside recent anxieties or debates both within and without the movement. Crucially, this involves a focus on the stubborn presence of feminism’s old opponent, patriarchy, as well as various contemporary power players with a stake in women’s fight for emancipation. In this introduction, I will review the main beliefs of second-wave feminism, most active in the 1960s, that have been significant in contributing to recent attempts to address the role of identity politics in feminist discourse and fiction. This will lead to an examination of the influence of postmodern thinking in, as well as a reflection on the status of, twenty-first century feminism – what is known as postfeminism or third-wave feminism. While the use of a ‘wave’ metaphor to delineate the various periods of the women’s movement does not mean that there

is a neat segregation from one period to another, I am most intrigued by the fact that certain influential ideas and concepts recur even as the time when they were on the ascendant has passed.

My critical reading of Hall's novel *The Carhullan Army* centers on the tensions inherent in the bid to re-vitalise the feminist movement in our time by referencing the activism of second-wave or radical feminism. This type of women's collective action is most active in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Ramazanoglu 1989:3-4, Echols 1983:38),<sup>1</sup> focusing on challenging systematic patriarchal domination in all aspects of women's lives – politically, socially, economically and sexually (Ramazanoglu 1989:12, Willis 1984:91). Indeed, the term 'radical' points to a conviction that women's oppression would only be overcome when basic social and economic structures are transformed for the benefit of women (Kreps 1973:239); this was the major point of departure from first-wave, liberal feminist discourse that fought for women's rights within the existing societal framework (Hekman 1999:10). In other words, radical feminists 'questioned the legitimacy of any social order which created and maintained the oppression of women by men.' (Ramazanoglu 1989:13) Unsurprisingly then, the vocabulary of politicised feminism – 'consciousness-raising', 'the personal is political', and 'sisterhood is powerful' – now so familiar in popular culture, originated from this movement (Willis 1984:92).<sup>2</sup> By insisting that 'the oppression of women is the first and primary oppression', and concentrating on 'women's lived experience', second-wave feminism attempts to transcend – without denying – women's differences, so as to empower women through the collective concept of 'sisterhood' (Rowland and Klein 1991:305).<sup>3</sup>

As Hall's novel shows, lingering misogynist thinking and attitudes rear their ugly heads when the social fabric is threatened. In the futurist setting of her novel, when natural resources have been almost depleted and climate changes

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<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that active feminist resistance began only after the mid-twentieth century. For example, at the beginning of this century, apart from the suffragist movement in England, the radical feminist review, *The Free Woman*, interrogated issues that concerned women's life, such as 'marriage, politics, prostitution, sexual relations'. However, booksellers shunned the publication, and it received little support from the women's suffragette movement due to its criticism of the view that achieving the vote for women would be the most significant improvement of the lot of women. Lisa Tuttle (1987), *Encyclopedia of Feminism* (London: Longman), p. 117; quoted in Rowland and Klein 1991:11.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the radical feminist writers and theorists in the 1970s include Kate Millett (*Sexual Politics* 1970), Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectics of Sex* 1970), Susan Brownmiller (*Against Our Will* 1975), and Andrea Dworkin (*Pornography* 1979).

<sup>3</sup> For a suggested list of radical feminism beliefs, see York *et al.*, 'We are the Feminists that Women have Warned us about', in Sneja Gunew (ed.) (1991), *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, pp. 308-311.

have wrought havoc upon the land, it is women who pay the higher price in the struggle to survive. The novel raises questions about the extent to which women can say firmly that they have established, and are able to maintain, an equitable status with their male counterparts today. Furthermore, it highlights how female collective identity, apart from providing a rallying call to oppressed women, also pose problems that range from a recourse to essentialism, isolationism, as well as the danger of privileging all aspects of the feminine at the expense of masculinity – concerns that characterise radical feminist discourse. My analysis of the novel will show that one of its most significant functions is to probe the effectiveness of looking to second-wave feminism to provide answers to – or at the very least, points to (re)consider in – the women's liberation movement in the twenty-first century. An important part of this process of re-imagining women's options in life include a paradoxical inscribing of the narrative within both a mythical/historical reference to the Greek myth of the Amazonian women warriors as well as its setting in a near-future of dystopia and ecological burn-out.

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, on the other hand, can be seen to act as a counterpoint to Hall's in this debate of the status of feminism today. As with Hall, the novel is set in a futuristic – albeit still very familiar – world where science and technology reign supreme. Those who work for the wealthier multinational biotechnological and pharmaceutical companies enjoy privileged lifestyles and benefits in the Compounds, while in the Pleeblands reside the flotsam and jetsam of society. In particular, the female characters vividly illustrate the experience of economic differences among women around the world. This is one of the most frequent points of criticism raised against radical feminism, in that it cannot deliver the feminist dream of liberation and emancipation to all women, despite – or because of – its universalistic definition of 'woman', since she 'turned out to be white, heterosexual, middle-class, and aspiring to a professional career alongside her husband', and hence failed to include 'the diversity of women even within [western] society, much less non-Western women. It certainly did not encompass the women of color who cleaned the professional women's house and cared for her children.' (Hekman 1999:10)<sup>4</sup> Reflecting this concern, Atwood's novel

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to deny that the place of radical feminism in the history of the women's movement, especially in its early days, 'in order to create a feminist framework to begin with', according to Ellen Willis (1989:94). Willis herself acknowledges at the same time, however, that 'it made for a very fragile kind of solidarity' since it 'excluded large groups of women' (*ibid*:95).

contrasts the lives and attitudes of the women scientists in the Compounds with Oryx, an Asian child-porn actress who later became the protagonist Jimmy/Snowman's lover, and Dolores, his Filipino nanny. The portrayal of these female characters allow for a complex dialogue that addresses the inability of second-wave feminism to accurately reflect many women's actual struggles, and reflects the postmodernist call for greater diversity within the movement itself.

Critics generally agree that feminism and postmodernism share particular similarities, such as a specific timeframe during which they were at the forefront of critical and intellectual consciousness (the 1960s onwards), the acknowledgement of the experience of liminality, disruption of traditional boundaries as well as the view that master narratives have lost their hold on today's society (Waugh 1989; Hutcheon 1989). It is the postmodern inclusive view of multiplicity and heterogeneity that has, in particular, sent reverberations throughout the women's movement that can be felt up till today. In the 1970s and 1980s, French feminism's post-structural destabilisation of all determinants, including the term 'woman', challenges binary concepts of male and female attributes, and problematises previous emphasis on the collective identity of womanhood (Weil 2006:154, Cixous 1986). Indeed, Caroline Ramazanoglu, in her reading of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, proposes that 'feminism, in the guise of an international women's movement addressed to a (more or less) common cause, not only cannot be justified, but is itself a form of terror' (1998:64). Speaking in a less forceful but similar vein, Ellen Willis, referring to her own experience as a radical feminist, notes that women activists like her were then operating 'in a social milieu that was middle-class, educated, culturally liberal and politically leftist' which excludes in reality a majority of women both in western and non-western societies (1984:100). This admission of the narrow context from which radical feminists at times articulate their thinking, together with French feminism, exposes the asymmetrical power relations not just between the genders, but among women themselves, in terms of class, education levels, and even global political power and influence. This is one of the most urgent considerations of twenty-first century feminism, and which Atwood has addressed at length in her novel through the characters of Oryx and Dolores who have experienced few of the benefits and progress of the feminist struggle in the west,

but are exploited by the sisterhood itself in its climb towards liberation and equality with men.

Reading both Hall and Atwood's novels together thus gives me an excellent opportunity to work through some of the most pressing issues of feminism in the twenty-first century. Atwood's novel, with its postmodern diversity of female characters, illuminates power relations at work in feminist discourse and, simultaneously, presents significant problems within it, since it directly contradicts second-wave – and even later – feminist belief in the necessity of holding on to a sense of collective identity for all women, as seen in Hall's imagining of an all-female outcast community in a dystopic patriarchal world. As Patricia Waugh notes, postmodern theory can conflict with the feminist bid to 'construct an identity out of a sense of unified selfhood' (1989:6). The critique of postmodernism's undesirable impact on feminism continued unabated into the late 1990s:

our ability to act in the present is being severely curtailed by the post-modern insistence that there are no subjects, with the consequence that woman has been virtually erased as the author of her own life. Women, reduced to an assemblage of texts and multiplicities of identities, no longer exist as a sociological category [...] woman disappears. (Bell and Klein 1996:xx)

These unresolved questions concerning feminism today will be discussed in my next two chapters; how/why does Hall's *The Carhullan Army* insist on and simultaneously deny the saliency of women's identity? To what extent does Atwood see third-wave feminism taking on women's issues and concerns globally in *Oryx and Crake*, even as 'old' problems of class and economic differences continue to be largely unresolved?

The feminist backdrop against which Hall and Atwood's texts can be read is one of multiple voices, competing identities, and unequal distribution of power. Lynne Segal writes of the natural development of many political movements, including women's liberation: 'once the excitement of finding a new collective identity begins to ebb, everyday politics becomes a far more discouraging, even tedious affair, a matter of competing interests and conflicting alliances.' (2000:19). Taking a less sanguine view, Toril Moi laments that many of her students in her American university, since the mid-1990s, 'no longer take feminism as their central political and personal project' (2006:1735). Even as many of these bright, educated young women believe in – and even insist on –

equal rights for their sex, they shun any form of an outright identification with the feminist cause, for fear that others ‘would think that they must be strident, domineering, aggressive, and intolerant and – worst of all – that they must hate men’ (*ibid*:1736).<sup>5</sup> This is the state of the women’s movement that we find ourselves in now, and in which the two authors are especially interested: third-wave feminism or post-feminism.

Third-wave feminism can be characterised by feminist practices that often turn into ‘matters of personal style or individual choice’ (Orr 1997:34).<sup>6</sup> This trend departs from the movement’s earlier focus on patriarchal institutions and misogynist acts against women, and is thus a cause of worry for many older feminists; as the writer Naomi Woolf warns, ‘the world isn’t going to change because a lot of young women feel confident and personally empowered, if they don’t have grassroots groups or lobbies to advance women-friendly policies, help break through glass ceiling, develop decent work-family support structures or solidify real political clout’ (Hill and Wiseman, 2009:30).<sup>7</sup> The two novels I will analyse examine precisely this preoccupation of the impact of social or global changes upon women, often so easily in negative ways. Sarah Hall’s act of invoking, in her novel *The Carhullan Army*, radical feminism’s emphasis for solidarity amongst women, and its activist drive to transform society into a more egalitarian place, can then be seen as an attempt to address the state of inertia or complacency that plague current feminist practices and beliefs. By providing different facets of women’s experiences not just within the western society, but beyond it as well, Atwood, in her novel, opens up the range of the feminist debate

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<sup>5</sup> Moi cites ‘the success of the conservative campaign against feminism in the 1990s’ that portray feminists as ‘full of hate’ (2006:1736), the presence of ‘conservative extremists’ in America such as Pat Robertson and Rush Limbaugh, and ‘disenchanted feminists’ such as Katie Poiphe, Cathy Young, Camille Paglia, and Natasha Walter (*ibid*:1736-9), as reasons for today’s women’s reluctance to identify with the female liberation movement.

<sup>6</sup> See also Misha Kavka (2002), ‘Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What is the “post” in Postfeminism?’; and Libby Brooks (2009) ‘Time for a good scrap about what our feminism really is’.

<sup>7</sup> Recent social developments concur with the academics’ concern of an alarming slide in women’s status and rights in the western world. For recent press coverage/reports on the declining rape conviction rate in Britain, see Sean O’Neil and Fiona Hamilton (2009), ‘Rape audit to find out why so few win justice’, and Richard Ford (2009), ‘Labour tries again to give women greater protection against sex crimes’. Ruth Sunderland (2009) has written extensively on the limited progress made by women at transcending the corporate ceiling for women: ‘To rebuild the corporate sector, we have to do more than just smash the glass ceiling’, ‘Revealed: failure of top UK firms to get women on board’, and ‘Women still face a steep climb to the top table’. For reports on the recent murder of abortion doctor George Tiller, see Ed Pilkington (2009), ‘Doctor shot dead in Kansas church fuels bitter divide in America over abortion’. The feminist crime writer Sara Paretsky condemns Tiller’s murder as an erosion of women’s rights to receive equal protection as their unborn foetuses; see Paretsky (2009), ‘Terror in the name of Jesus’. For a view on the stalled status of the feminist struggle, see Katherine Rake (2008) ‘The long fight for equality’.

to examine the effect of market capitalism on women's sense of selfhood. Both closely linked arguments contribute to a re-imagining and interrogation of some of the fundamental tenets of the women's movement today.

Another advantage of reading Hall's novel in conjunction with Atwood's lies in how their similar futuristic settings allow for the narratives to be analysed for their interplay of utopian and dystopian elements, an approach that has always been an integral part of a feminist 'inherent utopian inclination' (Goodwin 1990:1). In chapter 2, I shall analyse the ways in which these narratives reflect the genre of utopia/dystopia writing. In many ways, Hall is continuing Atwood's earlier vision of a dystopia/utopia in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1984); both writers imaginatively explore the nuances of contemporary demands and problems by extrapolating their impact and significance, concentrating on the manner in which women have negotiated their social status and resisted patriarchy in the midst of technological, scientific, and economic pressures. How this particular genre acts as an effective space for thinking about the feminism movement will be a recurring point of interest when I discuss Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) in the next chapter.

To sum up, Hall and Atwood's novels present an invaluable opportunity to imagine and work through the feminist agenda simultaneously from a historical perspective, as well as to project ahead through an extrapolation of recent trends and developments. This shared perspective and acknowledgement of the importance of women's past struggles and the associating problems or issues that remain unanswered today take on greater significance when both writers frame them against our current preoccupations such as environmental damage, competing political powers, and worryingly, the perceived erosion of women's hard-won rights and status. Interestingly, both female novelists engage with an apocalyptic vision when they imaginatively reconsider the narratives of women in our time and beyond, blending both utopian and dystopian ideas to grapple with the conflicting demands and challenges of womanhood in the twenty-first century. The ongoing debate on women's identity, as revealed in these novelists' works, indicate that there is still much left, if not more, to fight for and to talk about before anyone can truly say feminism has had its say.

## Chapter 1 Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army*: Radical Feminism in the Twenty-first Century

Sarah Hall is a British author and poet whose writings have garnered critical recognition; her novel that I will be analyzing in this chapter, *The Carhullan Army* (2007), won the John Llewellyn Prize (2007), was nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award (2008), and is her only novel with a futuristic setting and a distinctively feminist viewpoint. Set in a futuristic Britain, the country suffers from repeated floods, climatic changes, dwindling fuel supplies, and is also bogged down by its military commitments in South America and China. Due to the collapse of its agricultural base, it is dependent on America for food and other necessities, and the British government – having morphed into a dominant state apparatus called the Authority – has herded its population into cities where energy supplies and food are rationed, and individual freedom and rights curtailed. Those who refuse to be corralled into these overcrowded and bleak areas are deemed ‘Unofficials’ and left to fend for themselves in a barren and destroyed landscape. The readers come to the story through the protagonist’s prison statement; named generically as Sister, she flees from her city Rith to the outlaw community of Carhullan, where sixty women, led by a female ex-soldier named Jackie, subsist in the northern reaches of Cumbria. The Carhullan army is defeated when it attacks Rith in a bid to free its people, and it is at this point that Sister is arrested and interrogated.

The issues that preoccupy Hall in her writing of *The Carhullan Army* reflect, to an extent, twenty-first century concerns with renewable resources, man’s relationship with technology and nature, as well as gender relations that continue to confound western societies despite their more than a century-long experience with feminist struggles. In an interview on the novel, Hall states that she was thinking about the British government’s handling of the country’s demand for oil, and the impact of its shortage in a few decades. Also, she points to her Cumbrian childhood experience, specifically her memories of its ‘fierce agricultural women’, as a source of inspiration for her female characters: ‘I’ve always admired that strength in women. And I was thinking about self-sufficiency – those women had always managed farms. I’ve always been interested in the history of radical feminism – what happened to those women of the 1960s and

1970s.' (Brown 2007:14). Hall's stated interest here may be interpreted as an attempt to access what is arguably the revolutionary power of the feminist movement in the mid-twentieth century; a collective, politicised drive that is arguably almost absent in the twenty-first century, when most women in western industrialised countries appear to be as active in the public sphere, and to enjoy the same legislative rights to employment, healthcare, and legal representation as men.

In *The Carhullan Army*, dystopic Rith might be a far cry from liberated First World nations, but I see Hall's imagination of women's future lives as being closely tied to the increasingly urgent debates in these countries about dwindling energy resources, the wars in the Middle East from which America and Britain seem incapable of extricating themselves, and the easy recourse to fundamentalist thinking when our once comfortable lives are threatened.<sup>8</sup> By associating the masculine with natural resources-dependent technological and industrial activities, as well as with a government that tends towards militarism – simply called the Authority – Hall's novel postulates an alternative vision that divorces itself from this patriarchal system in order to empower women: a reflection of the radical feminist inspiration of 'a revolutionary movement of women' which 'must be autonomous, create its own theory, and set its own priorities' (Willis 1984:93). It is now women's turn, in other words, to do things differently. Carhullan's separatist stance from the official cities recognised by the Authority, such as Rith, is Hall's way of experimenting with and analysing the effectiveness of such a revolutionary call. The attractiveness of this vision of a united and cooperative female group can also be understood when placed against the myriad of conflicting voices that permeate the feminist movement currently, as I have discussed in the introduction to this section.

In this chapter, I will analyse Hall's novel using three main considerations: the narrator's identity and perspective, the establishment and the interrogation of binaries, and power relations. The conclusion of this chapter will synthesise this discussion by studying the *The Carhullan Army*'s resonance with Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in terms of their utopian/dystopian narrative focus.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Susan Gubar's 'Feminism Inside Out' for an exposition on the battered state of women's rights under George W. Bush's presidency 2001-2009 (2006:1712-13).

## **'You will call me Sister': Narrating Generic and Individual Identities**

The first line of *The Carhullan Army* reads: 'My name is Sister' (5). This definitive declaration of a name that denotes familial ties as well as gender identity distinguishes the narrator's presence in the narrative, conferring a specific, but also a collective, identity on her. On the one hand, it could be that because the narrative is a record of a prisoner's statement, her refusal to reveal her name can be seen as an attempt to protect others related to her, such as the husband she left behind when she left for Carhullan. On the other hand, in the following lines, she goes on to state that 'Sister' is

what the others called me. It is what I call myself. Before that, my name was unimportant. I can't remember it being used. I will not answer to it now. It is gone. You will call me Sister. (5)

In the narrator's erasure of her individual identity lies her determination to shed her life and experiences in Rith in order to embrace Carhullan and all that it represents. When we take into account that though the Carhullan women use the term 'Sister' with one another as well, and that they all have individual names which they request to be (re)used after the initial period of settling in (134), with the narrator being the sole exception to the rule, it is clear that Hall means for her to function as a spokesperson, a representative, of the Carhullan community. A few questions are raised at this point: what kind of narrator and spokesperson is Sister? What is the significance of her being the last woman to join the Carhullan community? How does her perspective and representation of events construct our knowledge of the tradition of radical feminist struggles and ideology that Hall has stressed as a particular point of interest for this novel?

To understand Sister's narrative role in the novel, I suggest that we pay attention to how her identity undergoes a radical transformation in her journey from Rith to Carhullan. In the process, Hall underlines the extent to which Sister cleaves to Carhullan and all that it represents, thereby establishing her as a convincing voice for the community. In the narrative, while on the road to Carhullan, the narrator revels in the Cumbrian wilderness that surrounds her, where there are 'no regulations', 'no human mess, no chaos, poorly managed, and barely liveable' as in Rith. Freed by her decision to abandon the city – and with it her husband – her sense of self surfaces: 'There was just me, in my own skin, with my blood speeding up.' (17) Fully alert to her surroundings and herself, she thus

displays a heightened sense of self-awareness that has been lacking in Rith where she had led ‘a wrecked and regulated existence’ (41). Another way in which the narrator comes into her own identity is when she successfully meets Carhullan’s requirement that each new member be subjected to a period of isolated incarceration in a ‘dog box’ – an enclosed tin outhouse – with limited food and water, and no toilet facilities. Apart from testing the physical and mental suitability of the woman for a hard life on the rugged mountains, this test also suggests an act of sloughing off the old self conditioned by patriarchy to allow for a rebirth. This would then bind the member closely to the group and its beliefs. Indeed, when the narrator is at last released from her claustrophobic, and by then fetid, prison, she was ‘void to the core’:

To get here I had committed a kind of suicide. My old life was over. I was now an unmade person. In the few days that I had been at Carhullan nobody had called me anything other than Sister [...] The person I had once been, the person who had walked out of the safety zones and up the mountain, was gone. She was dead, I was alive. But the only heartbeat I had was the pulse these women were beating through me. (94)

In her survival of this trial by fire, the narrator has earned her place in, and is now officially part of, Carhullan. By being ‘unmade’ by the rigorous trial, cleansed of her previous oppressed life in the squatters, she is deemed ready to receive the beliefs and practices that characterise Carhullan. But if this is so, Hall has thus stripped Sister of a set of rules, a way of being, only to replace it with another; how far does the reader know her as an individual? Will matriarchal Carhullan prove to be more enlightened than patriarchal Rith? I will return to these questions in greater detail in the subsequent subsections on identity, essentialism, and war.

The authorial interest of *The Carhullan Army* clearly centers on a radical feminist identification with the oppression of women and the means with which to overcome it. Sister’s arduous physical journey from Rith to Carhullan, and the period when she is forced to draw upon her inner strength and resources while imprisoned in the dog box, both act to strip back the various layers of patriarchal ideology that enmesh her while in Rith. The very extremity of these measures reflect the radical feminists’ insistence to recognise the depth of subjugation women are subjected to in male-dominated society, and thus the impetus to eradicate that by overhauling women’s self-knowledge and political awareness. In their assertion that such a form of suppression is the most fundamental example of

a group of humans oppressing another (Willis 1984:96), such that the idea of ‘woman’ is inextricably connected to their ‘general condition of subordination to men’ (Ramazanoglu 1989:12), the way out of this power imbalance appears to be an utter overthrow of the patriarchal system as well as its defining views of women’s identity. The radical feminist Bonnie Kreps states her disbelief ‘that the oppression of women will be ended by giving them a bigger piece of pie’, for it is believed that ‘the pie itself is rotten’ (1973:239). Therefore, only by distancing herself physically, emotionally and spiritually from Rith can the narrator extricate herself from the bonds of patriarchy and be ready to embrace her female identity.

This sense of the narrator coming into her own, however, requires careful attention, for in Sister’s declaration of herself as the last to join Carhullan (5) there is a perceptible significance to her status in the group. After recuperating from her trek to Carhullan and her ordeal in the tin shed, Sister retires for the first time to the dormitory with the other women and realises, as she listens to them chatting, that their knowledge of life outside Carhullan is ‘almost two decades old’ (121), cut off as they are by the mountain ranges on which the farmstead is situated. This isolation is heightened by their Unofficial status in the eyes of the government, as well as by the media blackout across the country. As one of the sisters comment, ““We all got out before things really deteriorated, more or less. It’s hard to appreciate it when you’re up here. It’s still hard to believe of this country. I think some of them still imagine things are the way they were when they left.”” (120) Jackie’s insistence that the narrator speak to the group about her harrowing life in Rith, then, is an affirmation of the former’s vision and hard work in establishing the farm. For the narrator is not just the voice of this all-women community, in the early days of her arrival there, she also bears witness to the atrocious level that life in the cities has descended to. As a point of reinforcement, the contraceptive coil that most women in these cities – from ““fourteen-year-olds”” to ““grandmothers””, according to the narrator (90) – are required to be fitted with as a form of population control, is passed around the group in a kind of macabre show-and-tell, after Lorry has taken it out of Sister.

It is important, then, to read Sister’s narration not just as a personal experience of transformation and change among the Carhullan women, but also as a public record – and indictment – of tyrannical bigotry. Although Sister’s personal identity is subsumed under her sexual one here – and we can thus query

whether Carhullan is no less tyrannical than Rith for doing so – Hall effectively portrays an instance here when the collective identity of ‘woman’ is empowering and liberating. By intertwining the personal and the political in Sister’s narrative, the novelist issues a familiar strategic rallying call for many second-wave feminists who ‘focused directly on women’s relation to men as politically problematic’, especially on issues such as reproduction and sexuality that used to be thought of as private and hence to be kept out of open debate (Ramazanoglu 1989:12). In so doing, what has been perceived – and often dismissed – as matters pertaining to the welfare of women are now pushed to the forefront of public consciousness. Sister’s recount of her experience in Rith serves to explicitly highlight not just the erosion of civil rights for their people, but also the drastic reduction of the status of women to neutered beasts (men are not subjected to such sexual control in the cities), subject to public ‘random examination’ of their coils; ‘women were sometimes asked to display themselves to the monitors in the back of cruisers’ (27). It is easy to imagine the Carhullan women’s sympathy when the narrator describes how the doctor attached the contraceptive device in her ‘as efficiently as a farmer clipping the ear of one of his herd’ (28), leading – probably as Jackie intended – to these women coming together in their collective abhorrence of having their bodies thus violated. Indeed, the entire scene is reminiscent of the consciousness-raising sessions that radical feminists prioritise as a cornerstone of their identity as a sisterhood, a concretisation and articulation of their lived experiences of oppression. As Lorry, an older Carhullan woman, tells Sister: ““There are things we’ve known for a while. But it’s quite another thing to hear what they are doing from someone else, first hand. It makes a difference.”” (120) After Sister’s speech in front of the women, the sense of ‘camaraderie’ increases between them (121), as they swap stories of their lives before Carhullan between swigs of cider.

### *Binaries: Engendering Identities*

If Sister as the narrator of *The Carhullan Army* serves the function of inscribing her personal story onto the public and political realms, Hall also uses the narrative to structure a binary consciousness that runs through the entire novel. Dichotomous differences – from the narrator’s descriptions of her life in the

highly regulated, sterile city Rith and that of rural, fertile Carhullan, to her views on nature, identity, gender relations and religion – mark out a continuous dialectic that highlights the tension between the mainstream (associated with the masculine Rith) and the Unofficials. The latter are identified as such when they refuse to be on the electoral roll or to live within the jurisdiction of the Authority. As the largest and most well-organized group of Unofficials, the Carhullan women are both female *and* alien. The narrative thus offers a polemic view of the *polis* versus the unlawful, the urban versus the rural, technology versus nature, and encompassing them all, masculinity versus femininity. In so doing, the juxtapositions and contrasts work to throw into greater relief the construction of gender power relations and their far-reaching consequences that, while today no longer as obvious as in the past, are all the more powerful because of their covertness.

The city of Rith, where the narrator is forced to register and live in after the collapse of Britain's infrastructure, economy as well as food and energy supplies, is characterized by almost unbearable living conditions: 'The bacterial smell of the refinery and fuel plants...the smog of rape and tar-sand burning off, and all of us packed tightly together like fish in a smoking shed' (5) in the combined residences. It is this dire sense of an anxious fixation on energy supply coupled with terrible overcrowding in the residential quarters that linger in the reader's mind. Sister highlights the 'metered artificial lighting' (42), and the tediousness of her job on an assembly line for wind turbines that are never installed for unknown reasons (53). Food rations for the Rith inhabitants consist largely of 'imported canned food' (31) with 'gelatinous contents' that taste 'either too sweet or too salty' (32). When life is 'ant-like', when 'everywhere the atmosphere was of human pressure' (88), it is little wonder that drug abuse is rampant in Rith, and as time wears on, the 'overdose and suicide rates climbed' (30). The despotic Authority bans all news and travel outside of Rith, so that people are effectively trapped physically, mentally and emotionally within the city walls. Even the rain 'feels wounded' in Rith (6), with the sky 'the dun colour of bitumen' and the moon 'a white smear' resembling 'a ridged and filmy ulcer in the lining of cloud' (8).

Hall's depiction of Sister's life in the city vividly renders to the reader its association with technology, and thus its unnaturalness and inhumanity. Within

such a harrowing space, it is Sister's husband, Andrew, who adapts and eventually accepts his lot under the jurisdiction of the Authority, even when both of them had initially despaired of the increasingly regimented ways in which the country is run. Andrew is gradually identified as being coterminous with Rith when he is promoted in his workplace, and tells his wife that 'it was madness to be anything other than complicit in Britain's attempts to rebuild herself' (31). In other words, the masculine appears to be capable of being part of and fully functioning – even at home – in a city, the *polis*. Ultimately, Andrew's identification with Rith is confirmed when, after examining his wife's newly fitted contraceptive coil, while sympathetic to her pain and humiliation, he also finds it so arousing that he beds her there and then (29). Against the backdrop of the Authority conducting spot-checks on women to ensure compliance with its population control method, and the inevitable occasions for abuse of such rights – 'women were sometimes asked to display themselves to monitors in the backs of cruisers' (27), while the narrator has had a monitor 'who had me lower my overalls in front of his colleague, who had come forward with a gloved hand, joking about dog leashes, and though the wire of my coil was easily seen, he had still examined it' (17) – Andrew's actions invariably alienates the protagonist, and entraps her within a patriarchal dome of abuse and humiliation.

After nightmarish Rith, where both the patriarchy and environmental degradation make for a living hell for its women, the reader is surely relieved to move on to Carhullan in the wilds of highland Cumbria in northern England. It is worth noting that 'No man had been inside the farm since it had passed into Jackie Nixon's hands' (169). The entire commune is proudly run by women who undertake all of the tasks needed to keep them fed, clothed, and sheltered. On her first approach to the farm, the narrator notes the 'ripe smell of silage [...] an odour both offensive and rousing' (65). There are 'packs of dogs' spilling into the yard, while 'over in the paddocks, ponies necked against each other' (87). Being self-sufficient in their food supply, the contrast between Carhullan and Rith cannot be any greater: 'the women ate tomatoes from May to September. There were soft fruits that came out of season, soya beans and citrus' in their solar-panelled greenhouse (101), as well as 'sties, bees, an orchard, and a fishery' (54). The Carhullan women were 'vigilant and observant' (87), working together on the land and the farm to eke out 'a serious and honest existence' (103). To Sister, in

those early days, they seemed to be ‘sexless, whittled back to muscle by toil and base nourishment, creatures who bore no sense of category, no dress code other than the one they chose’ (118-9).

Nevertheless, Jackie, who mockingly identifies Carhullan as ‘Shangri-La’ on Sister’s first day of recuperation after her initiation trial (78), is at pains to stress the hardships attendant with living off the land in such a remote location. As she brings her newest member for a tour around the community, Jackie lists the ‘illnesses’ that plague the community: anaemia, gastro-sicknesses, genital warts, thrush, ringworms, constipation, and so on (95-96). Anyone coming to the farm, Jackie pronounces, should ‘get their wisdom teeth removed first’ and bring ‘good shoes’ and books (51): an illustration of Carhullan’s basic lifestyle. Despite this – or perhaps because of this – the narrative, in detailing the (relative) abundance of livestock and crops that Carhullan owns, as well as the sense of ‘camaraderie on the moors and in the dormitories’ (131), implicitly provides a stark contrast, and an alternative, to Rith’s retreat from the natural landscape, its reliance on artificial and manufactured goods, and the residents’ aloofness from their neighbours wrought from their enclosed living conditions.

At this point, it is timely to pause and assess the effect of Hall’s establishment of these two contrasting communities. The novel’s association of women with nature, and men with technology and urbanisation, calls to mind the development of ecofeminism in recent years, which pushes the feminist debate towards the familiar precipice of biological determinism and essentialism. Furthermore, her vision of an all-female group living away from mainstream society is undoubtedly a reflection of the separatist stance of many radical feminist advocates, who view such an act as an essential part of their movement. These are issues which I will discuss in detail in the following section, together with Hall’s portrayal of Jackie as the female leader of Carhullan, in particular her call to arms and subsequent attempt to attack Rith.

### **Ecofeminism, Separatism, and War: Where/What is a woman’s place?**

At the heart of these three topics – ecofeminism, separatism and warfare – lies the as yet unresolved debate of nature versus nurture, essentialism versus constructivism; this has preoccupied not just feminist advocates, but also theorists

and intellectuals engaged in discourses of race, science, as well as social engineers and planners. *The Carhullan Army* addresses, complicates and re-imagines arguments concerning the nature of woman – her biological, psychological and emotional drives and impulses. At the end of this discussion in this section, I will evaluate the efficacy of Hall's imaginative vision in its attempt to reach towards some form of answers or even to raise further questions about the status of women in our current moment.

### ***Ecofeminism***

Even when Sister first heard about it at the age of seventeen, Carhullan was already closely associated with nature: 'Its lamb was being sold in Rith, its vegetables and honey, and char when the tarn on its estate held them. The woman living there traded every month in the border markets, with organic labels and low prices' (47). Sister tells of how the women had 'installed a waterwheel, harnessing a nearby spring. A year-round garden had been planted, and a fast-growing willow copse.' There are also 'peat troughs, filtration tanks. It was all grandly holistic, a truly green initiative.' (54) In view of how the narrative paints a disconcertingly – albeit by now familiar – scenario of the breakdown of the country in the midst of global warming, a shortage in fuel, as well as increasingly dire levels of flooding, it is hardly surprising that Carhullan has opted for a more sustainable and ecologically friendly mode of farming. What is more noteworthy, however, is the emphasis in the narrative of the women's close affinity with nature from working on the land. Jackie claims that their vegetable plots are tended everyday by a group of women who are 'more worried about insect netting than anything else they ever had been in their lives', and what is more, '*they were happier for it.*' (emphasis mine) (102) Indeed, Sister later comes to echo Jackie's viewpoint, when she extols on her joy in her task of harvesting peat on the moors for fuel: 'It was the sense of basic usefulness and dependence, feeling active and real and *connected*' (emphasis mine) (103). This sense of accord between the women and nature is reinforced by the leader of the peat task group, Shruti, who highlights the therapeutic benefits of being part of the initial agrarian lifestyle of the community:

"It's working with the land that does it. Getting back to basics." The key to it, she said, was communing with the actual ground and not being divorced from reality any more. It was therapeutic; it gave a person perspective. (*ibid*)

Here, the link between women and nature is easily discernible; the latter is rewarded, rejuvenated and re-energised by their work on the land. In turn, selling their organic products in the border markets, they publicly identify themselves with this alternative way of interacting with nature and the environment.

Hall's suggestion of women's affinity with nature – and, in the narrative, men's distance from it – reflects the ideas of ecofeminism. Such an identification of women with nature is not totally new: Sylvia Bowerbank notes that debate over women's 'appropriate relationship to "nature" was certainly already taking place in early modern England during the rise of the scientific revolution' (1996:120).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Carolyn Merchant points to women adopting this identification of their sex with nature in the early twentieth century in western countries: a woman has it “in her power to educate public sentiment to save from rapacious waste and complete exhaustion the resources upon which depend the welfare of the home, the children, and the children's children”, according to Lydia Adams-Williams, a ‘self-styled feminist conservation writer, in 1908’.<sup>10</sup> It is this imbalance of power between the genders – and between nature and the modern mechanistic worldview – that runs through ecofeminist beliefs. As Karen J. Warren states, ‘ecofeminists agree that the domination of nature by human beings comes from a patriarchal world view, the same world view that justifies the domination of women’ (1994:10). This view is shared by Merchant, who proposes that in the last decades of the twentieth century, ‘when women today attempt to change society’s domination of nature, they are acting to overturn modern constructions of nature and women as culturally passive and subordinate’ (1990b:xvi). Therefore, in the Carhullan women’s rejection of the kind of exploitative and ravenous consumption of the earth’s resources that has led to Britain’s downfall in the novel, opting instead for a more sustainable way of tilling the land and living lightly off it, there is a simultaneous spurning of the patriarchal dominance over women through their physical removal from the official cities. When Hall portrays the women’s success in living close to, and in harmony with, nature, she is also gesturing to a challenge towards cultural and social tendencies that associate femininity with the qualities of weakness, docility, and a reliance on men for most

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<sup>9</sup> See also Carolyn Merchant (1980) *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Merchant, “Women of the Progressive Conservation Movement, 1900-1916”, *Environmental Review* 8, (Spring 1984), pp. 57-85, 65; quoted in Merchant (1990a:117).

of their needs. To a large extent, I believe, this challenge is part of the radical feminist belief in the dynamics of unequal gender relations:

Women must learn that the technique used to keep a *woman* oppressed is to convince her that she is at all times secondary to man, and that her life is defined in terms of him. We cannot speak of liberating ourselves until we free ourselves from this myth and accept ourselves as primary. (emphasis as original) (Koedt 1973:319)

Nevertheless, there is disagreement as to the extent to which radical feminism and ecofeminism are close allies. Alice Echols insists that, together with pacifist feminists, ecofeminists are those who advocate women's close connection to nature, making them 'uniquely qualified to rescue the planet from nuclear holocaust and ecological ruination' (1983:38). In contrast, she argues that radical feminism objects to this mode of thinking as it rehearses 'an oppressive patriarchal construct' (*ibid*:37). I raise this debate here to aid my critical reading of Hall's all-female group's relation not just with nature, but also with how she imagines their interaction with men outside of Rith. If some men voluntarily reject, as with the Carhullan women, the claustrophobically mechanical Rith, would they be able to survive and thrive as the women do in the natural landscape? Or would they, as men, prove to be incapable of the supposed organic bond between women and nature, and thus simply lack the wherewithal to eke out a living in the Cumbrian mountains?

Near the Carhullan farmstead is a male settlement, which is 'involved with the farm's running, but remained at a satellite location.' (111) Sister's first glimpse of the these males confirms the success of Carhullan and the women's labour: 'I could see immediately that they did not have the vitality of the Sisters and I wondered in what conditions they lived, whether their existence was poorer, and how much they depended on the women for their survival.' (135) This suggestion, that the men have largely failed to replicate the Sisters' productive farm, is further heightened when the men asks for a load of peat from the women in exchange for help in repairing their fishery nets, and two of the women 'gave them some pieces of fruit they had in their pockets' (136), almost as if out of pity for them. When Sister speaks with one of the men, Calum, she quickly notes that 'his gums looked red and inflamed', and that 'he was underweight, that his diet was poor' (138), a description that brings to mind the well-stocked larder and

farm of Carhullan. Indeed, Sister's visit to one of the men's largest cottage allows her to contrast their basic living conditions with that of Carhullan's:

The place smelled of clay, charcoal, and animal fat, and there was a musky odour too that I couldn't place, something mushroomy and decayed, like a forest's interior. Underfoot it was soft. There were no boards. The women at the farm often decorated rustically, with flowers and green cuttings, bowls of fruit, or they made spirals with pebbles on the mantels and window seats in the parlour. But here there was little in the way of ornament. It was utilitarian and sullen. (139)

Hall has thus set up a dialectic in which the men, with their physical strength, would have been the better candidates for survival in the wilderness, yet have emerged the weaker ones, dependent on the women for their fuel and other supplies, while the latter – even if they are faced with numerous hardships such as diseases, lack of hygiene facilities, tedious and demanding farm chores, and few personal possessions – clearly thrive in relation to the men. Perhaps it is due to the fact that there are only fewer than ten men in their settlement, while Carhullan has sixty members. But that in itself is a telling point: that the novel has so few men who have chosen to get away from the cities seems to imply that men invariably function more effectively within an urbanized setting, distanced from nature and striving to control their surroundings with the aid of technology and machinery. It raises questions about Hall's vision of Carhullan: while the women have overturned the traditional prejudicial impression of women as dependent and weak, the author's depiction of the contrast between the two genders' attempts to live away from the modern city invariably fosters suggestions of what Roger J.H. King identifies as essentialist ecofeminism. This consists of the belief that 'women are closer in nature than are men', and therefore 'women are more likely than men to care about nature and are better prepared to do so than men' (1991:76). Therefore, in the images of the men's miserable cottages, their emaciated physique and their inability to be self-sustaining, Hall has demolished one aspect of the gender discriminatory hierarchy only to set up another in its place: one that allows for the superiority of women over men in their interaction with nature, just as Echols has suggested. Such a view fails to take into account, as numerous theorists have pointed out, the very constructedness not just of the term 'femininity', but also that of 'nature' (Bowerbank 1996; James 1996; King 1991; Merchant 1980/1983, 1990a, 1990b). It can also be said that in radical feminist discourse, the slippage between 'radicalism' and 'essentialism' can at

times be too real. When feminists begin to celebrate ‘women’s essential difference from men, and by revaluing creative and nurturing aspects of femininity which had become devalued or distorted in patriarchal society’ (Ramazanoglu 1989:13), the danger of tipping the scale over to the other end is ever present, as I have argued here for Hall’s novel.

### ***Separatism***

While Hall appears to have adopted a biologically deterministic interpretation of the bond between nature and human beings, in other ways she shows an awareness of the role of social conditioning in the formation of gender traits. As I have discussed earlier, Rith and Carhullan are imagined dichotomously from each other: the former in which ‘millions submit to an exhausted existence of cordons, curfews and censorship’ (Greenland 2007:14), while at the latter the all-female farmstead is run efficiently and harmoniously, allowing the occupants there a standard of living unavailable in Rith. Carhullan, therefore, presents Hall with an opportunity to work out the implications of a separatist lifestyle for women, away from the pressures, structures and restrictions from patriarchal practices. At the same time, in the novel’s detail of the mainstream vehement denouncement of the Carhullan collective and their outlaw status, the author also reveals the power inherent in a traditional articulation of a hierarchical, narrow circumscription of gender traits, particularly for females who turn their backs on established norms and expectations.

Sister states that Carhullan ‘had in part been a sanctuary for abused women’ (106-7), as well as for those ‘who had committed a crime or were misfits: they had been violent, outspoken, socially inept, promiscuous, drug-addicted’ (130). In short, they are deemed aberrant by normative societal standards. Jackie’s farmstead is thus not just of a physically remote locality, being ‘the highest farm in England, almost inaccessible’, ‘a vast, self-contained, workable place’ (52); its inhabitants are rejects or outcasts, unable, or refusing, to toe the line drawn by authorities that often exhibit misogynist beliefs and practices. By opting to turn their back on mainstream society, the Carhullan women are uncounted – or rather, ‘discounted’ – in the official census, ‘no longer part of the recognised nation. The

Authority called them Unofficials' (15), thus establishing the close identification of femininity with their outcast status.<sup>11</sup>

This process of social rejection of all that Carhullan stands for in the eyes of the public – femininity that is independent, strong, and a collective that is supportive of one another – is couched in largely misogynist terms. Sister states, 'I had heard them all. Cult. Faction. Coven' (19). They are also termed 'a gang of bloody terrorists' (18), and among the public,

speculation about the lives they led was rife, and it was often cruel, or filled with titillation. They were nuns, religious freaks, communists, convicts. They were child deserters, men-haters, cunt-lickers, or celibates. They were, just as they had been hundreds of years ago, witches, up to no good in the sticks.' (48)

Clearly, the combination of women and nature as being out of control and disruptive is perceived as a threat; the superstitious persona of the female witch escapes the grasp of scientific rational men seeking to impose social order upon them (Merchant 1980/1983:138). Such a form of andocentric delineation of problematic females is also seen in the Greek myth of the Amazonian women warriors, which bear striking commonalities with the Carhullan women.

Page duBois suggests that as the Greeks' artistic endeavours in the fifth century B.C. developed the subject of *polis* (city) culture dominated by the Greek male human, 'the other – the alien, female, bestial – is excluded, in this discourse, from culture and set at the boundaries of the city' (1991:4). But because women are indispensable for their reproductive capabilities, Greek society had to re-admit them into the *polis*, though not without great reservations; 'they came to represent a potentially dangerous, even poisonous force which was both within the city and outside it.' (1994:5) The Amazonian women myth is thus illustrative of the enduring historically constructed and oppositional relationship between the sexes; as Karen Armstrong suggests, 'the most powerful myths are about extremity' (2005:3). With their exclusively female community commonly thought to be located at the borders of the known world (Fantham *et al.* 1994:134; Hardwick 1996:158), the Amazonians are perceived as being incompatible with the civilized

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<sup>11</sup> In Doris Lessing's novel, *The Cleft* (2007), there is also a similar concern with the official/unofficial status of a history of women versus that told from a male perspective. While the novel also features a community of females living together, the setting is that of the distant past, with the male narrator a Roman senator attempting to piece together, from the women's oral stories, their 'official' history. This recent novel, however, came too late for me to incorporate it in this dissertation, even though there are relevant narrative elements to *The Carhullan Army*.

mASCULINIST GREEK WORLD, AND THUS AN ANTITHETICAL CONTRAST THAT WORKS TO DELINEATE THE NORMATIVE:

Diodorus makes them less civilized eaters of meat alone, and Herodotus' Amazons have not yet learned to navigate ships. Amazons' weapons, the bow, the axe, and sometimes the javelin and the spear, tend to associate them with light-armoured soldiers or with those, like bowmen, who had less military prestige than the heavy armoured hoplite.' (Fantham *et al.* 1994:134)

References to the Amazons' social life also reinforced their deviant nature in the eyes of the Greeks; duBois writes:

Unwilling to live permanently with men, they met yearly with a tribe of men to conceive children, or else took men by force. Male children they mutilated for slaves or returned to their fathers; females were raised in traditional Amazon ways, taught to ride, armed with the double-edged Amazon axe [...] the Amazons existed outside marriage, capable of promiscuity' (1991:34)

LINKED CLOSELY WITH CENTAURS AND PERSIANS IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY (FANTHAM *ET AL.* 1994:131) – WHO, AS WITH THESE WOMEN WARRIORs EVENTUALLY, ARE ALSO DEFEATED BY THE GREEKS IN BATTLE – THESE IMAGINARY FIGURES PROVIDE AN EXCELLENT VEHICLE FOR ESTABLISHING THE PARAMETERS OF NORMALITY AND ANOMALY. HALL CANNOT HAVE BEEN UNFAMILIAR WITH THE GREEK MYTHOLOGISATION OF THE AMAZONIAN WARRIORs WHEN SHE IMAGINES THE CARHULLAN WOMEN. AS SHOWN IN THE PREVIOUS PARAGRAPH, A SIMILAR PROCESS OF DEMONISING FEMALEs WHO, THROUGH THEIR ACTIONS, DISMISS THE STATUS QUO AND SET THEMSELVES SEPARATELY FROM IT, RUNS THROUGH BOTH THE GREEK MYTH AND *THE CARHULLAN ARMY*. PHYSICALLY ISOLATED, WARLIKE, AND PERCEIVED AS UNCIVILISED, BOTH GROUPS OF WOMEN ENACT THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AND THE MARGINALISED. YET IF, AS ARMSTRONG PROPOSES, WE PARTICIPATE IN THE PROCESS OF MYTH-MAKING AS BOTH ‘A GAME THAT TRANSFIGURES OUR FRAGMENTED, TRAGIC WORLD, AND HELPS US TO GLIMPSE NEW POSSIBILITIES BY ASKING “WHAT IF?”’ (2005:8), AND THAT WHICH ALLOW US TO ‘GLIMPSE THE CORE OF REALITY’ (*IBID*:7), THEN HALL’S NOVEL MIGHT ALSO BE READ AS HER EXPLORATION OF THE POSSIBILITY OF A RADICALLY DIFFERENT PATH FOR WOMEN, AN IMAGINARY ATTEMPT THAT GROUNDS HER PROTAGONIST(S) IN FAMILIAR INSTANCES OF WOMEN’S OPPRESSION WHILE POSTULATING A FLIGHT, A SEPARATIST MOVE, THAT TRAVERSE DOMINANT MASCULINIST IDEOLOGICAL RESTRICTIONS. *THE CARHULLAN ARMY*, IN ITS IMAGINARY ALIGNMENT WITH ITS GREEK MATRIARCHAL PREDECESSORS, REBUTS THE MASTER NARRATIVES OF HISTORICAL MASCULINIST WORLDVIEW. AT THE SAME TIME, IT ALSO LOCATES WOMEN’S FIGHT FOR EMANCIPATION WITHIN A STILL-EVOLVING STAGE, WHERE PAST PREJUDICES AND GENDER POWER CONFLICTS HAVE YET TO BE SATISFACTORILY RESOLVED.

What remains to be asked, at this point, is the extent to which Hall's advocacy of a separatist approach allows her to envision a new energy, not least a workable platform, for the gender debates today. Susan Hawthorn, in her essay 'In Defence of Separatism' written in the late 1970s, suggests that separatism can be practised in the form of consciousness-raising groups, an engagement in political or social action with other women, women-only social gatherings and workplaces, lesbianism, etc; an all-women community (such as Carhullan,) for Hawthorne, is deemed 'a fairly extreme position and only possible for a limited number of women' (1991:312). Still, she stresses the importance of 'separatist communities or households' as they are the 'visible proof' that 'women do not need men for social, financial, and physical support' (*ibid*). As seen in the novel, the Carhullan women, according to Sister, are unanimous in their belief that the collective farm 'was the best thing to have happened to them', for there they are no longer perceived as 'victims' (130) and are able to exist on their own terms. While Hawthorne is cautious in her suggestion that the women's movement should at least 'always encourage minimal separatism' so as to empower women's sense of selfhood (1991:315), there is, however, undeniably a risk inherent in this retreat from patriarchal society, of leaving 'the problem of power insufficiently theorised and so inadequate in terms of effective political strategy' (Ramanzanoglu 1989:87). It is precisely this dilemma that Hall has explored in her novel: on one hand a woman's participation in her 'immediate social environment', as shown in Sister's life in Rith, inadvertently 'puts enormous pressure on her to submit to male dominance' (Kreps 1973:235), while on the other the resultant desire to retreat from it subject her to the charge – valid to some degree – of leaving intact the asymmetrical power relations that have oppressed women in the first place. In the following section, I will reflect on Hall's characterisation of Jackie as the questioner of the social conditioning of women, and explore her portrayal of the leader of Carhullan's decision to attack Rith to free its citizens – an action that can be read as a direct response to the view of women's passivity and the problematic aspect of separatism.

### ***Leadership and War***

After more than a year on the mountains, Sister is told by Jackie, along with the other women, that the British government, at the king's death, will

forcibly assimilate all Unofficials. Carhullan's leader wants to abandon the commune, attack Rith and help its inhabitants overthrow the despotic authority. In the confrontation between Jackie and the women who are against her plans to take the offensive to Rith, Jackie mocks the pacifist and passive attitude that is widely believed to be innately feminine; in times of danger, she says, “‘Surely it is better to just bolt the door [...] And pray to be left alone’, but this is articulated in a manner ‘as if she were acknowledging a moderate and rudimentary opinion presented by a child’ (116). In her impassioned speech to the women at their meeting, she challenges one of the most entrenched views of gender traits: the ability of women to be aggressive, and even to be capable of military conquests.

“Do women have it in them to fight if they need to? Or is that the province of men? Are we innately pacifist? A softer sex? Do we have to submit to survive?” (116)

“How bad does a situation have to be before a woman will strike out, not in defence, but because something is [...] worth fighting for?” (117)

Hall's attack on one of the last bastions of masculinity draws its strength and energy from the radical feminist objective to overcome socially constructed delineation of gender attributes; ‘the essential characteristic of the so-called “feminine” character is passivity’ (Kreps 1973:236). Thus, only when such forms of ‘sexual division’ is eradicated – as in Jackie’s plan to wage war on misogynist Rith – can ‘men and women have a hope of living together as human beings’ (*ibid*:239).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that this impulsion towards a stance hitherto more likely to be associated with masculine militarism is not without its ambivalence. Jackie’s identification of the Carhullan women with passivity is erroneous: the community is largely made up of women who ran away from abusive situations at home, and travelled long and hard, as the narrator did, in order to arrive at Carhullan. Yet, this does not seem sufficient to Jackie, who believes militarist activism to be the only trait capable of overcoming ‘the sickness of our breed’ (195). This conforms exactly to a chauvinist view of femininity that Carhullan itself rejects. Sister, however, attributes Jackie’s decision to take the battle to Rith as being responsible for redeeming the feminine to be on an even footing with the male:

She did not make monsters of us. She simply gave us the power to remake ourselves into those inviolable creatures the God of Equality had intended us to

be. We knew she was deconstructing the old disabled versions of our sex, and that her ruthlessness was adopted because those constructs were built to endure. She broke down the walls that had kept us contained. (187)

Quick to disavow any hint of abnormality that might be associated with the idea of the female taking up arms, as if Sister were aware of her historical precedent – the Amazon women warriors – and their depiction as the other by the Greeks, she nevertheless fails to see that the Carhullan army can also be perceived as leading the way not to gender equality, but to a close adoption of the master narrative of patriarchy. After all, as Kreps stresses, while ‘we must fight the myth of the so-called “female” character’, men, on their part, ‘should fight the myth of the “male”’ (1973:239). Jackie’s eagerness to discard feminine traits and associations only leads her to take up what she has hitherto scorned. Furthermore, the men on the fringes of the commune, with Jackie’s permission, are moved to Carhullan to service the women army sexually when it is training: an act reminiscent of the kind of sexual exploitation usually perpetrated by men, further complicating Jackie’s actions with regards to the extent that radical transformations of gender roles can so often fall back on the very stereotypes that are initially criticised.

Further questions arise in the form of Jackie’s dominance over the female community, and how the Carhullan army carries out its training and preparation for battle. Right from the start, contrary to the egalitarian nature of the community, Jackie is ‘the superior’, the ‘alpha’ (84). While things were running smoothly on the farm, the leader is content to take a back seat. Yet, upon the activation of her previous specialist army training experience, she is effective in ensuring that when most of the women at last agree to support her in plans to attack Rith, ‘there was no mutiny in Carhullan [...] There was no one to challenge her’ (176). This turn towards a more authoritative and militant attitude in Carhullan brings it nearer to Rith, and heralds a breakdown of the women’s camaraderie. While the farm is gradually reduced to ‘a support system for the soldiers within’ (176), arguments erupt between the volunteer army under Jackie’s direct command and those who opt for non-combat duties, as the latter group feel that they are valued less than the former. This is an example of what Willis identifies as a possible outcome of a supposed non-hierarchical all-women group – an important element of radical feminism – which can disintegrate in the face of leaders eventually emerging and dominating the group, and thus ‘the rage of those

who find themselves at the bottom of yet another hierarchy' (Willis 1989:109). Therefore, even though Jackie is responsible for setting up Carhullan and building a sense of sisterhood among the women there, she also undermines it with her grim determination to transcend gender stereotypes; unfortunately, she only succeeds in inverting them.

Then again, I believe the author also pushes us to think again about the ways in which the farm has previously, at a very basic level, been adhering to traditional feminine characteristics of nurturance, retreat, isolation, and as mentioned, the essentialist ecofeminist discourse of fertility and reproduction. It is at the disruption of a way of life revolving largely around these attributes that the women find themselves alienated from one another. If women should learn to 'seek fulfilment as human beings rather than as females' (Kreps 1973:238) – and surely that is one of Carhullan's fundamental reasons for existence – should that not, then, entail embracing the whole gamut of human emotions, characteristics, and personality traits? If not, then are the women who opt not to participate in the army training just as guilty of adhering to well-worn gender standards as Jackie is, inversely, in her determination to disprove that the female is 'innately pacifist' and the 'softer sex'? (116)? And if any of us read with disquiet Jackie's role as the 'alpha' of the women (84), and her fixation in getting her women ready for war – all elements long associated with being masculine – could it be that we, at some level, deny that 'the impulse to dominate', or that 'an authoritarian response to certain conditions of life, could be a universal human characteristic that women share, even if they have mostly lacked the opportunity to exercise it' (Willis 1984:96)? Is it not possible, after all, to think our way out of our socialised selves? Hall's novel raises these uneasy questions without reaching out for quick answers, pushing us instead to begin to try untangling the knotted discourse of sexual and gender characteristics and attributes, and by extension, our very identities.

The turn of events that makes one pause in even deeper uneasiness, however, is the murder of the married couple, Martyn and Chloe, who refused to participate in Jackie's plans in any way, nor wish to take up her offer of being resettled in one of the towns under the Authority before the campaign to attack Rith begins. When they run away from Carhullan, Jackie has her army track them down and shoot them for fear of them betraying their plans. Sister plays a

significant role in tracking and leading her team to them. Yet, after their deaths, she denies any sense of contrition; ‘I knew I was complicit in their deaths. I knew it, and I did not feel any guilt. I did not feel remorse. I knew that it had needed doing’ (203). Hall thus charts the way in which the Carhullan army’s radical attitude towards their preparation for war propels them to put aside not just their femininity, but possibly their humanity as well. Sister suggests that ‘if we had stood together on the shoreline two thousand years before, facing the invading ships with fire in our hands and screaming for them to come, they would have called us Furies, and they would have been afraid’ (204). This recourse to the mythological Furies (and to an extent the Amazon women) introduces an escalating sense of distance from reality. The language towards the end becomes increasingly militaristic, and thus more and more detached and impersonal; the narrator notes that, apart from the murder of Martyn and Chloe, ‘there was no other collateral damage at Carhullan’ (203), while in her last recorded statement given to the Authority after her capture, Sister is reduced to a disembodied voice denoting the ‘official’ stance of the Carhullan army, an automated response devoid of emotions:

We regretted the civilian casualties and civilian deaths that occurred in the first few weeks of the conflict... We took the town and held it for fifty-three days [...] We executed those monitors that were captured, and three doctors from the hospital, and we destroyed all official records for the Northern territories (207)

Although Sister’s impersonal lines at the end might be attributed to her drawing her prison statement to a close, and thus recalling her status at that point in time, it is still ironic that in the last line of the novel, the ‘second in council of the Carhullan Army’ reiterates her ‘name’ as she did at the beginning: ‘My name is Sister’ (207). For at this point of the narrative, any familial or gender associations usually to be found in that term seems to have vanished in the wake of the Carhullan community’s demise.

The capture of Rith for nearly two months is no mean feat; Hall takes pains to emphasise that the women do not have advanced ammunition of any sort, only those that they steal or were already in Jackie’s possession when she first set up the commune fifteen years ago. It is thus surprising that Hall skips over the battle for Rith entirely, by attributing that part of the narrative as ‘Data Lost’ by

the prison officers.<sup>12</sup> Does Hall face difficulty in realizing a final vision of the women in the heat of the battle, and if so, why? If not, then why this glaring omission and how does it affect the narrative as a whole? If we consider the very constructedness of gender differences as undertaken in *The Carhullan Army*, perhaps the lack of a final depiction of an aggressive confrontation between the representatives of both sides ultimately underlines the futility of this (gender) battle; neither the masculinist Authority, which eventually emerged the winner nor the Carhullan women who held them off triumphantly for fifty-three days are given the space to record and celebrate their respective victories. Instead, what is left at the end of the narrative, apart from Sister's insistence that the women's identity and efforts be noted, is a sense of waste at the loss of lives that include, according to Sister, the residents who 'attacked the remaining Authority cruisers and were shot' when the Carhullan army 'were unable to provide adequate support', as well as the execution of captured monitors and 'three doctors from the hospital' (207). Needless to say, the Carhullan women are wiped out when the Authorities recapture the city. One can argue that it was never a battle to be won by the Carhullan women, but that, more significantly, in her narrative Hall has envisioned that women in fact *can* be at the frontline of war – that they are just as capable as men of training, preparing, planning and carrying out an attack without allowing sentiments to get in the way, even if by so doing they raise more questions about a recourse to existing gender stereotypes. Alternatively, it can also be concluded that when women play at being men, they may carry that off successfully but only at a high price; could the Carhullan women have been better off staying on the farm?

The author has addressed, in her novel, one of the most persistent and controversial points in feminism: can women go to war, as men do? In today's largely male-dominated militaries, police forces and 'other "violent" professions', even in liberated western societies, women remain a minority.<sup>13</sup> This not only

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<sup>12</sup> Reviewers have noted this abrupt section in the novel: Colin Greenland laments that 'The plot ends prematurely [...] with a skip and a gory blurt, as if overcome with despair at the inevitability of the outcome' (2007:14), while Rachel Hore notes that while the author is 'unflinching, yet sensitive, in her anatomisation of the psychology of survival', 'she draws back from describing bigger events, in this case the final climatic battle' (2007:42).

<sup>13</sup> Women remain banned from the frontlines of battlefield up till today, although with the recent Middle Eastern wars, where female soldiers have been killed while performing non-combat duties, there is a reconsideration of this gender discrimination. See, for example, Christopher Bellamy (1997), 'Women soldiers join frontline war against the IRA', and Michael Evans (2009), 'The final taboo: MoD reviews women's fighting role'. More than ten years separate these two news reports, yet Bellamy's

suggests that women are seen as physically and psychically weak but it also – as Jackie has insisted – reinforces ‘the view of women as victims of male violence rather than as agents of violence themselves’ (Peach 2001:59). This is especially significant because by being barred from being ‘agents in state-sanctioned violence through participation in combat roles in all the armed services’ (*ibid*:60), women are effectively caught in ‘a double-bind’ that on one hand denies them adequate legal protection against male violence,<sup>14</sup> while on the other, reinforces the social and cultural perception that women are largely lacking in agency in the face of aggression and abuse (*ibid*:61). In *The Carhullan Army*, Jackie faces this double-bind head on when she insists on her women attacking Rith pre-emptively before the Authority begins its round-up of the Unofficials, and her scorn of the more pacifist views held by some of the women. In the Carhullan community’s struggle to define itself – as a sanctuary for abused women, as an ecofeminist commune, as an Unofficial group rejecting the Authorities’ phallocentrism, or as a militant all-women army – Hall imaginatively studies the often uneasy and at times impossible attempt to reconcile various voices within the feminist movement, as well as the well-nigh heroic effort needed to think past the nature-nurture conundrum. Although the author does not provide ready solutions to these problems, her novel is a resistance to quick resorts to any simplistic understanding of gender relations, as well as a reminder of the need to be vigilant in the face of the oft-touted victory of the women’s struggle.

This chapter has so far examined the various ways in which Hall’s novel *The Carhullan Army* has referred to, and thus reactivated, the historical energy and commitment of the radical feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. By juxtaposing the earlier feminist beliefs and practices – such as the call for a

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stated figure of 6.1% of the Armed Forces being made up of women in 1997 compares with Evans’ ‘just under 10%’ in 2009 reveals the continued resistance to letting females assume identical roles in the military.

<sup>14</sup> An illustration of this lack of effective policing of male violence against women is seen in the recent media report of the fall in rape conviction rate in England and Wales from 19% two decades ago to today’s 6.5%, despite increased governmental resources to encourage women to report rape. This is one of the lowest figures in the European Union. See Sean O’Neil and Fiona Hamilton (2009), ‘Rape audit to find out why so few win justice’, and Richard Ford (2009) ‘Labour tries again to give women greater protection against sex crime’. Perhaps those responsible for, and seeking to right, this abysmal record should take into consideration Lucinda Joy Peach’s assertion that ‘if violence is male, and the law is male, then, of course, sexual harassment, assault, and domestic violence against women will not be prohibited with the same vigour as crimes of violence waged against men’ (2001:67).

collective identity of ‘woman’ as primarily being oppressed by men, the concept of universal sisterhood among women, and the conviction that women will only be liberated when the current discriminatory practices are dismantled – with current interests in the form of ecological responsibility, anxiety over the planet’s dwindling resources, as well as referencing indirectly the ongoing war in Iraq and Afghanistan – the author draws on the historical verve of feminist activism but also illustrates the challenge of negotiating past and present, as well as positive and negative aspects of the movement today.

In thinking about Hall’s narrative of the challenges and ambivalences that feminism faces today through a re-examination of past battles and struggles, I propose that it is worthwhile to spend some time considering Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) alongside Hall’s novel, as they contain similar textual concerns and narrative structures: futuristic settings where women’s role and status are severely curtailed by the reigning patriarchal authority. These two novels – despite a gap of more than twenty years in writing – address and develop concerns, albeit in their individual ways, that center on the apparent dawning of women’s utopian dream, but also on the ease with which their hard-won battles for equality and freedom are overturned or re-interpreted in ways that set the clock back for them. Reading them together brings out significant phases of the feminist struggle through the years, and permits a clear view of recurring questions and topics. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as a point of triangulation between *The Carhullan Army* and *Oryx and Crake*, allows me to show the continuing imaginative conversations carried through these female writers’ narratives, and also how, in Chapter 2, Atwood’s later novel moves on from her earlier preoccupation with gender relations and power struggle to one where the feminist cause grapples with differing experiences and viewpoints among its own members, even as the familiar trope of issues – ecology, patriarchy, and the utopian dream of an egalitarian society – continue to be salient.

## Feminist Critical Dystopia: *The Carhullan Army* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

The women's liberation movement has always held on to a vision of a society where gender relations are egalitarian, balanced, and non-hierarchical. It is this 'impulse to improve the human community' within feminism, according to Sarah Webster Goodwin, that explains its 'inherent utopian inclination' in much of its discourse (1990:1). Certainly, the debate about what exactly constitutes a feminist utopia is multifarious in its explication of the details and minutiae, but overall, the fundamental dream is of a time and space where women's rights and concerns receive their due recognition and consideration, and are incorporated effectively into the fabric of society. The literary world has proven to be a fertile ground for such visions to be imagined and worked through, with perhaps Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) as one of the earliest modern precursors of the feminist utopian genre, and continuing with works such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979). Despite this optimistic start, in the 1990s, 'it is much more difficult for feminists to dream a better future than it was in the 1970s' (Donawerth 2000:58). The demanding, uphill struggle for women's rights and causes that often seem to be a case of two steps forward, one step back over time, has contributed in no small part to the phenomenon in the last two decades whereby more feminist dystopian fiction has been published than those that are purely utopian. Indeed, while Ramazanoglu suggests that it is in the genre of science fiction that the very difficulty of defining women's liberation has been most prolifically explored (1989:21),<sup>15</sup> the dystopian elements have been increasingly dominant in the genre.

It is this continuum of feminist utopian and dystopian thinking manifested in writers who are usually non-practitioners of the science fiction genre that I am interested in. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Hall's *The Carhullan Army* have been noted for their similarities in narrative concerns and structure

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<sup>15</sup> I will be using the term 'science fiction' as an umbrella term which covers utopia and dystopia fiction, what Atwood terms 'speculative fiction' [Ingersoll 2006:161, and Atwood (2004) '*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in Context', *PMLA*, p. 513], and by a small stretch, post-apocalyptic works.

despite their twenty-year gap.<sup>16</sup> Narrating from a first-person point of view, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* is Offred, a Handmaid whose social purpose is only to conceive for the privileged males in this futuristic society of Gilead where infertility is widespread. In this dystopian world, she is forced to become society's womb; Offred calls herself 'a prized pig' (79), and women such as her 'containers' as 'it's only the insides of our bodies that are important' (107).<sup>17</sup> While both Raffaella Baccolini (2000) and Fiona Tolan (2007) believe that this narrative can be read as what Baccolini terms 'critical dystopia' (2000) – that is, science fiction writing that holds on to a utopian vision despite the bleakness of its world – the two critics differ in their emphasis on the fictional elements that contribute towards their understanding of this categorisation. These viewpoints are useful in helping me to read *The Carhullan Army* as a continuing dialogue with *The Handmaid's Tale* through the resonances and divergences between these two books. Their focus and narratives of hope or despair, especially at women's evolving social status, can be perceived as developing articulations and imaginings of the trajectory of the women's liberation movement in the last few decades. Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* lends itself to a more slippery categorisation. Noted for its proximity to *The Handmaid's Tale* in terms of its setting and thematic focus,<sup>18</sup> Atwood's later novel is nevertheless more of a post-apocalyptic work than the earlier one, though it also engages with contemporary preoccupations that signal a dystopic/utopic view of our world in the twenty-first century. But since it is not a feminist ideal that *Oryx and Crake* is primarily concerned with, I will analyse the novel's utopian/dystopian vision in my subsequent section on science and nature.

Baccolini's term 'critical dystopia' is taken from Tom Moylan's observation of a renewed interest in utopian writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which he has called 'critical utopia'. Although the focus of this genre is on a utopian realm, Moylan suggests that it is consciously aware of the limitations of this tradition, as seen in the tension from criticising and rejecting the more

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<sup>16</sup> Reviewers of Hall's novel have noted its similarity to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Gatti 2007:13; Greenland 2007:14). There is also attention paid to its dystopic worldview (Arditti 2007:27) and the portrayal of Carhullan as a kind of utopic community before it went to war (Hore 2007:42).

<sup>17</sup> All textual references for this novel are taken from *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985/2005), London:Vintage.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the reviewers of *Oryx and Crake*, such as Coral Ann Howells (2003) 'Bad News', Daniel Mendelsohn (2003) 'After the Fall', and Elaine Showalter (2004) 'The Snowman Cometh'. Atwood herself has also been drawn to comment on both books together (Atwood 2004:516-517).

problematic aspects of a utopia as well as retaining its visionary dream.<sup>19</sup> Updating Moylan's discussion, Baccolini suggests the term 'critical dystopia' delineating science fiction work written in the 1980s and 1990s, covering 'texts that maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives'; in other words, these novels 'negate the notions of utopia and dystopia as mutually exclusive terms to describe a future alternative society', thereby containing 'both elements at once' (2000:18).<sup>20</sup>

In Baccolini's argument, the utopian impulse is maintained mainly at the level of form: firstly, hope for a better world traditionally manifested outside the dystopian story is, as mentioned above, reworked as a utopian nucleus in the narrative of critical dystopia; secondly, utopian *and* dystopian elements present in the narratives result in an 'impure' science fiction that, Baccolini believes, acts as a form of resistance to dominant ideologies (2007:18). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the source of hope is seen in the characters of the protagonist's mother and Offred's friend Moira; both are 'models of active resistance both in the pre-Gilead and Gilead society' (Baccolini 2000:22). Although their struggles are ultimately in vain, the critic argues that they act as examples of feminist opposition to patriarchal ideology, and provide pockets of hope within dystopian Gilead. Another utopian element is in the form of the novel's 'ambiguous, open' conclusion (*ibid*). Offred's last line in the narrative, when she is taken to a waiting van that might or might not be her hope for escape, contains both the possibility of her end or her escape: 'And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light' (307). The last section of the novel, titled 'Historical Notes', is an account of a conference speaker presenting his findings of Gilead; the reader is thus hopeful that it is no longer in existence, and that Offred has made good her escape. For Baccolini, this conclusion is perhaps 'the most striking deviation' from the traditional dystopian narrative, providing as it does 'a utopian space', and breaking with 'the absolute certainty of defeat' in dystopian stories. (2000:23). Furthermore, she also argues that Atwood's narrative, told in the form of Offred's

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<sup>19</sup> Tom Moylan (1986) *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen), pp. 8-11; quoted in Baccolini (2000:16). Some examples of such authors writing in the 1970s are Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ and Marge Piercy.

<sup>20</sup> Baccolini cites Marge Piercy's *He, She, It* (1991) and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) as prime examples of the critical dystopia genre.

letters, ‘is a subversive act that allows her to reclaim language and defy the regime’s patriarchal laws’, and becomes ‘an important record, a warning for future readers and an empowering story’ (23). All these narrative techniques, asserts the critic, provide possibilities of resistance and escape from the bleakness of misogynist Gilead, and thus marks *The Handmaid’s Tale* as an instance of the critical dystopia genre.

Before I continue with my analysis of *The Carhullan Army*, I wish to delve into Tolan’s reading of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as it offers an elaboration on Baccolini’s delineation of the female characters of Offred’s mother and Moira as examples of resistance to Gilead’s male hegemony, as well as additional insight to Hall’s address of second-wave feminist activism in her novel. The dystopian vision in feminist science fiction writing, for Tolan, is a response to the ‘limiting and prescriptive nature of the utopianism that had underpinned much of the feminism of the early second-wave’ (2007:145), and is a reflection of the 1980s as a time of ‘evaluation and reinvention for feminists, as a second generation of feminists inherited the second-wave’. *The Handmaid’s Tale* contains ‘flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism’; in particular, it examines the implications entailed in the fight for women to be free from physical and sexual abuse. The utopian hope in the novel’s historical references to feminist activism is seen in the feminist program ‘Take Back the Night’ (129) that was especially active in 1970s and 1980s Canada (Tolan 2007:152). Offred writes of feeling ‘protected’ in Gilead (34); ‘no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles’ (34). Another example of feminist activism is Offred’s childhood memories of a public burning of women’s, as well as pornographic, magazines (48). Yet, even as Aunt Lydia, the trainer for the handmaidens, insists that when women were given freedom to pursue their lives as they deem fit in the past, now they have ‘freedom from’, a benefit which they should not ‘underrate’ (34), Offred’s efforts to retain her identity in the face of Gilead’s repressive regime – her real name disallowed, her activities curtailed, her sole cause for existence merely to breed – undermine Aunt Lydia’s words. Tolan suggests that the novel marks a shift towards an anti-essentialist viewpoint in feminism, from a demand for equal rights that involves the view of ‘woman’ as ‘a specific, universal category’ and thus just as worthy of ‘universal equality’ as men, to a belief in ‘equal recognition’, when ‘gender division is deconstructed’ so that ‘each individual demands recognition and

respect for their individual situation' (2007:149). If so, then Gilead's blend of apparent support for second-wave feminist demands for equality and an emphasis on women's biological nature leads to its dystopian state that champions 'freedom from' at the expense of 'freedom to'. At the same time, however, it also illustrates the difficulty inherent in distinguishing between utopian and dystopian states, and thus the need for vigilance in feminist debates.

Both types of freedom outlined by Aunt Lydia are nonexistent in the dystopic city of Rith in *The Carhullan Army*. Women are not free to control their bodies as they wish, and neither are they free from male hegemony or sexual harassment. It is only in Carhullan that women are able to exercise agency over their sexuality and bodies; living away from men, they avoid any potential physical and sexual abuse, and are able to live as they wish. But if this is approaching as close to a utopia as is possible for Hall's female characters, looking back at Tolan's argument – where *The Handmaid's Tale* signals a change in emphasis from collective rights to individual liberation – it appears that Carhullan, in the twenty-first century, has in fact taken a step back to re-focus on the collective identity of women, albeit with the qualification that the women's freedom (from) is autonomously achieved and not imposed by an external agent, as it is instead in Offred's case. Yet, it is undeniable that this move – reminiscent of the early 1970s radical feminist activism – is in Atwood's novel seen as potentially problematic when it develops into a discourse based on essentialist thinking. When Hall has Jackie rally the women to attack masculinist Rith, she in fact challenges them to transcend their passivity, a trait which, as we have seen, she thinks is weak and feminine. Jackie believes that the women have a responsibility to destroy the dystopia that is Rith, even if it means firstly dismantling the near-utopian commune that is Carhullan (165-166). This interplay of utopia and dystopia is inextricably linked with gender and sexual identity in Hall's novel, and is complicated by the fact, as I have argued earlier, that Jackie both despises and desires the aggressive militarism traditionally associated with masculinity. Is *The Carhullan Army*, then, more of a feminist dystopia or utopia?

Tolan proposes that *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as what Tom Moylan would call a 'critical utopia', that is, works that 'reject utopian as

blueprint while preserving it as dream'.<sup>21</sup> In Atwood's critique of 'tyrannical' Gilead as a 'proposed utopian resolution to America's problems' (2007:156), Tolan nevertheless locates a preoccupation with the possibility of a utopian world. However, she ultimately rejects this idea when she argues that 'the critical utopia situates the author within the utopian vision, as an insider', but in *The Handmaid's Tale* 'both Atwood and the reader are situated, with Offred, as an alien within the Gilead regime', and therefore the novel 'can be more accurately categorised as a critical dystopia' in line with Baccolini's delineation of the term (2007:156). For *The Carhullan Army*, a consideration of the writer's position in a critical utopia/dystopia requires careful attention. I will analyse Hall's novel via two remaining points in my discussion of Baccolini's ideas – the ambiguous conclusion as well as the narrative structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* – and of the importance of a separate female community in the feminist utopian dream.

Sister's narrative, in *The Carhullan Army*, in the form of a prisoner's statement taken when she was captured by the Rith Authorities, is somewhat similar to Offred's; while the latter takes the form of a mix of generic conventions of the diary and the epistolary, the former is largely reminiscent even as it is an official account of Sister's past life. This is a reflection of Baccolini's idea of a critical dystopia as discussed earlier: the authoritative background of both these narratives is undermined by the form and tone of the protagonists' personal account of their experiences. Moreover, while the conclusion of Hall's novel does not contain as much ambiguity as that of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the beginning of the narrative consists of a note stating that the following narrative is from a transcript in the 'English Authority Penal System archive', 'recovered from site of Lancaster holding dock', prompting questions such as who exactly is involved in the recovering act, the purpose of such an act, and the reader's identity. Since none of these is explicitly addressed, there is space within the story for hope that with the likely demise of the Authority, Sister's unearthed words might be, as what Baccolini states for Offred's narrative, 'an important record, a warning for future readers and an empowering story' (2000:23). Indeed, this seems to be Jackie's very intention: at a time when it has become obvious that the women's army is overpowered by their antagonists, she insists that Sister 'live through this,

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<sup>21</sup> Tom Moylan (1986) *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, p. 10; quoted in Tolan (2007:156).

and tell them about us. Tell them everything about us, Sister. Make them understand what we did and who we were. Make them see.' (207) Sister's story, then, is told with a view – much more than in *The Handmaid's Tale* – of consciously ordering and presenting the Carhullan story as a form of justification of the women's actions, and by extension, a condemnation of its perceived enemy, Rith. For Offred, her narrative is more personal, and acts as a space, in the form of letters, in which she ruminates, broods, and articulates her frustrations and hopes. *The Carhullan Army*, therefore, is much more politicised in its narrative function than *The Handmaid's Tale*, foregrounding the author and the narrator's efforts in constructing a narrative and a physical space that actively resists patriarchal ideologies and male hegemony. Still, in its inclusion of both Jackie as a questionable presence within Carhullan, as well as Sister's experience in Rith, the dystopian elements cannot be ignored. Thus we can say that the novel approaches more closely to what Baccolini calls the critical dystopia genre, with its simultaneous perspectives of both hopeful and nightmarish existences.

However, the issue is complicated by the fact that on Hall's vividly imagined Carhullan persistently reminds us of the utopia genre. Instead of the more traditional meaning of the concept of utopia that points to its 'essence' as that which 'cannot be realised' (Mezciems 1992:xiii), she offers a detailed and realistic account of a community of women working together to create an alternative life for themselves; the very concreteness of the author's invention – and more significantly, its utopian overtone – is inescapable. From the women's self-sustainability in terms of food and fuel to their largely harmonious coexistence with one another, Sister notes the 'high level of courtesy and enlightenment' in such 'a society that celebrated female strength and tolerance' (178) – a complete contrast to the alienated and hopeless lives in Rith. This difference is reinforced by Carhullan's physical isolation: 'It was the highest farm in England, almost inaccessible', reachable 'only on foot or four-wheel drive via a convoluted upland route' (52). Furthermore, it is 'impervious to flooding that would come in the years to follow' (*ibid*), which contributes to the impression of its remove from the troubles of the ordinary world. It is, in fact, as Sister notes, a 'brave new world' (104) delineated in great sympathy by its author.

Despite the utopian genre being no longer as popular in recent years, Hall has elected to revive the dream for a perfect society for women. Although it

approaches nothing like the level of perfection found in Gilman's all-female community *Herland* at the beginning of the twentieth century, Carhullan in Sister's early days there certainly aspires to it. Possibly as a response to third-wave feminism in recent years that diffuses its predecessor's activist energy and drive, concentrating instead on differences within the movement itself, Hall's work appears to strive to revitalise the feminist vision and energy that is reminiscent of 1970s feminist utopian fiction which, as Peter Fitting writes, focused on 'understanding and explaining the violence of patriarchal forms and values' (1992:33). Most significantly, it does not conform to Fredric Jameson's study of the utopia genre in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2007), in that even as it exhibits some of the points of identification that characterise such works – usually a 'self-contained backwater' that marks its distance from 'practical politics' (*ibid*:15) and a 'return to simplicity' (*ibid*:162) – it avoids the negativity that Jameson brings to these factors. Even as Carhullan's physical isolation reinforces its utopian status, the novel avoids what Jameson sees as 'regressive images of village culture' with 'an odor of nostalgia' which seems 'less and less plausible in the era of world-wide ecological disaster and global warming' (2007:162). Carhullan is in fact a viable alternative since Hall does not shy away from descriptions of the hard work on the Carhullan farm, nor the sacrifices demanded of the women. It also addresses the catastrophic effect of climate change directly, aligning the narrative closely with our contemporary concerns.

As Fitting puts it, although the moment for a pure utopia has passed today, what remains are 'replies to those earlier versions' as well as 'their effectiveness in mobilising for change' (1992:43). Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Hall's *The Carhullan Army* both present dystopian worlds in their narratives that explore, develop and challenge earlier fictional feminist utopian visions, addressing issues such as the need to negotiate between individual and gender/sexual identities, the ways in which political machinations can overtly and/or covertly erode many of the achievements women have won over the years, and the possibilities for humanity as opposed to gender. Despite their bleak dystopian settings, both novels conclude on a notably optimistic note for women, and by extension the human race: 'The narrator who can create the other, be it in

the form of a utopia, in a memory of better times, or in a belief in a resistance, imagines an alternative that could potentially be realised.' (Tolan 2007:172).

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, which will be my focus in the next chapter, further develops the marginal female voices of characters such as Moira in *The Handmaid's Tale* (and Shruti in *The Carhullan's Army*) in a utopia/dystopia setting as well. This signals the shifting of her authorial interest from thinking about 'woman' as a group located dialectically to 'man', to one in which she interrogates the complexities that come from viewing feminism as a unitary identification for women around the world, reflecting the increasingly fragmentary voices raised within the cause itself particularly in the 1990s. Atwood also engages in her narrative with the supposed rewards that women in developed countries have reaped from their sisters' past struggle: the right to work in hitherto male-dominated fields, the belief that women can enjoy both career and family simultaneously, etc. The impact of the capitalist market system, especially on women – which is merely hinted at in Atwood's earlier novel but denounced explicitly in Hall's work – is also critically explored in this novel.

## Chapter 2 Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: Capitalising on the Female Body

An initial reading of Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* would identify its narrative preoccupation with the consequences of unchecked technoscientific development and opportunistic corporate exploitation – a surprising development for the author, in view of her other fictional works that almost always take as their narrative focus matters relating to women's role, place and agency (Ingersoll 2006:94). The protagonist is Jimmy/Snowman; possibly for the first time in Atwood's fictional oeuvre she has attempted a male main character, and this will prove to be a significant detail in my discussion later. He is ostensibly the last of the human race which has succumbed to a deadly infectious virus unleashed by his childhood genius friend, Crake, who is also the creator of a new race of human beings, the Crakers. As the narrative swings between Snowman's increasingly desperate attempts at survival in a burnt-out deserted world, his responsibility towards the Crakers, as well as flashbacks on the events that led up to the disaster when he still knew himself as Jimmy,<sup>22</sup> Atwood's novel addresses issues that strike at the heart of our current anxieties: ecological problems, controversial scientific developments, economic dominance, etc. These are topics that I will take up in greater length in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

At this point, I want to dispute some reviewers who have commented on Atwood's supposed departure from feminist concerns in *Oryx and Crake* (Mendelsohn 2003:43, Smith 2003:15). I believe Atwood is preoccupied with feminism at the end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first. This novel, set in a future dystopian society, is in many ways a near re-imagining of our contemporary western, late-industrial cities. As a continuation from my discussion on Hall's *The Carhullan Army*, I propose that Atwood too explores in her novel the demands entailed in being an emancipated modern woman, and the universal claim of sisterhood familiar to much of First World feminism, in particular the lingering impact of 1960s and 1970s radical feminism. I am interested in the author's questioning of the supposed gains that women

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<sup>22</sup> For this chapter, as I am concentrating on the protagonist's relationship with Oryx, I will use the name 'Jimmy' to denote this period of time when Crake and Oryx were alive. The names 'Snowman', and 'Jimmy/Snowman', more often than not, refer to the postapocalyptic world after the viral epidemic, and which I will employ in chapter 5 when I discuss how scientific and technological power structures demand that we rethink our sense of identity as human beings in the twenty-first century.

today are supposed to have reaped from the women's liberation movement thus far: what are the conflicting pressures exerted on women in advanced societies that prevent feminists from calling it a day in their struggle? In particular, Atwood's characterisation of Oryx, Jimmy's love interest in the novel, prompts a complication of not just radical feminism's belief in 'woman' as a unifying identity – most distinctively by a postmodern influence that privilege the diversity of voices within the movement – but also for a consideration of the evolvement of the feminist struggle into cultural feminism, specifically its anti-pornography drive. These preoccupations of the women's struggle in the last few decades are worked through in Atwood's novel for their possible trajectories and implications.

Apart from this critical reading of the novel's view of feminism today, I will also address the significance of Jimmy's attitude and understanding – or lack thereof – of the women around him. With the narrative told from his perspective, we are compelled to pay attention to gender constructs, as he is what I would suggest to be a liminal character, poised at the edge of distinct worlds and discourses. Jimmy is a word-lover – an identity that has often been more feminised in contemporary culture – who grows up in a technologised, computerized, and scientific realm that is largely male-oriented and male-dominated. Though Jimmy enjoys computer games and surfing the Internet with Crake, he does not fit comfortably into the streamlined corporate world of capitalist science that Crake takes to in their adulthood. However, despite his alienation from the masculinist world of science and high technology, Jimmy is not especially sympathetic to the women around him; crucially, he fails to understand his own lover, Oryx. His uneasy relationships with the female characters in the novel reflects the partial achievements of the feminist struggle today while at the same time it points to the complex negotiations that men and women must still constantly engage in when external circumstances such as environmental degradation, overcrowding in cities, and depletion of natural resources – as in *The Carhullan Army* – turn gender relations into a battle ground of identity.

### **The Compound Women: First World feminism and Flogging the Undead Horses of Patriarchy**

Atwood's novel is set largely in the privileged corporate Compounds, where its scientists work to address our real or perceived biological needs for a profit. Both Jimmy's parents, when he is young, are scientists employed by biotechnological or pharmaceutical companies involved in genetic research and development, and are thus securely ensconced within the Compounds. As a boy whose mother abandoned the family in his early teens to join an underground environmental guerrilla group, Jimmy's opinion on the women around him, through his growing years, unsurprisingly reflects his critical scepticism of their behaviour and motives. Invariably highly educated or trained, they are detached personalities who do not seem to know what to do with a lonely boy from a broken family.

Right from his childhood, Jimmy is schooled in the dichotomous nature of the genders. Musing on his memory of his father's view on women, Jimmy becomes aware of a gender gap based primarily on biological differences:

Women, and what went on under their collars. Hotness and coldness, coming and going in the strange musky flowery variable-weather country inside their clothes – mysterious, important, uncontrollable. That was his father's take on things. But men's body temperatures were never dealt with; they were never even mentioned, not when he was little, except when his dad said, "Chill out." Why weren't they? Why nothing about the hot collars of men? Those smooth, sharp-edged collars with their dark, sulphurous, bristling undersides. He could have used a few theories on that. (21)

The only desirable state of being for males, according to Jimmy's father, is that of being cool, unfazed, and distanced, as opposed to women who undergo 'hotness and coldness'. Thus does Jimmy's father construct and inscribe gender differences that privilege the (relatively unexamined) male gaze: their Cartesian neutrality, abstraction, and objectivity, and within their disembodied state, the absence of the very recognition of their body temperatures. At the same time, this association of the empirical gaze is often augmented by the technologies employed in today's laboratories and research facilities, such as magnetic resonance imaging. In other words, Jimmy's father's act of training his probing scientific eye on women 'and what went under their collars' reflects his privileged position both as a man and a scientist. But Jimmy, instead of acquiescing with his father, regrets not knowing more about 'the hot collars of men'; it is this paucity of an in-depth understanding of the male psyche that Atwood highlights; the male gaze, consistently turned

onto the female, cannot know itself. Since the male constructs the female without knowingly taking into account his investment in this process, it is no wonder that Jimmy struggles throughout the narrative to arrive at any accurate understanding of women. Atwood indicts the biasness of the male scientific gaze not just for its dominance over women, but also its impoverishment of men's attempt to construct meaningful relationships with them.

While Jimmy's mother is herself a microbiologist, she has grown increasingly disillusioned with the ethical and moral compromises thrown up in the course of her work. With her husband reluctant to share her mounting unease at the way in which animals and nature are manipulated at their most basic level for financial profit, she leaves the family to join an outlawed environmental group. Her husband's response is fright and unease, because his wife 'had broken every rule in the book, she must've had a whole other life and he'd had no idea. That sort of thing reflected badly on a man.' (76) Effectively, Jimmy's mother has evaded the empirical survey and authority of a scientific man: a worthy feminist achievement. Nevertheless, Atwood complicates the significance of this act by depicting the dilemma faced by many such women, torn as they are between their maternal role on one hand, and on the other, their urge to live their lives according to certain principles and visions that might not be compatible with parenthood. This conundrum is made all the more difficult if one believes that the women's liberation movement has more or less achieved its aims and goals in the twenty-first century, and thus women should be empowered to live their lives as they choose – a notion that can be found in postfeminist thought in the last few years, that 'feminism has already done its work by achieving as much social equality for women in the home and workplace as one could hope or even wish for' (Kavka 2000:32). Yet, here is a highly-educated female character, occupying a privileged social and professional position, but who also feels 'like a prisoner' (63). Over time, Jimmy's mother becomes 'detached, matter-of-fact', 'as if Jimmy and the chore of taking care of him, and his unsatisfactory father, and the scufflings between her and him, and the increasingly heavy baggage of all their lives, had nothing to do with her.' (60-61) This litany of unhappy issues – as signalled by the repeated use of the conjunction 'and' – shows the feminist struggle and identity becoming more complex today: the recurring problem of women restricted by patriarchal institutions that has been a cornerstone of the first-wave

of the feminist struggle in the nineteenth century clashes with the postfeminist insistence of women having largely won the struggle against gender discrimination today. Jimmy's mother's role and identity as a mother and wife, as well as that of a well-paid and privileged professional, only makes her feel imprisoned instead of emancipated, and has repercussions upon her son Jimmy as well.

Since the narrative is told through Jimmy's perspective, the impact of his mother's abandonment looms large in our reading. In keeping with her resolution to reject the technoscientific exploitation and manipulation of nature practised by the largely male scientists, Jimmy's mother takes his beloved pet along in order to 'liberate' her into a 'wild, free life in the forest' (72): an affiliation between her and the female pet is unmistakable. This is an ill-conceived idea, as the pet is a genetically-produced animal, a cross between a raccoon and a skunk: a rakunk. Not having experienced wilderness, or what is left of it in the dystopian world of the novel, as Jimmy notes later, most of these tame animals are the first to be killed by the more feral ones when the world goes into meltdown. More crucially, in one fell swoop, Jimmy has lost both his mother as well as his constant companion: 'Jimmy had mourned for weeks. No, for months. Which one of them was he mourning the most? His mother, or an altered skunk?' (73) In Jimmy's cynical association of his mother with his pet, Atwood problematises not just an instance of women taking their lives in their own hands but also, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, the supposed affiliation that women have for nature that Sarah Hall suggests in *The Carhullan Army*. Years later, when Jimmy is Snowman, the pain of abandonment still rankles: 'She must have had some sort of positive emotion about him though. Wasn't there supposed to be a maternal bond?' (72) Yet, even as the author depicts Jimmy's painful loss, she lets the ever pragmatic Oryx cast a different light onto the situation: '*So Jimmy, your mother went somewhere else? Too bad. Maybe she had some good reasons. You thought of that?*' (233), again reminding us that a woman has the right to choose her own life, an option that feminism stands by ever since its earliest days. By presenting the various angles from which we can interpret Jimmy's mother's actions, Atwood examines the multiplicity of conflicting demands that a beneficiary of the feminist movement would encounter in our time, which precludes any recourse to a single viewpoint – such as Jimmy's – or to simple generalisations about feminist

decisions or actions. It is this latter point that Atwood reinforces in a scene when Jimmy stages a hand puppet show for his classmates:

His right hand was Evil Dad, his left hand was Righteous Mom. Evil Dad blustered and theorised and dished out pompous bullshit. Righteous Mom complained and accused. In Righteous Mom's cosmology, Evil Dad was the sole source of hemorrhoids, kleptomania, global conflict, bad breath, tectonic-plate fault lines, and clogged drain, as well as every migraine headache and menstrual cramp Righteous Mom had ever suffered. (70-71).

This caricature of the gender war descending into facile stereotypes vividly illustrates the inherent challenges in gender relations: how 'Righteous Mom', reflecting the struggle for the rights of women, overemphasises the biological nature of womanhood and simplistically blames men for all her problems, while 'Evil Dad' is full of hot air and nothing much else. The resulting impasse, as suggested by each puppet sitting on a separate finger, means that little can be done to bring about resolution between gender identities, especially from the viewpoint of Jimmy in relation to his connection with other females in his life.

Through Jimmy, Atwood also points to the inconsistencies of much of contemporary feminism through other Compound women in the novel. Their world, reminiscent of many industrialised nations today with its educated female population employed in hitherto male-dominated jobs, bespeaks of a time when feminism appears to have gained most of its objectives. Contrary to expectations, however, Atwood represents such women in her novel not as liberated persons on an equal standing with their male counterparts within their societies, but as possessing ambivalent stances towards their relatively emancipated status. Take, for example, the character of Ramona, Jimmy's father's colleague with whom he quickly begins a long-awaited affair after Jimmy's mother's departure. Despite being a modern, educated female – she is supposed to be a 'tech genius' – in Jimmy's view, 'she talked like a shower-gel babe in an ad' (31). Jimmy, in the tradition of his father's dissecting gaze trained upon women, also observes wryly that Ramona was 'getting little creases on either side of her mouth, despite the collagen injections'; she succumbs to the cosmetic enhancement procedures churned out by the very pharmaceutical company that she works for, and 'Pretty soon, it would be the NooSkins Beau Toxique Treatment for her – Wrinkles Paralysed Forever...in say five years, the Fountain of Youth Total Plunge, which rasped off your entire epidermis' (213-4). The surfeit of beauty products and

surgical operations in a capitalist consumer society that prey on the insecurities of women by placing a premium on their appearances is a familiar contemporary phenomenon,<sup>23</sup> even direct employees of the industry, such as Ramona, who cannot but be familiar with the marketing ploys involved in the constructed female image, fail to shake off the pressure from the patriarchal emphasis on women's appearances, whatever their age or professional qualifications.

The other female characters in the novel hardly fare any better as representations of the achievement of feminism over the past decades. When Jimmy's mother left, the Compounds community police (CorpSeCorps) sends around two women officers in an attempt to discover whether any confidential information had been stolen. In order to gain his confidence, they feed him 'terrible leathery omelettes' and 'microwaved frozen dinners and ordered in pizza,' (77) an illustration of their 'cast-iron' (*ibid*) nature that probably qualifies them to work for such a regime. Similarly, Jimmy's friend Crake, the boy genius whose destructive talents ultimately results in an apocalyptic end for the world, has a mother who is a diagnostician at the compound hospital, and has no time for him. The description of her is certainly unflattering; 'She was an intense, square-jawed, dark-haired woman with not much of a chest', who 'was out a lot, or in a hurry' (106) Admittedly, Atwood has created somewhat stereotypical characters here – the desexualised modern working women who have gained a foothold in previously male-dominated occupations, but who appear to have sacrificed the ability to reach out to others (the CorpSeCorps women officers) or their private family life (Crake's mother). It is worth noting, nevertheless, that they are but bit players in the highly mechanized and regulated Compounds, where it is men such as Crake who are given the resources and authority to develop their work. In other words, power is still invested in the male scientific members; none of these female employees hold exceptionally influential positions within these bio-pharmaceutical corporations. Atwood thus questions the extent that feminism has successfully transcended the ubiquitous glass ceiling for women; Sandra Harding

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<sup>23</sup> This insistence on women's appearance is still a thorn in the side of feminism today. Even one of the most powerful women in the world, Hillary Clinton, is not spared this scrutiny. Commenting on the United States' Democratic Party's 2007 race to select a presidential candidate, the radio host Rush Limbaugh asks on air, with reference to Senator Clinton, 'Will this country want to actually watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis?' even as nothing is said about the appearances of her rival candidate Barack Obama or the already lined face of the 71-year-old Republican candidate John McCain (Sarah Baxter, 'Lines of combat scar Hilary's face', *The Sunday Times*, December 23, 2007, p.20).

has recently pointed out that while we still refer to ‘women scientists’ as somewhat of an anomaly, ‘the self-image of their male colleagues remains one of individual experts whose particular biological or cultural identity is irrelevant to both the fact of their expertise and its content. After all, whatever women’s colleagues may think about the proper gender of scientists, they do not publicly identify themselves as “men scientists”’ (2006:70). The novel thus reflects realistically the limited in-roads made by feminism in such professional fields, contrary to popular conceptions of the state of women’s rights that often paint an overly optimistic or inaccurate view of their social and professional status.<sup>24</sup>

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood critiques not just the persistently male-dominated scientific field, but also its inability – as with all biased, narrow worldview – to reflect on itself and its interaction with the opposite gender, as seen in Jimmy’s father’s failure to learn anything from his wife’s unhappiness and subsequent disappearance. On the other hand, although Jimmy is certainly sceptical of women after witnessing his parents’ unsuccessful marriage, his hypercritical reading of them is still insightful, as he notes the various compromises women make in order to make their way in an androcentric society whilst being subjected to the male gaze at all times; Ramona’s professional qualifications do not preclude her from obsessing about her looks and speaking in an infantile manner, just as Oryx is forced to exploit sexist attitudes for her survival (I will examine this in greater detail in the next section). At the very least, Jimmy’s narrative reinforces the very real scenario in which feminism becomes merely a form of rhetoric to be acknowledged when it fits into the institutional and systemic structure. Indeed, as Katherine Rake notes, ‘Shoehorning women into a labour market or political system that was designed by and for men has brought important but ultimately limited returns’ (2008:39) – an echo of the radical feminist conviction in the necessity of overthrowing existing discriminatory institutions and systems before women are truly liberated. The metanarrative of male hegemony is arguably still alive and well when choices allowed to supposedly emancipated women are restricted to those within a gender-biased society. Indeed, Atwood noted in the 1990s that in her inclination

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<sup>24</sup> For recent data and reasons cited for the continued dearth of female scientists, see Alison Beneey (2006), ‘Wanted: Women Scientists’, *The OECD Observer* 257 (Oct), p. 23, and Emily Ford (2008) ‘Avoid a waste of talent’ (interview with Susan Greenfield), *The Times* (Oct 8), p. 15.

to scrutinize gender relation in its various guise and settings in her works, she was addressing a kind of persistent belief system – namely, patriarchy – that refuses to be put down; ‘If you think I’m flogging a few dead horses – horses which have been put out of their pain long ago – let me assure you that this is because the horses are not in fact dead, but are out there in the world, galloping around as vigorously as ever’ (2005:173). In this novel, she shows that even within the western industrialised world, where the feminist struggle first gathered collective strength, patriarchal institutions and beliefs are not dead yet. Moreover, these are also women who, because of their employment by the scientific community, lead privileged comfortable lives that are a far cry from that outside the gated compound; their improved status can be said to be at the expense of those who have neither their opportunities nor the (relevant) abilities to make it in such a male-dominated world, as I will elaborate in the next section on Oryx.

### **Reading Oryx: The Other Woman in Feminism**

In her portrayal of Jimmy’s lover Oryx, Atwood has been accused, perhaps unprecedently, of having created a female character who appears to elicit little empathy or sympathy; the critic Daniel Mendelsohn in his review of the novel complains that ‘Oryx is beautiful and remote, and toys seductively with poor Jimmy while maintaining vast reserves of what you can only call inscrutability’ (2003:46), while Martin Halliwell, in an interview with Atwood, insists that ‘Oryx is a kind of hazy character who never seems to be fully fleshed out’ (2006:254) or ‘reaches the realm of reality’ (*ibid*:255). It is true that Jimmy struggles to understand his fascination with Oryx throughout the novel. But that in itself is a telling detail; how is Oryx different from the other women in his life such that he repeatedly fails to arrive at a coherent image of her? What Mendelsohn deems as inscrutable in Oryx can be read as a form of challenge to the First World stereotypical images of Third World women, which perhaps explains Jimmy’s fascination with her; the women around him partake of the benefits of living within gated communities where life is comfortable and well provided for, just like him. While they represent the difficulty of negotiating their female identity within a social system that reify the masculinist language games of science, technology, capitalism and ambition, Oryx, in contrast, reflects the

seamier underbelly of advanced industrialised countries, and thus acts as an effective foil to the first group of women. She is an enigma that challenges Jimmy's ideas about the marginalised, schooled as he is in a liberal education. In Oryx's story, expectations are overturned, moral values are questioned, and power structures revealed uncompromisingly in the complicated interplay of feminist, capitalist, and postmodernist practices and discourses.

*'...because there is only so much food to go around'*

Oryx's narrative, at first reading, resembles that of many poverty-stricken Third World Asian females. Sold by her mother to a child trafficker along with numerous other children in her village, including her brother, she first earned her living selling flowers in the city, went on to appear in child pornographic films, and possibly becoming a domestic maid/sex slave in Jimmy's country in the West during her adolescence. Jimmy is 'outraged by this the first time he heard about it' (144) – a typical liberal, Western and middle-class response – but Oryx herself shows no overt signs of distress or anger at her fate; in fact, she is rather blasé about her childhood experience. This interplay of responses between Jimmy and Oryx reveals the underlying power structures that belie postmodernism's claim to allow the disenfranchised a voice, and directly challenges the way in which feminism accommodates the 'other' in its midst. In this section, I will examine the various implications resulting from economic pressures exerted upon Third World women's lives.

It is often thought that the sale of village girls to slave traffickers is perpetuated by the patriarchal familial system within rural areas in Third World countries, where girls are perceived to be mere burdens on the family resources as they contribute little to their labour-intensive agrarian lifestyle. In her novel, Atwood presents an alternative viewpoint: the women of the village aid and abet in the trafficking, aware that they 'might need help to sell their own children one day, and if they helped out they would be able to count on such help in return' (141). Neither ethics nor morality comes into the picture here, as Oryx patiently points out to Jimmy, there is simply no room for such thoughts or sentiments in a dirt-poor village where raw economic necessity is a primary preoccupation:

if they stayed where they were, what was there for them to do? Especially girls like Oryx. They would only get married and make more children, who would

then have to be sold in their turn. Sold, or thrown into the river, to float away to the sea; because there was only so much food to go around. (147)

The limitation of choices in life for such people, in particular women, is a stark reality that is only recently receiving fuller acknowledgment in feminist discourses of developed nations.<sup>25</sup> This is especially so when we consider the growing income gap between rural and urban regions, as well as developing and industrialized nations, wrought largely by capitalist globalisation. What matters ultimately in such desperate circumstances is the ability to keep as many alive as possible; thus, some have to be sacrificed, and these are very often the female children, due to the Asian cultural preference for male offspring as both a reliable source of labour and its primogeniture practice. Oryx challenges Jimmy's sense of indignation at such practices by casting an ironic perspective on them; 'Oryx said it must have been bad for a child not to be chosen. Things would be worse for it in the village then, it would lose value, it would be given less to eat. She herself had been chosen first of all.' (147) Her pride in being the choicest pick of the lot of children, if misplaced, illustrates the possible unhappy consequence of being seen as possessing little 'value' in the eyes of both the parents as well as the traffickers: starvation and neglect. It is a long way off from Oryx's village to Jimmy's Compound where women there at least enjoy relative freedom in forging their life paths; clearly, First World feminism has yet to adequately address this disparity, especially with regards to 'women who have to struggle alongside men for their subsistence' and thus fighting for equal gender rights remains a low priority for them (Ramazanoglu 1989:18).<sup>26</sup>

To such a poor Third World community, then, of paramount significance is the idea of economic 'value' and 'worth' – the catchphrases of capitalism – and its complicity with patriarchal attitudes and beliefs. There are no outright villains in *Oryx and Crake*, only exploitative opportunists and dubious father figures. Thus, the child trafficker who frequents the village is perceived more as a

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<sup>25</sup> I am fully aware that feminist debates in developed nations also at times neglect to think about the less privileged women in their society. My interest here, however, is to reflect on metanarratives and power relations that problematise the postmodern positive emphasis on *petit* narratives and the marginalised. Therefore, the consequences of globalisation and capitalism, I would argue, are best viewed and comprehended when we refer to transnational examples. This by no means trivialises or negates the struggles of First World women who face economic demands daily.

<sup>26</sup> Ramazanoglu provides a detailed comparison of the experiences of women in Iceland and India, as well as American and Guatemalan Indian women in her text *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression*, that is especially insightful in drawing out the various conflicts of interest within feminism when differences among women – whether in terms of nationality, race, class, or age – are persistently subsumed under its collective identity (1989:17-18).

welcome saviour than a monstrous evil, even as his identity is also reduced to a mercenary one; he is

the village bank, their insurance policy, their kind rich uncle, their only charm against bad luck. And he had been needed more and more often, because the weather had become so strange and could not longer be predicted – too much rain or not enough, too much wind, too much heat – and the crops were suffering. (142)

When Atwood draws the reader's attention to the changing climatic conditions, the vulnerability of the disempowered to such fluctuations in their daily lives, as well as the patriarchal-economic patron, the borderline conditions that demand equally desperate measures for survival become palpably clear.<sup>27</sup> Similar extreme responses from the sold children are necessary in order to make sense of their predicament, and all are couched in commercial terms; they understand that they have 'a money value: they represent a cash profit to others', and that in itself, though 'no substitute for love', will have to suffice because, as Oryx rationalizes:

love was undependable, it came and then it went, so it was good to have a money value, because then at least those who wanted to make a profit from you would make sure you were fed enough and not damaged too much. Also there were many who had neither love nor a money value, and having one of these things was better than having nothing. (154)

"So I learned about life... That everything has a price." (171)

Indeed, to the extent that human beings and human traits are commodified in a capitalist economy, Oryx bears witness to the transactional nature of relationships in her life. Brought to the city by the traffickers who exploit her looks and age, Oryx is made to ply flowers to foreigners: 'Who could resist her? Not many of the foreigners. Her smile was perfect – not cocky or aggressive, but hesitant, shy, taking nothing for granted' (159). Playing the stereotype role of an innocent child helps Oryx to meet her sales quota and thus 'feel safe for one more day' (*ibid*). The rules of economic demand and supply are ever present, whether for Oryx or her traffickers; she 'shouldn't be seen too much in the same locations because it wouldn't do for people to become tired of her' (159). The entire scenario is undergirded by the mercenary demands of capitalism that play off sex, gender, age, and culture for its own benefit.

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<sup>27</sup> The topic of Third World development and its impact on women is a wide one. Due to the lack of space in my dissertation, I cannot go into any detail on it. For a useful reader on this topic, see, for example, Lynne Brydon and Sylvia Chant (eds.) (1989) *Women in the Third World: Gender Issues in Rural and Urban Areas*, and Janet Henshall Momsen's *Gender and Development* (2004).

From the above, it is only a short step away to Oryx being exploited for her sexuality. Used as a bait for foreign men who think to lure Oryx to their hotel rooms, even as she is being watched all the time by her minders who will then break into the rooms feigning perhaps the very sort of disgust that Jimmy experiences, these paedophiles immediately apologise and pay to settle the issue. It is thus difficult to judge precisely who is being made use of, for Oryx feels ‘strong to know that the [foreign] men thought she was helpless but she was not. It was they who were helpless’ (162), and thus instead of self-pity, she wrests a little power for herself, however ambiguous the circumstance that allows her to do so. Such an attitude characterizes all occasions when she is sexually exploited; faced with limited options in life, she is resolutely pragmatic and matter-of-fact. Indeed, with reference to her stint as a child pornographic actor, she points out that there is hardly much difference between the movie producer Jack and Jimmy himself, much to Jimmy’s chagrin;

“Why do you think he is bad?” said Oryx. “He never did anything with me that you don’t do. Not nearly so many things!”

“I don’t do them against your will,” said Jimmy. “Anyway you’re grown up now.”

Oryx laughed. “What is my will?” she said [...] “He taught me to read,” she said quietly. “To speak English, and to read English words...” (173)

For Oryx, to be taught English while acting in pornographic films is a satisfactorily tangible transaction, which leaves open the question of what exactly are her gains in her relationship with Jimmy while in the employment of Crake as a ‘globewise saleswoman’ for his company (370). Of course, it can be argued that she is putting a positive spin on her plight, but undoubtedly it complicates the feminist discourse on the issue of pornography. Ramazanoglu points out that

women are extensively employed (or coerced) as models, actresses, strippers, hostesses, and prostitutes in the pornographic industry. This means that feminist political action against the industry is also action against working women. These women are generally highly exploited, but the economic alternatives open to them are likely to be very limited. (1989:166).

Jimmy’s protest against Oryx’s exploitation, viewed in this light, echoes the anti-pornography movement.<sup>28</sup> Its argument of pornography as being ‘the

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<sup>28</sup> There is much to be said on the topic of sexual exploitation and pornography with regards to its use of both children and women which my dissertation regrettably does not really have room for. Although in this paragraph I am questioning the common argument that pornography is harmful to all women (and men), I am in no way underestimating the seriousness of this issue for many women. The worrying practice of rationalising and defending pornographic practices as a lifestyle choice for liberal societies, especially when it hijacks the language of postmodernism, is particularly reprehensible; see, for example, Laurence O’Toole’s

quintessential symbol of a male sexuality assumed to be inherently violent and oppressive', while true to a certain extent, has the effect of transforming that very symbol into 'the focus of a moral crusade reminiscent of the nineteenth century social purity and temperance movements' (Willis 1984:113), and ignores the social and economic factors that have compelled such women towards the sex industry, as Ramazanoglu has argued above. By having her male protagonist in the novel articulate the mainstream outrage towards the sexual exploitation of women, Atwood at the same time emphasises his simplistic focus on Oryx as a passive victim. It is precisely this persistent adherence to such a reading of Oryx that perplexes Jimmy, for his lover resolutely refuses to conform to it.

I will discuss the implications of the male gaze that continues in the twenty-first century to strive to control and manipulate the female body and identity in the next section. But before that, I want to briefly examine another female character who depicts the presence of a class of women within the First World metropolis that problematises the universal term 'woman' in its inadequate reflection of real-life distinctions and tensions. As Jimmy's mother relegates the care of her child to hired help while at work in the day – a familiar situation in many advanced nations – Jimmy's fondest childhood memories are unsurprisingly not of his parents but of Dolores, 'the live-in from the Philippines' (36) who baked him birthday cakes while his own mother 'could never seem to recall how old Jimmy was or what day he was born' (58). Even as Atwood probes the difficulty of working women in many cities around the world juggling both careers and family, she also contemplates the economic status of women such as Dolores who support their more well-off sisters in their bid for economic and social emancipation while enjoying little of that themselves. As with Oryx, the diverse experiences of women demands a recognition of such differences within feminism, an acknowledgement that 'Social, economic, and political "progress" made under certain feminist political and economic regimes is structurally linked to the exploitation, regression, and devolution of other women' (Romero 2000:1516). Atwood's portrayal of this unequal power relation between women in

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book, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire* (1998). See also major feminist critics who write against (Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 1987) and for (Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, 1978) the topic.

her futuristic novel reveals her concern towards the plight of such women, which has yet to be satisfactorily addressed in contemporary feminist discourse.

### *Inscribing Oryx's identity*

The patriarchal view of women, especially disenfranchised Third World women in *Oryx and Crake*, entails the attempt to shape them in order to reflect specific ideals, ideas, and agendas: a process that First World women had endured – and continue to do so – as well. For Jimmy, his fixation on Oryx as a much-put-upon and helpless female prevents him from arriving at any in-depth understanding of her. Furthermore, Jimmy/Snowman re-imagines Oryx's femininity as a maternal and fertile symbol for the Crakers. In both cases, he focuses and pursues particular gender traits within Oryx that inadvertently reveal his own character and visionary limitations.

Jimmy's horrified reaction to his lover's narrative about her childhood experience of being sold off by her own parent is directly challenged by Oryx for its ignorance and sentimentality; “‘Oh Jimmy, you would like it better maybe if we all starved to death?’ said Oryx, with her small rippling laugh. This was the laugh he feared most from her, because it disguised amused contempt’ (145). On some levels, Jimmy is aware of how his understanding of Oryx falls far short of her own perception of her lived experiences, hence his discomfort and unease when she refuses his sympathy and, to a large extent, pity, for that only serves to disempower her in relation to him. Yet, Oryx is also cognizant that while she might deny Jimmy the right to recast her according to his perception of women such as her, beyond the interpersonal level, social and economic pressures rob her of any ability to control her own life. Returning to the quote from the novel in the previous section, when Jimmy protests against Oryx's comparison of him to the pornographic film-maker by pointing out that their relationship is not coerced and thus not against her ‘will’, her chilling response ‘What is my will?’ is an indictment of Jimmy's western liberal belief in individualism that is also part of western second-wave feminist ideology of the realisation of selfhood. Jimmy's persistent badgering of Oryx to relate her life story, especially the sordid details such as whether she was raped by those involved in the pornographic film-making, betrays his desire to read her in a way that he could comprehend: ‘Perhaps he was digging for her anger, but he never found it’ (378). She remains

an enigma because ‘she refused to feel what he wanted her to feel’ (233), to allow him to see himself as being different from those who exploited her in her entire life through the perverse way of gathering all the ugly facts such that ‘the more it hurt, the more – he was convinced – he loved her’ (165). The inscrutable Oryx that the critic Mendelsohn objects to must thus be read as Jimmy’s limited ability, both as a male and a First World citizen, to understand one who is different not only in terms of sex and gender, but also culture and class, a point that feminism in its bid to represent all women must take into account if it wants to speak on behalf of women such as Oryx. Jimmy’s limited viewpoint in the narrative constructs Oryx’s alleged ‘inscrutability’ (Mendelsohn) and ‘hazy character’ (Halliwell) as mentioned at the start of this discussion.

Other examples of how, at different times, Oryx is the object of the male imagination is when, for instance, Jimmy/Snowman invents an originary account of the Crakers upon their demand, assigning the responsibility of their creation to Crake, while Oryx is attributed with the (secondary) presence of animals and words. Crake’s status and work is analogous to the act of construction undertaken by the biblical male God – *‘Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango’* – while Oryx is associated with fertility – *‘the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself’* (116). Moreover, Oryx acts as a teacher to the Crakers initially, while Crake observes them outside the domed enclosure where they are kept, thus maintaining his masterful gaze on them. Agency and action are clearly attributed to Crake rather than Oryx in Jimmy/Snowman’s story; for Oryx her biological capability as a female is foregrounded as her contribution to the Crakers’ existence, and this, to say the least, is a highly selective viewpoint that adds on to the protagonist’s inability to read her coherently. Apart from this fable concocted by Jimmy/Snowman, her life story that he has attempted to piece together, as well as her own version of it, the narrative reminds us that there are also ‘other versions of her: her mother’s story, the story of the man who’d bought her, the story of the man who’d bought her after that, and the third man’s story’ (138-9). At the end of his reminiscence of Oryx, Jimmy/Snowman has to admit the futility of his attempt to understand her – he does not even know her real name, for ‘Oryx’ is finally ‘only a word. It’s a mantra’ (134), a chant, a mirage, that is appropriated for the masculine gaze and re-invention.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, my discussion has focused more on the thematic interest than on an analysis of techniques and motifs in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*; the latter will be taken up in Chapter 5 when I examine the author's employment of the eye as a motif and narrative strategy. Here, I am interested in Atwood's engagement with issues that have raised many questions within recent feminist debate in her novel, one of the most pertinent and urgent being how we can speak with insight of the female characters' experiences in the First World – Ramona, Jimmy's and Crake's mothers, and the CorpSeCorps women officers – as well as those in the developing world – Oryx and Dolores.

As a response to current belief that feminism has had its day, the novel is a reminder that when one scratches the surface of such feminist celebration of emancipation, a more complex – and troubling – scene presents itself, where women in both rich and poor countries continue to struggle within largely intact male hegemonic social structures. They are exploited and in turn exploit others. Add to this other factors that contribute to this state of affairs, as depicted in Atwood's novel – globalisation, climate change, cultural norms, and the monopoly of capitalist economy – it is thus impossible to adopt a straightforward feminist discussion of a collective identity and a unified vision. Of particular concern for the author in this novel is the impact of globalisation upon the more vulnerable nations, especially its women. The foreigners who buy Oryx's flowers, the western men who attempt to lure her to their hotel room, the child pornography industry run by men such as Jack who teaches her English – such are the adverse effects of global trade on local communities and economies that forces its women to take up lowly-paid jobs, or to become refugees or prostitutes. Questions are thus raised not only in terms of the distribution of resources and wealth worldwide, but more significantly for feminism, the participation of more privileged women in gaining from this inequality. It also indicates that under the universal banner of 'woman', those who come from impoverished countries and communities have different priorities from First World women; Atwood reminds us that for the former – as represented by Oryx – money is 'important [...] because you'd be amazed how it alters your thinking to be financially dependent on someone. Indeed, anyone.' (Ingersoll 2006:148).

But this does not mean that the feminist struggle, splintered by diverse stories and narrations, is no longer relevant. As Adrienne Rich asked more than two decades ago, ‘How much do our differences mitigate what we hold in common as women?’ (1986:96-7); we must continue to think in terms of degrees and extent. After all, the female characters in the novel, in one way or another, have to negotiate the continued dominance of masculinity, be it in the scientific or corporate world, in the form of primogeniture in Third World villages, or the exploitative sexualisation of poor women and children. Atwood’s work illustrates effectively that ‘we need a broader understanding of the complexity of how the different perspectives are linked, both in conflict and in mutual struggle’ (Romero 2000:1516). Although the Compound women appear to share few commonalities with Oryx and Dolores, and their differences being both very real and wide, Atwood’s portrayal of the power differences amongst women themselves is perhaps a first step towards, in Romero’s terms, a ‘broader understanding’ of the diverse life experiences of women, so as ‘not to assume some fictive female unity but to deal creatively with real divisions between women’ (Ramazanoglu 1998:66). One of such creative ways to think about conflicts within feminism, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, is through the genre of feminist dystopia fiction. Another method, as seen in this chapter, is Atwood’s complication of various familiar feminist positions and assumptions through her representation of both stereotypical scenes and characters that, at the same time, surprises us with unexpected perspectives. It is perhaps Atwood’s refusal to reach for simple answers, but instead to imagine at once the convergences and divergences of women’s experiences, that help us towards a sensitive and in-depth understanding of feminism today.

## Conclusion to Section I

In Section I, Hall's *The Carhullan Army* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* have been read and analysed together in order to examine the authors' re-imagination of the condition of women's lives after more than a century of the feminist liberation movement in western countries. Both works, in their different ways, acknowledge the almost heroic historical struggle that allows for today's First World women to have the wherewithal – legislatively, economically, socially, and culturally – to live their lives as they choose. More significantly, they update and further earlier feminist arguments centering on the validity of women's collective identity.

In Hall's *The Carhullan Army*, we see the more positive aspects of the experience of women's solidarity through the writer's sympathetic depiction of Carhullan as an exclusively female, almost-utopian, commune. Yet, binary ways of thinking that facilitate the concept of innate behaviour and acts – women's passivity, men's militarism – are foregrounded and problematised; any tendency towards an essentialist viewpoint is thus avoided. Considering Hall's novel with Atwood's *The Handmaid Tale*, the utopian/dystopian tension inherent in both works allows for a critical view of the changing emphasis on the focus of feminism through the last twenty years or so, from a call for solidarity in women's struggles to overcome patriarchal systems in the 1960s and 1970s, to an argument for civil rights for women, and now to a concern for the domination of rights-based struggle over that of the initial collective energy in feminist activism. In highlighting women's biological identity in her narrative, Hall reminds us that our bodies – and the differences between the genders and sexes – are still concrete points of consideration, despite ideas of social construction, and it is this narrative of physicality which has yet to be resolved for feminism.

On the other hand, Atwood, in *Oryx and Crake*, is insistent on widening the preoccupations of feminist discourse, especially that of women's lived experiences. Therefore, she only concedes to being identified as a feminist 'in the broad sense of the term' (Ingersoll 2006:33); that is, 'as part of a large issue: human dignity' (*ibid*:58), 'as human equality and freedom of choice' (*ibid*:81). In the light of this assertion, *Oryx and Crake* can be said to have almost the widest range of narrative concerns in her works, but undergirding it undoubtedly is still a

commitment to realistically evaluate and re-think the contemporary woman's status and life. Part of this effort to encompass other pertinent issues that impinge on the feminist agenda is the issue of diverse experiences within the movement. The narrative effectively and vividly critiques the postmodern inclination towards heterogeneity that at times approaches a hegemonic consciousness; feminism is guilty of this when it simply adds 'another item to the list of all "others" – all finally to be incorporated into some version of a global McSisterhood'.<sup>29</sup> *Oryx and Crake* subverts this tendency towards a power imbalance within and without feminism itself by giving voice to marginalised women.

Although the three novels have raised more questions than their narratives could provide answers to, in their representation and re-imagination of the old battleground of gender relations, they have contributed invaluable towards the ongoing task of undermining the grand narrative of patriarchy. Towards this end, Hall and Atwood have both articulated in their novels that feminism is still, in the second millennium, in spite of all its differences and shifts in focus from collectivism to individualism, a much-needed concept and discourse; its vision of overcoming gender discrimination has yet to be fulfilled. With this in mind, I turn to a discussion of another type of identity in Section II: decolonised and diasporic identity in the twentieth century.

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<sup>29</sup> Sabina Sawhney, 'Authenticity is such a Drag!', in Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (eds.) *Feminism Beside Itself* (New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 205); quoted in Ellen Rooney (ed.) (2006) *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, p. 4.

## Section II Ambiguous Identities: Fictional Narratives of Decolonised States

### Introduction

Similar to feminist discourse that continues to grapple with unresolved issues of power structures and the concept of selfhood as discussed in the previous two chapters, segments of metanarratives linger on in the postcolonial world, problematising any sustained celebration of political emancipation in late twentieth-century ex-colonies. Even as Peter Hulme believes that ‘the grand narratives of decolonization have, for the moment, been adequately told and widely accepted’,<sup>30</sup> it is perhaps still premature to announce the coming-of-age for many of these former colonies after more than half a century of independence. The sight of decolonised countries that are in the grip of prolonged ethnic strife and civil unrest at the end of the twentieth century is surely a painful contrast to the hopes and ambitions for a better life following their earlier successful bids for independence.<sup>31</sup> How has this unravelling of the independence dream been represented in the fiction of decolonisation? What are the pressing issues that preoccupy these imaginative efforts at thinking about the legacy of colonisation? My reading of two novels in this chapter – Michelle de Kretser’s *The Hamilton Case* (2003) and Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) – pivots on the literary representation of these “young” countries’ negotiations of their colonial inheritance as well as with western hegemonic institutions and nations in recent years. The two authors’ works, both set in twentieth-century Sri Lanka, critically probe the power relations among First and Third World nations in the twenty-first century. They also examine the consequences of internal strife – ethnic conflict, territorial dispute and the struggle for a sense of identity – that beleaguer the road to successful nation-building for many newly-independent nations. In the period of writing this dissertation, civil unrest in Sri Lanka was exacerbated by the government’s controversial war on Tamil rebels in the northern and eastern parts of the country in 2009, bringing into greater relief de Kretser and Ondaatje’s

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Hulme, ‘The Locked Heart: The Creole Family Romance of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’, in F. Barker, P. Hulme and M. Iversen (eds.) (1994) *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press. Quoted in Loomba, p. 252.

<sup>31</sup> See Sumantra Bose’s *Contested Lands* (2007) for detailed analyses of political and cultural troubles that are largely the legacies of colonialism and consequences of neo-colonialist interventions in nations that gained their independence from the mid-twentieth century on.

engagement with the very concerns that have preoccupied them in these two novels.

The history of the imperial appropriation of, and settlement in, distant lands by colonial powers entails the ‘*unforming* or re-forming’ of the native communities, according to Ania Loomba, for colonists were often involved in ‘a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions’ (1998:2). When colonial nations gained political independence, the hope was that such deplorable and inhumane acts would be relegated to the morgue of historical memory; this hope is still unfulfilled, and these practices constitute a significant part of the problems that plague these societies post-independence, as they grapple with leftover colonial infrastructure and beliefs, or the yoking together of different ethnic groups struggling for supremacy within artificially partitioned spaces. Basil Davidson likens this colonial inheritance to ‘the “dish” handed to the new leaders upon independence; it

was old and cracked and little fit for any further use. Worse than that, it was not an empty dish. For it carried the junk and jumble of a century of colonial muddle and ‘make do’ [...] What shone upon its supposedly golden surface was not the reflection of new ideas and ways of liberation, but the shadows of old ideas and ways of servitude.<sup>32</sup>

This cracked ‘dish’, burdened with the structures of imperialism (judicial, economic, and educational structures, ethnic/racial divides, depletion of natural resources, etc), often impedes the smooth transition from colonial to post-colonial states. Moreover, if colonialism involves what Loomba has termed the disruptive ‘*unforming* or re-forming’ of local communities, then for Frantz Fanon, writing in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*, decolonisation entails the violent ‘substitution of one “species” of mankind for another’ (1961:1), and thus ‘an agenda for total disorder’ (*ibid*:2). All these critics trace a trajectory from the destructiveness of imperialist practices to the conflict-ridden experience of newly-independent countries’ efforts at nation-building. Echoing the metaphor of the ‘old and cracked’ dish decolonised states inherit from their former masters, Fanon also notes that for these countries, ‘national consciousness is nothing but a crude, empty, fragile shell’, as volatile identity formations mean that it is too easy for the

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<sup>32</sup> Basil Davidson (1973) *Black Star: A View of the Life and Times of Kwame Nkrumah* (London: Allen Lane), 94. Quoted in Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, p. 1.

local population to ‘switch back from nation to ethnic group and from state to tribe’ (1961:97). This resort to tribalism, instead of legitimising these young nations’ transition to full independence and a place on the global stage, troubles decolonised states for a significant period of time. In addition, neocolonialism manifests itself in the form of what Homi Bhabha has termed ‘coercive conditionality’ in the last few decades (1994:xvi); that is, subjecting these vulnerable and impoverished former colonies to forms of authoritative control – for example the World Bank – such that ‘it is difficult to enter into equitable negotiations with one’s allies or one’s enemies’ (*ibid*).<sup>33</sup> Both novels discussed in this chapter reflect these issues of colonialism, post- and neo-colonialism from the mid- to end-twentieth century, exploring the conflicting narratives of identity, agency and empowerment.

I have chosen my two novels with a view towards attempting a close critical analysis of the trajectory of the political independence of an ex-colony, Sri Lanka, from the dying days of British occupation at the end of the nineteenth century, to the recurring civil unrest in the eighties that have plagued the nation since its liberation from colonialism. While my interest in the novels developed before my intention to focus on Sri Lanka as the one country to be studied as a kind of ‘case study’ of the decolonised state in recent times, it is not an entirely arbitrary choice. The historical past of this nation is resonant with that of many other decolonised countries, thus providing for a suitable starting point to think about the more troubling aspects of postcolonial and decolonised states today. However, instead of sprawling narratives of imperialism that characterise continents such as India and Africa, and regions such as the Caribbean – that inevitably necessitate grappling with even more complex links and historical baggage with other states within their region – Sri Lanka, as a more or less self-contained island (despite its links with India), allows for an in-depth study of its colonial and postcolonial experience, as well as its interaction with the international community, on a scale suitable for the scope of this dissertation.

With its more than four hundred years of colonised history – from the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 to the Dutch attack and subsequent conquer of large parts of the island in the 1660s, and finally to the British imperial

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<sup>33</sup> Other critics who with the same view as Bhabha are Boehmer 2005, Douzinas 2007, Koshy 1999, and Oberleitner 2007.

domination from the late 1700s till its independence in 1948 – Sri Lanka’s colonial masters’ worldview and practices had been thoroughly embedded in the warp and weave of its society. Its ethnic and territorial unrest, flaring soon after its independence, is an example of how the dream of liberation has turned into a long nightmare. The causes of this tumultuous state of affairs over its fifty years of independence are many and varied, and its effects are felt in the bones of the country even today in the twenty-first century. Primarily, the civil conflict stems from ‘processes set in motion during the colonial era’ (Nissan and Stirrat 1991:29): that is, the political and social interpretation, identification, and demarcation of the country’s ethnic and religious groups by the British colonisers (Rogers 1991:90), a problem shared by nations such as Rwanda and Palestine for example, and described in Davidson’s reference to the inheritance of the cracked dish of colonialism, as well as Fanon’s image of the fractured national consciousness. Its political model, based on Westminster’s rule of the majority (Bose 2007:12), has split the racial makeup of its society, when the dominant Sinhalese wrested away parliamentary and governmental roles from the Tamil minority after independence. With its ‘Sinhalese Only’ policy in the 1950s, the English-educated Tamils were sidelined in mainstream society, and the practice of their native language – together with educational and employment opportunities – were severely curtailed (Bose 2007:16-17, Robinson 2007:28). Following this, the Sinhalese population was relocated in the north and east of the country, the traditional stronghold of the Tamils, who termed this act “state-sponsored colonisation” (Bose 2007:20-21). Religious differences between the Sinhalese (largely Buddhist) and Tamils (mainly Hindus) stirred into the volatile mix of ethnicity and politics worsen matters; ‘This fight is part ethnic, part religious and wholly vicious’ (Robinson 2007:27). In ‘the self-conscious proclamations of Sinhala identity and community’, the dominant ethnic group perceives the Tamils as ‘the “dangerous other”’ (Nissan and Stirrat 1990:32); this thus legitimises acts of colonisation within the island by their own populations. It also raises questions as to Fanon’s belief in a decolonised process whereby in order ‘to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation’, its revolutionary call should be ““the last shall be the first”” (1961:2), since colonialism is ‘naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence’ (*ibid*:23). If so, are nations such as Sri Lanka doomed to spirals of violence and competitive tribalism?

This chapter aims to examine the ways in which these literary texts, completed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, mediate the challenges of ethnicity and pluralism in a non-western society on the one hand, and on the other, explore the pressures exerted on liberated colonies from persistent totalising narratives that largely stem from western historical and cultural epistemologies. Although the timeframe covered in both books, taken together, span the period from the late nineteenth century to the 1990s, and does not approach our current moment (early twenty-first century), I wish to draw attention to how these writers, having imbibed the postcolonial (and also postmodern) debates, return to the colonial past to re-imagine the binary relationships characteristic of these hierarchical societies, as well as to analyse their efforts to trace the process of the changing of political guards in the second half of the twentieth century. They provide insights to our understanding of not just by now familiar characters and situations – decolonised peoples and nations – but also their interaction, responses, and exploitation of global forces bearing down on them. Before I analyse each of the novels separately, I want to briefly discuss their places in postcolonial literature; that is, their convergence on or divergence from the contemporary narratives of decolonisation.

Bill Ashcroft's theory of the colonial and postcolonial response to the writing of imperial history is helpful in framing my discussion here: he posits three possible reactions: acquiescence with the Eurocentric model of a hierarchical historical perspective (focusing on the west as the legitimating narrator of colonial and postcolonial experiences), a total rejection of it, and lastly, a mode of interjection in which he locates the postcolonial response, where 'the basic premises of historical narrative are accepted, but a contrary narrative, which claims to offer a more immediate or "truer" picture of post-colonial life, a record of those experiences omitted from imperial history, is inserted into the historical record' (2001:101). With regards to the third response, both de Kretser and Ondaatje can be said to have offered, in their novels, an alternative vision of the postcolonial experience that complicates the official account of colonialism as a mission of civilisation, although there are no explicit claims by these two authors of conveying singularly authentic depictions of a 'true' Sri Lanka. However, Ashcroft's notion is still, to a large extent, Eurocentric; he suggests that the postcolonial rewriting of history is 'a political contestation of imperial powers

[...] one that works through, in the interstices of, in the fringes of, rather than in simple opposition to, history' (102). Much more than that, de Kretser and Ondaatje in their novels shun a positioning on the fringes by centering the locals in the reader's consciousness. At the same time, they also reflect on how imperial forces assume different forms at the end of the twentieth century, further straining the resources of decolonised nations. These authors have subjected the binary of coloniser/colonised to a complex scrutiny and questioning.

Ashcroft's identification of the 'interstices' as the concern of recent postcolonial writing is echoed in Bhabha's thoughts on "in-between" spaces:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1994:2)

In post-independent states, the processes of national and individual self-definition, as Bhabha has pointed out, constitute instances of different loyalties, backgrounds, beliefs and practices that defy simplistic categorisation or identification. These intertwined nodes of identity involve not just 'collaboration and contestation', but also, I argue, uneasy combinations of exploitation and subversion, withdrawal and participation. The characters in de Kretser and Ondaatje's novels occupy precisely such liminal and shifting terrains, so that from their perspectives of both their society and themselves – at times partial, but also capable of illuminating and trenchant views – they problematise any attempts to be an unwavering partisan to singular political and social positions.

Another way of thinking about these two novels is to contrast them with earlier anticolonial narratives. Elleke Boehmer, in her comprehensive text *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (2005), delineates 'anti-imperial cultural nationalism' in the first half of the twentieth century – such as that adopted by the Negritude and nativist writers – as that which sought 'an inversion of imperial values, if not structures' (2005:96). In other words, 'the strategic line of attack taken by the colonised was to turn the identities ascribed to them into positive self-images.' (ibid:101) Alternatively, they might attempt 'to retrieve or invent edenic homelands' and 'lost spiritual traditions set in an unspoilt pastoral past',

thereby converting ‘apparent deficiencies into definitions of self.’ (*ibid*:112) Boehmer notes that with the advent of political liberation for ex-colonies, writers inhabited – or rather, mimicked – ‘dominant colonial myths and languages’ to disavow and undermine their power over indigenous identity and history (*ibid*:163), the most well-known example of which is J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986). With the trend of cultural revivalism, and motifs of bereavement as well as of journeying and return (or homecoming) that characterise the second half of the twentieth-century postcolonial literature, Boehmer points out the various strategies of reconciliation and recovery of oppressed identities. For the 2000s she posits the ‘coming “home” to the old and now polyglot colonial metropolis’ as one of the definitive themes of postcolonial writing (*ibid*:227), and cites Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Michael Ondaatje, Ben Okri, as well as the second generation of immigrants such as Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali, as instances of such literary personalities. Suggesting that these authors, situated in the ‘still hegemonic western (or Northern) hemisphere’ (*ibid*:229), invariably adopt a cosmopolitan viewpoint in their works, Boehmer argues that the resultant texts favour a ‘highly marketable juxtaposition of differences’ (*ibid*:230).

My interest at this point is to situate *The Hamilton Case* and *Anil’s Ghost* within Boehmer’s chronological view of the development of postcolonial writing so as to gain an understanding of the significance of their works. Both novels depart somewhat from the initial stages of articulating formerly suppressed identities via literary modes of inversion, retrieval or invention, and cultural revivalism. Instead of staying within their (western) comfort zones, both de Kretser and Ondaatje in these works re-direct the reader’s attention to decolonised Sri Lanka, and interrogate this interplay of ethnic, religious, cultural and even territorial differences. Such a journey away from the western metropolitan centre, and towards a re-examination of post-independent nation-states is what Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin envision as a much needed response towards ‘the recolonising tendencies’ of recent postcolonial studies (1993:7), that is, what they term ‘Anglocentrism’ which is manifested in the proliferation and ‘multiplication of “marginalisations”’, but in fact creating ‘little real disturbance to Anglocentric and Eurocentric curricula within the academia’ (*ibid*:8).<sup>34</sup> Consequently, Brydon

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<sup>34</sup> Such a view is similar to my earlier response to Ashcroft’s delineation of postcolonial writing working ‘in the fringes’ of official history (2001:102).

and Tiffin argue that ‘postcolonial writers write “decolonising fictions”, texts that write back against imperial fictions and texts that incorporate alternative ways of seeing and living in the world’ (*ibid*:11) Even as I agree with Brydon and Tiffin here, I am also aware that the genre of “decolonising fiction” is thus not entirely new, but has in fact been taken up in the form of ‘the novel of disenchantment’ from the 1960s onwards in the works of Chinua Achebe, V.S. Naipaul and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o (Boehmer 2005:231). Yet, these works have, by and large, been engaged with the disillusionment at the realisation of the myriad, and often seemingly insurmountable, problems arising from both the colonial legacy as well as differences within the nation. Ondaatje and de Kretser’s novels analyse these thorny issues, but go further to imaginatively and compassionately contemplate the complex interplay of (western) metanarratives of progress and modernity with ideas of historic specificities and locational identities. By privileging a Third World setting that struggles to come into its own on the global stage, both authors acknowledge the difficulties inherent in the task of nation-building as well as – in Brydon and Tiffin’s words – illustrate ‘alternative ways of seeing and living in the world’, specifically with regards to the drive for communalism and agency in postcolonial societies.

Although my choice of novels share the similarities of setting and to some degree thematic concerns, their approaches differ significantly, and this has governed my decision as to the order in which I will discuss them. I begin my discussion with de Kretser’s text, despite its later publication date, as its more immediate delineation of the details of Sri Lanka’s history will help those unfamiliar with the workings of the nation. Generally speaking, *The Hamilton Case* adopts a more direct stance towards its treatment of the colonial and postcolonial experiences in Sri Lanka; political details are explicitly referred to, and the issue of ethnic differences and tension act as one of the consistent bulwarks of the narrative. In contrast, although the text of *Anil’s Ghost* contains an entry at the beginning that refers specifically to the author’s situation of the novel in the aftermath of the 1980s ethnic riots, throughout the narrative itself Ondaatje steers clear of both distinct ethnic references and definitive standpoints on the political development of the country. While it should be noted that both writers refuse to prioritise or champion in any way the various factions that make up the tangled and multifaceted troubles of Sri Lanka, de Kretser’s narrative does

throw into greater relief Ondaatje's frequent reluctance to provide extraneous details of the characters' background in the upheaval. This disavowal to stake out a clear position on Ondaatje's part can in itself be a problematic position, as I will examine in chapter 4. Put side by side, these two novels effectively illuminate the predicament of such decolonised states plagued by communal and religious strife, as well as the persistent imperial forces and demands that adds further pressure on these relatively young nation-states.

### **Chapter 3: Michelle de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case***

Born in Sri Lanka in 1958, the writer Michelle de Kretser moved to Australia when she was fourteen. Educated in Melbourne and then Paris, she published her first novel *The Rose Grower* in 1999. Her second work, *The Hamilton Case* (2003), won the Tasmania Pacific Prize, the Encore Award, and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, while her latest novel, *The Lost Dog* (2007) was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize (2008), and won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award – the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction as well as the overall Best Book Award (2008). Removed from the orbit of Anglo-Eurocentric readership and publication market by her ethnicity, she is, unsurprisingly, concerned with notions of transgression in her works; her multilayered narrative style often presents alternative perspectives of familiar historical events.

In the novel *The Hamilton Case*, de Kretser critically examines the colonial and postcolonial experiences of Sri Lanka, from the days of the British rule in the late nineteenth century to the country's mid-twentieth century political independence that mainly brought about negative consequences of decolonisation – civil turbulence, ethnic strife and neo-colonial practices. The protagonist of the story, Sam Obeysekere, is the narrator in the first section, tracing his childhood, family relations and education during the British occupation in Sri Lanka. Two other sections are told from a third-person viewpoint, relating Sam's trials and tribulations as he struggles to find a place for himself in the turbulent pre- and post-independent periods of his country: this change in perspective lends a sense of a loss of centred-ness to the narrative, both with regards to the protagonist as well as the country. Moreover, the reliability of Sam's narrative is undermined in these parts through his various encounters with his rival Donald Jayasinghe, a bullying schoolmate who becomes the country's Culture Minister upon its independence, and who makes no attempt to disguise his contempt for Sam even when they are adults. The final section of the narrative consists of a letter from Sam's friend John Shivanathan to Sam's son Harry. The three characters – Sam, Jayasinghe and Shivanathan – can be said to represent particular facets of the postcolonial history and experience. To summarise it rather simplistically (and thus at the cost of doing a disservice to the intricate narrative) de Kretser explores

the intertwined lives of the coloniser and the colonised through Sam, the experience of decolonisation in Jayasinghe's climb to political power, and in Shivanathan the by-now familiar figure of the diasporic migrant in the West.

## Coloniser and colonised

'Are you telling me Sam Obeysekere used to be anti-British? Because as long as I've known him, his veins have run with Bovril.' -- *The Hamilton Case*, p. 255

Of course, accents are what other people have.

"Where You're At," *All Points North*, Simon Armitage, 1998:3

Under the burden of western imperialism, Sri Lanka had been, as with many colonies (supposedly) blessed with natural resources, the golden goose for its various European masters. In the novel, the British imperialists skim off the fat of the land in order to fill their own coffers; they implement the Waste Land Ordinance stipulating that 'all lands not permanently cultivated or in certifiable ownership were the property of the Crown', and thus 'acquired acres of primeval forest that were sold for plantations' (8). They also 'slaughter-tapped' the rubber trees in the country during the second World War; 'trade and theft, speculation and profit; on these activities the root of Empire had always fattened.' (199) Upon Sri Lanka's independence, the English leaves 'with the haste instinctive to thieves' (238), abandoning a sinking ship after stripping it bare. de Kretser's emphatically denounces the illegality of the colonial exploits, cloaked in the imperial juridical laws that justify such thievery. Other forms of discriminatory colonial acts depicted in the novel include the racially segregated clubs in the cities and the reservation of top civil posts for whites only. However, as if implying all such actions are already familiar for many contemporary readers, de Kretser instead focuses on the racial and ethnic discrimination practised by the indigenous and mixed population on each other in the country. This form of localised bias is often more virulent – even as it is highly conflicted – simply because its impact and consequences hit home harder, its distinguishing more minute as it draws upon subtle differences in skin-colour shades.

In the novel, the blatant prejudice practiced in colonial society is a lesson the local population has learnt all too well: the British, as de Kretser puts it, 'had entered the country's bloodstream like a malady which proves so resistant that the

host organism adapts itself to accommodate.' (174) And adapt it does, indeed, with a flourish. For Fanon, the colonial world is 'a compartmentalised world' divided between colonists and colonised (1961:3-4), to the extent that the inhabitants are 'different species' (*ibid*:5). de Kretser, in her novel, depicts the subdivision of the colonised amongst themselves in nineteenth-century colonial Sri Lanka: the petty levels of discrimination exercised by the Burghers (descendants of European and Sri-Lankan marriages) towards the native Sri Lankans, who in turn take great pains to distinguish themselves either as Tamil or Sinhalese. In this section of the novel, the first-person narrative of the Sinhalese protagonist, Sam, vividly portrays a mind-set and a society that has imbibed the colonial discourse. His Dutch Burgher tutor, Miss Vanderstraaten – whose 'European purity of her race was her great pride' (18) – objects to another Portuguese Burgher lady, 'black as the ace of spades', for 'always passing herself off as one of us' (19), and nearly has a fit upon catching Sam picking up her photo frames; 'don't you ever, *ever* touch my belongings with your *black hands.*' (20, emphasis as original) Yet, Sam, a most loyal colonialist if ever there was one, accepts her outburst with equanimity, noting that the Burghers' 'European blood renders them superior to' either the Sinhalese or the Tamils (88). Such minute racial differences are disproportionately magnified in colonial Sri Lankan society; as Bhabha suggests, the 'difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural – colour as the cultural/political *sign* of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural '*identity*' (1994:114, emphasis as original). Beyond the usual black/white dichotomy, shades of colour perpetuate and intensify the racial hierarchy in Sam's world.

Indeed, Sam himself is a master of such racial bias. At his boarding school in Colombo, Sam recalls how 'we routinely referred to the Chinese boys as Ching-Chongs' and 'we never bothered with the Kaffirs' jawbreaking names but dubbed them the Kalus for their glossy black skin'. These instances of racial name-calling are nonchalantly brushed aside as being 'no more sinister than calling a chap Four Eyes because he wears spectacles or Fatty because he runs to lard; all schoolboys everywhere seize on physical attributes that deviate from the norm' (26). The casual certainty of Sam belonging to the 'norm' thus allows him to proclaim that 'racial divisions were played down' (26) in school officially, and nothing is said about there being not a single white European schoolboy amongst

them, or that being bespectacled or overweight are not immutable conditions as one's racial makeup is. It is thus hardly surprising that in his narrative, the fact that the school was 'founded in 1862 by an Anglican bishop on the pattern of Eton and Rugby', is repeatedly emphasised (24), for it legitimises his sense of superiority by its association with the west, but also selectively ignores the racial discrimination he himself has suffered under the colonists. This minute racial and ethnic differentiation, begun by the colonists, has indeed 'entered the country's bloodstream'.

Present in Sam's narrative is thus a yawning gap between that which is suppressed (racial/ethnic identity) and that which is strenuously emphasised (his loyalties to the British). The ensuing tension is perceptible in his name 'Stanley Alban Marriot Obeysekere' (3), with its blend of Ceylonese and English references; it even hints of an illicit affair between his mother and Sir Alban Marriot, the then Governor of Ceylon. Such a murky identity irks Sam greatly; to deny any hints of illegitimacy, and whenever 'doubt creeps in' about his birthright, Sam would walk to the mirror 'where reassurance waits in the solid evidence of my flesh' (4); his physical appearance – to his relief – undoubtedly marks him as a Ceylonese, even as his intellectual and spiritual allegiances lie with the departing English. This very act of referring to one's mirrored image in order to pin down one's racial and ethnic identity is a false move, for even as he thus affirms himself, what is unperceivable within the mirror is his identification with the British. It is this clash of conflicting yearnings, identity, articulations and repressions within Sam's unreliable narration that de Kretser works at to explore the contradictions of post-independent Third World nations and its peoples in the twentieth century.

Sam's well-to-do Sinhalese family is representative of the local elites who act as 'buffers between the foreign rulers and the native ruled', for they are 'the narrative that supports the master narrative of the dominant European subject' (Spivak 1999:358). What constitutes these secondary narratives? How are they maintained and spun-out, especially when the era of colonisation comes to a close? While Fanon suggests that colonialism implies a corresponding relationship between economic status and racial identity – 'You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich' (1961:5) – de Kretser complicates this connection by giving Sam a wealthy family background which

locates him, together with his western education, in a liminal position of belonging neither to the indigenous peoples nor the British colonisers. Fanon's belief in the colonised intellectual – such as Sam and his cohorts – whose faith in the colonist's culture 'is smashed to smithereens' in the face of his countrymen's 'real-life struggle' (1961:11), who 'confesses' and 'reverts to his old ways' (*ibid*:158), is challenged by de Kretser's refusal to adopt such a view, for Sam is one who cling to the last vestiges of British imperialism till the end.

From the beginning, his grandfather, Sir Stanley Obeysekere, sets the direction by which Sam would live his life under Sri Lanka's colonisers. Sir Obeysekere was a *mudaliyar*, a headman of his people. But in the eyes of the imperialists, these men were mere cogs in the colonial administrative wheel, serving 'as record keepers, as intermediaries and interpreters, as presidents of the courts that dealt with native disputes concerning land, contracts and debts' (6), bringing to mind Thomas Macaulay's proposal in 1835 to train a 'higher class of natives' in colonial India who are 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect', trained to act as 'interpreters' between coloniser and colonised (1835/1979). Thus, this privileged group in colonial society inevitably realises that even as 'they raised their status within the imperial system, imperial ideology marked them as inferior' (Boehmer 2005:111). This nebulous position is exemplified by Sir Obeysekere's heroic effort to save a drowning British girl being misinterpreted by her companions to be of questionable motive, so that one of them killed him with a blow to his head with an oar. The British court deflected any blame from the girls by noting that there were two white men nearby, and Sir Obeysekere should have shouted to them for help, for 'they would not have sat by and watched an English girl drown.' Moreover, they also pointed out that 'the Ceylonese [...] were prone to exaggeration' (7). If the incident ends here, it would be easy to castigate the British for their callousness and ingratitude towards the colonised. However, Sir Obeysekere's brother Willy writes to the local newspapers to support the British interpretation of the events, despite the local population's unhappiness with it, so as to secure the court's support to settle a lengthy dispute over some land. While Willy wins his court case, Sam notes with some satisfaction that he 'died a disappointed man' as 'the OBE he yearned for never materialised'. He attributes this to the English having 'long memories', for their 'great talent lies in the

reconciliation of justice and compromise' (9), even as he ignores his grandfather's fate at the colonial masters' hands.<sup>35</sup> It is Sam's (in)discriminate perception – or rather, wilful blindness – of the British that leads the protagonist to his tragedy in the end.

The subsequent sections of the novel switch to a third-person narrative viewpoint, moving the reader away from Sam's interpretation of his world to one where we witness the consequences of his wilful discrimination against his countrymen. Instead of learning from the plight of his grandfather as well as his Great-uncle Willy's treatment by the English, Sam's pride in his capabilities as a state prosecutor leads him to take on a court case of a murdered English planter Hamilton – hence the title of the novel *The Hamilton Case* – narrated to him by the district superintendent of police Conrad Nagel, a Dutch burgher. Hamilton, found shot through his chest, is thought to have been killed by his Tamil plantation coolies. Although two coolies are subsequently arrested for the murder, Sam takes it upon himself to direct suspicions onto Hamilton's friend Gordon Taylor who, with his wife, lives with Hamilton as his guests. Taylor eventually hangs himself when his wife testifies against him, and Sam is publicly feted by Nagel for his supposedly successful detective work.

There are two implications for Sam's persistence in solving the Hamilton case. Firstly, his delight for an opportunity to walk in the footsteps of the traditional English literary detective fiction is misplaced. While Sam is 'most impressed by the cold brilliance with which the great English murderers planned their crimes, the slow maturation of the project in logic and cunning over weeks and months', he sneers at the 'lack of premeditation' in his country's killers, whom he thinks display 'no art' in their passion-driven crimes, and are 'simple and dull as the alphabet' (41). This leads Sam to conclude that the Tamil coolies could not have committed such a well-planned crime, but he is unaware that his racial prejudices has coloured his attempt to accurately interpret the signs of the murder scene. Years later, Shivanathan, who represented the coolies at the trial,

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<sup>35</sup> Leonard Woolf's account of his six-year administrative service in Sri Lanka, in *Growing: An Autobiography of the years 1904-1911*, provides for an interesting tangential perspective of de Kretser's novel. It is a fascinating narrative of the workings of the British civil service in the country. Despite his professed disapproval of colonial discrimination of the local population and his aversion to the hierarchical social distinction among his countrymen in the colonial outpost, Woolf in many other ways sustained and performed the acts of exploitative empire. It seems Woolf would have been a suitable parallel of Sam from the colonial master's perspective.

questions Sam's conviction of Taylor's guilt, and offers his version of the events that point to a collusion between Nagel and Taylor's wife so as to clear the way for their affair and later, their child.

Secondly, Sam's professed love for the English literary detective heroes and his approval of their relentless pursuit of the guilty perpetrators can also be seen as a result of his unresolved identity crisis. Recalling his uneasiness at the conditions surrounding his birth – his amalgamated Sinhalese and English name, and the rumours about his mother's promiscuity – it is perhaps unsurprising that Sam obsessively picks at the Hamilton case like a scab, digging deeper and deeper in his desire to arrive at the 'truth'. This is reminiscent of what Fanon calls the colonised intellectuals' experience of 'psycho-affective mutilations' whereby they attempt to negotiate 'the need to assume two nationalities, two determinations' (1961:155); due to their lack of an 'anchorage', these individuals tend to strive for a "universal perspective" (ibid), as seen in Sam's career as a prosecutor and his investigative verve in this case. What de Kretser has shown in her novel is that this drive for an all-seeing position from which to discern one's identity is doomed to failure, for Sam himself cannot shed the blinkers that obscure his view of the world around him, especially when he does not even realise he has them.

Alternatively, Gillian Beer, in *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounters*, provides another possible reading of Sam's actions and motives; she suggests – with reference to Arthur Conan Doyle's classic work *The Hound of the Baskervilles* – that the detective novel, despite its numerous ubiquitous red herrings,

still promises that by the time we have read to the end we shall also have reached back to secure origins. A sufficient explanation of how things came to be will be provided by means of this revisionary backward reading. The insistence on stable recovery of initiating acts was at odds with (perhaps was an attempt to find comfort against) the lostness of origins figured in nineteenth-century geology and evolutionary theory. (1991:118-9)

It can be argued that, haunted by his psychical split – his loyalties to the British, his race and ethnicity – Sam approves of the crime writing genre because it allows him, in his compulsive investigation of the Hamilton case, to reach back to 'secure origins', to achieve a 'sufficient explanation of how things came to be', in the face of 'the lostness of origins'. The detective novel's inevitable success in solving the crime and identifying the criminal at its conclusion certainly holds out

a certain attraction for Sam when viewed in this light: it is as close as he will ever be able to get to the ‘truth’ in his life. Yet, his ‘revisionary backward’ perspective is faulty, for it is so clouded by his attitude towards specific racial identities that he misjudges the guilty party. Boehmer suggests this is characteristic of nationalist elites ‘caught in a situation of split perception or double vision’, having access to two distinct worlds ‘yet alienated from both’ (1995:110) – referenced in Fanon’s idea of the colonised ‘psycho-affective mutilations’: in this instance, Sam’s unreciprocated affiliation with the British only serves to unmoor him further in the turbulent sea of coloniser/colonised relations.

For all his hard work on the Hamilton case, Sam’s anticipation of recognition from the colonial masters will prove to be presumptive for, as his grandfather before him, Sam has overstepped his place in the imperial hierarchy. Although the case ends with Taylor’s suicide, which seems to suggest an admission of guilt, the press reports that he would ‘almost certainly have got off’; ‘that a native should hang an Englishman was unthinkable’, one of the jurors proclaimed, and he ‘for one, would not have returned a Guilty verdict’ (119). Indeed, the judgeship position that Sam craves as a ‘reward’ for solving the murder is eventually awarded to Shivanathan by the British, in a shrewd political move reminiscent of Fanon’s view of their Manichean divisive motives in their colonies: ‘Putting a Ceylonese on the Bench quelled the hullabaloo over the Hamilton case, while the choice of a Tamil engendered rancour and division in nationalist quarters.’ (111) Sam’s error – even with his Uncle Willy’s experience of their self-interested and manipulative practices – lies in his taking for granted the intellectual superiority and judicial impartiality of the Europeans. In spite of his disappointment and sense of betrayal at being passed over in his career, however, Sam remains faithful to the imperialists to the end of his days, for colonisation and its accompanying infrastructure are irrevocably entrenched in his very ‘bloodstream’ (174). With the dawning of Sri Lanka’s political liberation, Sam, as the third-person narration reveals, is cast adrift by his identity and racial conflicts.

Sam’s denouncement of the anti-colonial movement, and his refusal to be drawn into any nationalist struggle for independence against the British provides another angle from which to view Boehmer’s understanding of postcolonial elites – ‘To be true to oneself in borrowed robes’ is the ‘core dilemma’ of the colonized

native (1995:110). Together with like-minded acquaintances, they ‘date the decline of the island from the departure of the British’ (251), and gather for annual small formal dinners at Sam’s on 24 May, designated as ‘Sam Obeysekere’s Empire Day do’ (246). Cutting a lonely figure on his morning walk after his retirement and dressed in his ‘borrowed robes’, he steps ‘straight-backed through the streets every morning with a Malacca cane. He wore a straw boater and a sand-coloured suit, and noted evidence that standards had deteriorated’; as he takes in the disintegration of the social fabric of his country, he ‘would return to breakfast well satisfied: it was no more than the fools deserved.’ (252) As in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* (1967) and Bhabha’s idea of colonial mimicry that is ‘the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*’ (1984:126, emphasis as original), Sam is a metonymy of the colonisers, even as his performative act is carried out now in their absence – no longer ‘at once resemblance and menace’ (Bhabha ibid:128) to the English, but anachronistic and displaced within his own country. This is so in his private life too: Sam fails to identify with – and alienates – his family and friends. When dismissing his son Harry’s nanny – thus earning Harry’s hatred – Sam uses a form of Sinhalese that is ‘the lowest forms of address, suitable for animals, because anyone who deserved respect spoke English’ (217). At a family breakfast, as he contemplates the eventual departure of the British in the coming days – ‘And there he would be, high and dry and thousands of fellows like him, craving the amber subtleties of marmalade and obliged to make do with pineapple bally jam’ – Sam watches his wife

smearing onion *sambol* on buttered toast. It was a habit he had not been able to break her of. The whiff of Maldivian fish depressed him every morning. His son sat between them, head tucked over his plate, eating spoonfuls of neutral boiled egg. (206)

Sam’s refusal to see any merit in his ethnic heritage, or to compromise by blending elements of the local and British cultures – as his wife has apparently done in the above scene – isolates him from his kin. Displaced and cast adrift by his ‘gift of perfect mimicry’, de Kretser’s portrayal of Sam Obeysekere is both tragic and ‘unbearably sad’, in Shivanathan’s words (276).

At the end of the novel, rejected by his only son, his wife dead, Sam’s loneliness and disorientation are reflected in his inability to welcome his country’s violent lurch into political independence; his identity as a steadfastly loyal

colonial local elite is dialectically juxtaposed with his alienation towards his very own people and family. Not only does de Kretser, through this character, complicate any attempt to locate the subjugated and oppressed within ‘the stereotyped view of colonised peoples’ victimage and lack of agency’ (Ashcroft 2001:2), she also vividly portrays what is ‘not quite’ similar between coloniser and colonised, for ‘mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference’ (Bhabha 1984:126). In Sam’s strenuous and tortured strivings towards the Eurocentric, the author emphasises his misjudgments, callousness and limited vision – indeed, ‘there were entire days when his life seemed a thing of cardboard and paint, and a gale raged offstage, mocking him with losses’ (121) – but it is also through his perspective that his country’s descent into political and social upheaval in the midst of the fevered sweep of nationalist sentiments in the early days of decolonisation is detailed.

### **Political independence**

Benedict Anderson’s notion of the process of constructing a national selfhood after decolonisation in *Imagined Communities* (1983), is a familiar one in postcolonial critique: the decolonised nation is (re)imagined, through narratives and symbols, as it undergoes physical and material changes. *The Hamilton Case* contemplates precisely this act of imagined self-identity in the struggle for independence, focusing not just on the (more familiar) positive celebration of national independence and unity but also on the cynical exploitation of cultural origins and ‘authenticity’ by the local elites as they vie for power in the new political hierarchy.

In the character of Donald Jayasinghe, who rises to become the country’s Minister of Culture by championing the privileged status of the Sinhalese, thanks to their supposed Aryan bloodline (27), de Kretser has created a vehicle for her indictment of the colonial elite who opportunistically whips up nationalist feelings among the Sinhalese in the early days of Sri Lanka’s independence. Bruce Matthews notes that Sri Lanka’s hand-me-down British constitution ‘rejected the Ceylon Tamil demand for a communally-constituted legislature based on balanced representation’, thereby leaving ‘the issue of minority rights entirely to the good will of the Sinhalese majority’ (1986:33). That the majority does not in fact possess much ‘good will’ towards their minority brethren is heightened by the

establishment of democratic elections and its attendant political infrastructure, which spells trouble for the numerically-disadvantaged Tamils. As “‘Aryans’ (Sinhala) came to be opposed in absolute terms to ‘Dravidians’ (Tamils) historically’ (Nissan and Stirrat, 1990:30), ethnic and cultural faultlines hitherto obscured by the imposition of a single metanarrative of colonialism are increasingly foregrounded. The resultant ‘special post-colonial crisis of identity’, a ‘crisis of self-image’ in the forms of cultural denigration, and ‘a pervasive concern with myths of identity and authenticity’ (Ashcroft *et. al.* 1989:8-9), become tinderboxes awaiting the spark of nationalist and/or essentialist fervour. In *The Hamilton Case*, Jayasinghe adopts the persona of the authentic Sinhalese national in his campaigns. Seen through the eyes of Sam who bitterly resents his rival’s successful transformation from a dashing Westernised young man – ‘the aristocrat turned demagogue, handmade shoes from Bond Street exchanged for thick-soled sandals of local manufacture, single malt replaced by that vile fruit cup at official functions’ (28) – it is nevertheless a convincing condemnation of the duplicity of such political manoeuvres by the elites. The disastrous effects of such irresponsible fanning of nationalist emotions, the imagination/nightmare of a unitary national identity, are spelled out clearly by Sam despite him being a Sinhalese himself:

What has Jaya’s entire political career been but a hideous practical joke perpetrated on our country? Calling us the Lion People, telling every Sinhalese lout with a chip on his shoulder that he was the rightful master of the land [...] Jaya used to boast that he taught his countrymen to be proud; the truth is, he taught us to hate. We’re no longer Ceylonese; we’re Sinhalese, Tamils, Malays, Burghers, Chinks, Moors, Colombo Chettys, and ready to cut each other’s throats at the slightest provocation. (31)

The potential of ‘identity or subjectivity as a rallying space where postcolonial peoples or cultures strive to obtain certain interests, economic, religious, military, and so on’ (Boehmer 1995:8) is thus undermined and hijacked by personal greed, ambition and ego; differences are emphasised so that a specific identity can be defined and concretised at the expense of other groups. Shivanathan notes ‘the tonic effect of anti-Tamil rhetoric’ (278) on Jayasinghe’s political career, but also its cataclysmic effects on his country; ‘Words flowed from him and men wept or committed murder [...] He polished his speeches until they flashed like instruments. But their action in the world was a matter of indifference to him’ (285-6). In Jayasinghe’s manipulative appeal to a Sinhalese essentialist identity,

we see how nationalism, ‘a sentiment as large as light’, could be ‘reduced to something as petty and merciless as the glint of ambition’ (281), or, in the words of Fanon, ‘We have switched from nationalism to ultranationalism, chauvinism, and racism’ (1961:103), ‘nothing but a crude, empty, fragile shell’ (*ibid*:97). We also see how violence, thought by Fanon to be a necessary tool to overhaul colonist legacies in decolonised states, in fact plunges the nation into a deeper abyss that it is still struggling to escape in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, de Kretser poses a very difficult question in the light of the dominant view that democracy is the best and only solution for all decolonised modern nations today, the one true shining path that would lead these nations to peace and prosperity. Sam indicts the very process of political democracy imprinted on the newly independent country by the former British rulers:

The British made a fatal error when they brought in universal suffrage. It might be plausible in Europe, but here, with our ignorant masses, what can it lead to but the disasters we’ve seen since independence? Would you ask a child to operate on your appendix or a lunatic to advise you on your investments? Yet we trust our choice of government to villagers with no discernment or finesse, no training in sustained analytical thought. Inevitably, their crude emotions carry the day. (27)

Looking beyond Sam’s prejudiced and derogatory views on his countrymen, I believe de Kretser’s intention is to interrogate the often unexamined assumption that a single political system is *de rigueur*, meant to suit every nation in the world, regardless of cultural, historical, or social differences, especially in the light of the novel’s publication date (2003), when Western countries’ war in the Middle East was carried out in the name of exporting democracy to these supposedly unenlightened societies. In the absence of alternative satisfactory governmental systems today, it could be argued that it is the best option going so far. Perhaps that is true, but as Sam points out, without any preceding experience in the workings of a democracy for both the local population and government, the British simply upped and left the Sri Lankan parliament in the hands of the Sinhalese majority, which is a recipe for corruption, confusion and discrimination, especially when charismatic characters such as Jayasinghe milks the political mess for self-gain. It is a narrative that is not unfamiliar today; de Kretser’s novel, by walking us through the implications of colonial oppression to the difficulties of the transition to liberation and freedom, records and ruminates on how the challenges facing a colonised nation do not end when imperial rule concludes. In

fact, it can be argued that the greater set of problems only surface upon emancipation. As Edward Said suggests, ‘To have been colonised was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results, especially after national independence had been achieved’ (2000:294), for ‘Poverty, dependency, under-development, various pathologies of power and corruption [...] designated the colonised people who had freed themselves on one level but who remained victims of their past on another’ (*ibid*:295). The earlier metaphor of the cracked dish handed to the decolonised people returns in this instance to remind us again of this very conundrum of postcolonialism.

### The Postcolonial Exotic

When de Kretser has John Shivanathan in *The Hamilton Case* settle in Canada, she employs the character as a discursive strategy with which to interrogate the role and contribution of diasporic writers to the literary world in the later half of the twentieth century. Shivanathan writes a type of novel that pivots on the figure of the postcolonial exotic; the interesting point to note is that such a figure has traditionally been the hallmark of western literary and cultural productions, as argued by Edward Said in his seminal text *Orientalism* (1978). Later, Boehmer states that nationalist writers appropriate this western genre and employ it side by side with ‘the special grittiness or quiddity of their own cultural experience’. What differs their effort from Said’s description of the western writers is that, according to Boehmer, ‘they nonetheless tried to represent their societies accurately from within’ (1995:113). De Kretser’s portrayal of Shivanathan in *The Hamilton Case*, on the contrary, proposes that the postcolonial exotic can be appropriated not just by the West – as argued by Said – but also by the marginalised in an exploitative manner that departs from Boehmer’s suggestion of efforts towards accuracy and verisimilitude. In many ways, it is a complex system – of mutual exploitation as well as of use and abuse – that undermine familiar roles and identities such as ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’.

The idea of exoticism in contemporary works might not be a new one, yet it is a recurring concept that has increasing urgency in our globalised and image-saturated world. Despite the contemporary emphasis of political correctness and the celebratory call of multiculturalism, the fact remains that racial difference is still a topic of concern today. This is given greater currency in our current global

economic markets, where products and services cross national boundaries with ease, bringing the foreign at times too uncomfortably close to home. All these changes demand that we re-think the exotic figure today. How does the postcolonial exotic respond to its constructed image when much of the colonial experience, often linked to its formation and persistent presence, is today thought to be largely obsolete? In particular we should consider anew our reading experience in terms of the processes of recognising, delineating, and most worryingly, perpetuating or exploiting the postcolonial exotic in today's globalised economic and cultural realms. Do we as readers partake in the process of exoticising the 'other' as much as we denounce its construction and exploitation?

Graham Huggan, in his book *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, outlines his understanding of 'postcoloniality' as that of 'a function of postmodernity', where 'its own regime of value pertains to a system of symbolic, as well as material, exchange in which even the language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed.' (2001:6) In other words, postcoloniality undermines postcolonial resistance to western global dominance when its works are mediated and consumed by readers and practitioners from developed societies, in ways that could problematise the comprehension of the salient struggles that preoccupy formerly colonised groups. The way in which such a consumption process is carried out, according to Huggan, is largely through the 'exotic' figure, which he defines as follows:

the exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent *quality* to be found 'in' certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places'; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery [...] [It is] a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity. (ibid:13)

The exotic, then, both an instrument and a currency of the postmodern celebration of differences, is complicit in maintaining the very distance that it was initially believed to erase; as Huggan goes on to state, 'while exoticism describes the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings and associations to unfamiliar things, it also denotes an expanded, if inevitably distorted, comprehension of diversity' (ibid:14). It is this play with perception of the strange/familiar images of exotica that feed into a mis-representation of

diversity; from the position of the exoticised figure, invariably it is shunted to the margins even as its image is constantly appropriated in the consumer market and artistic world. In other words, the perpetuation of the exotic figure (re)-locates the minority irrevocably at the margins even as the market keeps its simplified form at the forefront of our consciousness. In the process, the postcolonial exotic is made passive and inert, existing mostly for the observer's (or reader's) pleasure.

Indeed, with regards to the view that the exotic exists purely for aesthetic pleasure, Ron Shapiro has suggested that 'every imaginative text is intrinsically exotic' since the literary text is 'concerned with the construction of 'other' worlds' (2000:48); hence, the exotic need not necessarily always be viewed 'in any politically destructive way.' (*ibid*:43) But I believe this perception only serves to mask the inescapable fact that the postcolonial exotic is primarily a function of the Western imperial world, and it is thus as much – if not more – a political practice as it is an aesthetic one: a 'highly effective instrument of imperial power', its politics 'is often concealed, hidden beneath layers of mystification.' (Huggan 2001:14) The metanarrative of imperialism, in other words, can be obscured by Shapiro's emphasis purely on the aesthetic aspect of the exotic. In addition, most of the critical writing on the postcolonial exotic thus far has focused on how the Euro-American societies or institutions interpret and exploit it – historically, socially, culturally, economically. But how does the perceived exotic figure respond to, manages, manipulate and challenge its received image(s)? Here, I would like to address the character of Shivanathan and his writing of the postcolonial exotic in the novel, so as to add to this debate by privileging the postcolonial producer of the postcolonial exotic.

Shivanathan reflects the problematic deployment of the concept of the exotic. In choosing to write novels about his homeland in a foreign western country, he specializes in what he terms 'pretty little tales, tricked out with guavas and temple bells', but which Sam would have denigrated as simply too 'native':

I persuaded myself that a girl with oiled hair threading her way barefoot through a paddy field was more authentic than a man downing a cocktail, one glossy shoe resting on a polished rail. After all, the girl stood for a way of life uncorrupted by the West. In its service I perfected a rhetorical sleight-of-hand...*Coconut oil. Paddy field.* Hey presto. (294)

Shiva thus exploits the symbol of the 'girl with oiled hair', barefoot, in a paddy field, as one that signifies the exotic and hence alluring, mysterious and attractive.

His books ‘proved very popular with readers in the West: ‘They wrote to tell me so. *Your work is so exotic. So marvelously authentic*’ (294), so much so that ‘students wrote requesting interviews for their theses on New Literatures in English’ (295). Only later does he realise that what he had taken for as ‘markers of truth’ actually

functioned as signs of exoticism. The colonizer returns as a tourist, you see. And he is mad for difference. That is the luxury commodity we now supply, as we once kept him in cinnamon and sapphires. The prose may be as insipid as rice cooked without salt. No matter: call up a monsoon or the rustle of a sari, and watch him salivate. (*ibid*)

As an ex-colonised, Shiva understands which button to push to sell his work in Canada; to this extent he has located himself right in the postcoloniality of benefiting from emphasizing his difference, his exoticism. In the end, he admits to being part of the marketing of exotica: ‘Literature as souvenir: I confess I traded in it’ (294). This is precisely what Huggan presents as problematic: the exotic narratives of colonial and postcolonial periods being consumed as so much fascinating, and ultimately *foreign*, products. In the process, the hegemony of race remains largely unchanged in the academic, social and cultural milieu; worse, it is perpetuated by the very people who are the recipients of the stereotyped images inherent in such a portrayal. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood also raises this issue of the exotic in the character of Oryx, who both self-consciously manifests its characteristics (especially when with Jimmy) – ‘She was wearing some sort of kimono covered with red and orange butterflies; her dark hair was braided with pink ribbon’ (280) – and is in turn perceived as such by Jimmy – ‘Oryx was so delicate. Filigree, he would think’, with ‘the face of a Siamese cat. Skin of the palest yellow smooth and translucent, like old, expensive porcelain.’ (139) As with Shiva, Oryx ‘traded’ in exoticism, both characters in their own ways reflecting the desires of the consumer, so as to appropriate some power in this uneven relationship.

Self-reflexive in her writing, de Kretser is aware that her book could precisely be described as what Shiva has written, that which caters to a readership hungry for the exotic; in Sam’s family house, we read about ‘the fabulous flotsam of Empire: scarlet-lacquered boxes, ivory-stemmed opium pipes, pewter card trays, an ostrich egg mounted on a filigree stand, even a jade-green tika from New Zealand’ (16). In fact, the entire novel is suffused with familiar and lyrical images

of the East: ‘a fan of red chillies drying in the sun’ (149), elephant shooting in the jungle (66–75), and untranslated local terms such as ‘*padda* boats’ (180) and ‘the clay *chatties*’ (214). As we enjoy the detailed renderings of the settings, we are complicit in consuming the exotic even while we sympathise with the protagonist’s identity conflict. This shifting perspective of the producer/product of the postcolonial exotic is further complicated when Sam strolls through ‘the perfumed abundance of Mr Selfridge’s emporium’ years later in London, taking in with delight ‘a cornucopia of disparate items, lace-trimmed handkerchiefs and rattan parrot cages, collected *en bloc* from every outpost of the globe. My gaze alone lent meaning to its surreal topography, rescuing it from chaos.’ (*ibid*) Sam relishes in his imposition of order and meaning to the chaotic Selfridges display despite his identity as an exotic (post)colonial product. But he forgets that it is because he is constructed as a product of imperialism that he now buys into its logic, imagining himself no longer marginalised but at the centre. His ‘gaze’ is thus oriented by his awareness of the practice of exoticism since he has been schooled in it all his life in Sri Lanka; agency and power still eludes him despite his being positioned in the centre of the empire in London.

*The Hamilton Case* explores a complex interchange of dominant and subordinate roles; what is postcoloniality and what is the exotic, who exactly is the postcolonial and the exotic, and how the two concepts situate themselves in a consumer-driven economy. While the setting of the novel, one might protest, is far from the postmodern, or twenty-first-century, capitalist society, I believe de Krester has deliberately situated the story at the start of the twentieth century to highlight the fact that the metanarrative of racial discrimination can be read just as poignantly and resoundingly in our time as it was a hundred years ago; we are still mesmerized by the exotic setting and characters. Moreover, it is in fact our contemporary consumer culture that promotes the allure of the exotic in place of meaningful encounters and interactions with the racial and ethnic Other down the road from our house, as Paul Gilroy notes, in a British context,

the impact of a neoliberal consumer culture that can glamorise racial difference [is that] we can be misled by the fact that a few black and Asian Britons may benefit from the love of exotica that has arisen in response to the rigors of living with difference, of being with the Other. This confusion is compounded when we discover that exciting, unfamiliar cultures can be consumed in the absence of any face-to-face recognition or real-time negotiation with their actual creators. (2004:137)

The postcolonial exotic, therefore, must be a figure that should be consistently interrogated and challenged not just in any consideration of past colonist writings, but in narratives of today too, for the perceived ‘half-different and the partially familiar’ (*ibid*) are invariably masked by today’s ascendancy of globalisation and the admittance of the notion of multiculturalism in mainstream political and social discussions: developments which too often erroneously suggest an effective redress of the power imbalance symptomatic of the coming together of the centre and the periphery. Whether it is in a developed nation such as Britain, a fictional futuristic world in *Oryx and Crake*, or a ex-colony such as Sri Lanka, in confrontations with the exotic what are taken as ‘markers of truth’, according to Shivanathan, should be recognised as possessing greater nuance and unspoken associations than any initial cursory reading would reveal. In short, our view of the postcolonial world today must consistently entail not just ‘alternative ways of seeing and living in the world’ (Brydon and Tiffin 2001:11), but also the awareness of who gazes at what/who since the appropriation of power and agency no longer rests with certainty on one side/site today.

### **Conclusion**

De Kretser, in *The Hamilton Case*, is preoccupied with what can be said to be a continual metanarrative today: the idea of an originary account that fixes and determines one’s identity. While Shivanathan observes that his peers were ‘being written by the grand narratives’ of their age, such as ‘Nationalism, empire, socialism, capitalism’ (294), conversely stories and narratives, weighed down or buoyed by power differences, recounted from an array of perspectives, defeat attempts at pinning them down to particular authoritative versions. Similarly, one’s identity also resists efforts at singular delineations. Against this thought, the experience and narrative of decolonisation often involves precisely such a search for a unitary sense of belonging and identity. Moreover, within this bigger and louder picture of nationalism, the quieter accounts of the daily struggle to negotiate the ‘rigors of living with difference’ (Gilroy (2004:137) is often relegated to the sidelines of our attention. De Kretser problematises familiar terms such as ‘colonialism’ and ‘decolonisation’ by exploring the various characters’ responses to their nation’s transition from a British colony to an independent state,

showing effectively that there are more layers in the narratives of identity-formation, and acts of discrimination and exploitation, than is commonly thought. This juxtaposition of power contention among colonists as well as the indigenous peoples with the notion that identity is a somewhat fluid entity that nevertheless exists as a significant marker of difference means that *The Hamilton Case* raises more questions in our understanding of the concepts of differences and the exotic other. In the next chapter, my reading of Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* will further de Kretser's exploration of Sri Lanka's narrative of decolonisation, especially with its confrontation with other nations with greater global power.

## **Chapter 4: Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost***

Michael Ondaatje is perhaps best known for his novel *The English Patient* (1992), which co-won the Booker Prize and was popularised when it was made into an Academy-Award film by the director Anthony Minghella (1996). Besides this, Ondaatje has an oeuvre of critically acclaimed works comprising both poetry and prose from the late 1960s to his latest work of fiction, *Divisadero* (2007). Born in Sri Lanka, educated in England and Canada, Ondaatje is now a Canadian citizen. As with de Kretser, the tenor and focus of his work is reflective of his transnational background, characterised by a preoccupation with the constructed nature of concepts such as identity, truth, history and memory. In many ways, Ondaatje's works reflects the influence of postmodernist thinking; *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), and *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) all multiple narrative perspectives and timelines, as well as the playful experimental mode of juxtaposing a variety of generic artistic styles within each text. This is especially true of the first two works, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*; as Winfried Siemerling notes, both privilege a 'multiplicity of voices' and interpret such a form of polyphony through 'many formal perspectives on the page' (1994:107-8). Apart from the familiar format of narrative prose, there are lyric poetry, lists, photographs, interviews, tape transcripts, and the play of lines or picture frames on blank pages. Together with his fictional-memoir *Running in the Family* (1982), all these works explore one of the main preoccupations of the postmodern: the (im)possibility of historical accuracy and the (un)reliability of the knowledge of the past and its figures, especially of characters who are 'adumbrated in the margins of history' (Siemerling 1994:108).

However, it appears that, possibly from *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje has gradually moved away from the pyrotechnics of a highly experimental postmodern narrative towards that which is more subdued, though retaining the thematic focuses and the diversity of temporality and narrative voices. Moreover, while the earlier works re-invent the specific historical figures of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, the writer, since the 1980s, has begun examining the processes and consequences of ordinary people caught up in the unfolding of history; *In the Skin of a Lion* explores the immigrant community in Toronto in the

1920s, while *The English Patient* inhabits the setting of a desert during the last days of the Second World War. This move, away from the overt exploration of textuality and identity and towards the contemplation of postcolonial issues is arguably a progression from the postmodern at-times over-emphasis on form to a writing style that increasingly reflects on as well as interrogates the legacy of postmodernism: the supposed emergence and strengthening of voices from the periphery, the dissolution and destabilisation of the self and nation, and the decline of grand narratives. Still, both *In the Skin of a Lion* as well as *The English Patient* could be interpreted as belonging to a narrative consciousness that resides largely in the west, one that unpacks and then complicates the historical stories and concerns of the northern hemisphere. Needless to say, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* are also, in the words of Maya Jaggi who interviewed Ondaatje for *Anil's Ghost*, solely concentrated on 'aspects of US culture' (2004:259).

In *Anil's Ghost* (2000), Ondaatje continues his exploration of ideas such as the contingency of identity, the unreliability of history and memory, and the destabilising presence of the other. However, if in *The English Patient* Ondaatje was interested in historical change in 1945, when the 'balance shifted from the colonial to a different kind of world, where people like Kip see themselves as empowered' (Jaggi 2004:264), *Anil's Ghost* is arguably a study of how Kip has turned out at the end of the twentieth century. Thus, Ondaatje explores not just the abovementioned issues present in his previous works, but has also based his narrative on the ethnic civil war in his native country from the 1980s to the 1990s, thereby situating the narrative within a postcolonial/decolonised consciousness. Admittedly, this is not the first time the writer has written about the country; *Running in the Family* is his response to writers who locate their writing largely from where they have come from or settled; 'there are those regional writers I love and envy, like William Faulkner or Alice Munro. A lot of writers like us who are nomadic don't have those deep regional roots, those wells, and you envy that. I decided I also wanted to do something like that: it was a test, a new discovery.' (Jaggi 2004:257)<sup>36</sup> A work that pushes at the boundaries of the familiar genre of

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<sup>36</sup> Ondaatje is not alone in turning his envy of a form of determined historical identity into creative efforts to interrogate such a state of being. V. S. Naipaul, in *A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling* (2007), cites the experience of reading Pepys's works as one which is shocking in his ability to trace his ancestors back to the thirteenth century, and reflects, 'I don't have that kind of past. I think I would have been a

autobiography, Ondaatje blends the account of his journey to Sri Lanka to piece together his family history with imaginative narrative renditions so as to problematise any stable concept of ‘home’ or ‘homeland’, an approach reminiscent of his ‘nomadic’ background. To a large extent, however, this work is a highly subjective exercise in the self-conscious re-creation of a personal history.

A step nearer to the concerns explored in *Anil’s Ghost* is Ondaatje’s collection of poems *Handwriting* (1998), a multifaceted reflection on Sri Lanka’s history and culture, as well as the contemporary civil conflict; one can almost say the poems are an exercise at drafting and articulating the issues he contemplates in his subsequent novelistic work. If *Running in the Family* is a largely self-reflexive attempt at assembling and imagining his family and country, then in *Handwriting* Ondaatje has attempted to merge the subjective and objective to an almost seamless togetherness: ‘The great writer, dying, called out / for the fictional doctor in his novels.’ (5). These aestheticised and transgressive short sketches and ruminations are given greater space and depth in the novel, where a stronger sense of urgency and engagement can be discerned. It seems the lead-up to *Anil’s Ghost*, then, required a series of mental and imaginative limbering up before confronting it in the form of a novel. As Ondaatje notes, ‘We began with myths and later included actual events.’ (*Handwriting* 1998:3). Such crossings of boundaries – in this instance, of the mythic and factual – preoccupy the author in *Anil’s Ghost*.

As a work of fiction, *Anil Ghost* focuses on the interplay of public issues such as political unrest, ethnic strife, and the lingering practice of imperialistic dominance in Sri Lanka, with more private ones of personal identity, family history and psychological trauma. Therefore, it can be read, not as an exercise to trawl for autobiographical details, but as a way of thinking through Ondaatje’s unique positioning in relation to the decolonised nation and the attendant ideas of identity, ethnicity, historical veracity and political violence. In its way, the novel is certainly more willing to acknowledge the materiality of history than his past works, even as it retains its questioning stance on the constructedness of the past.

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different man if I had had a past. I would have had something extra from walking about in this past and understanding it.’ (Bryan Appleyard, ‘The Great Offender’, *Times* Culture supplement, p.8.) Naipaul’s response could very well have been Ondaatje’s, in its yearning for a traceable, clearly discernible, even neatly chronological line of ancestry, as opposed to the ‘nomadic’ sense of dislocation from being an immigrant writer.

In my reading of the novel, I am concerned with issues connecting the author and his work from a postcolonial focus: how does Ondaatje, in the novel, shape his response to his native country's turbulent political and ethnic situation since it gained its independence in 1948 from its British colonial masters? As a member of the diaspora, what insights does he bring to the crises that have repeatedly plagued his homeland? Equally important, how do we as readers interpret Ondaatje's subjective view of an occurrence that is historically verifiable?

The story is mostly told from the point of view of a character not unlike Ondaatje himself. Anil Tissera is a Sri-Lankan who has lived in the West for the past fifteen years. Educated in Britain and America, she is a forensic anthropologist<sup>37</sup> representing the Center for Human Rights in Geneva, sent to investigate the local government's role in the ethnic conflict that has resulted in thousands of deaths over the years. The Sri Lankan authorities are suspicious of Anil's presence, while the work partner assigned to her, the archaeologist Sarath Diyasena, is initially perceived to be of questionable loyalties and motives in their collaboration. As the narrative progresses, Anil and Sarath both learn, albeit with much clashes of opinions, to understand the other's viewpoint. Things come to a head when Anil discovers a skeleton buried in an off-limit, historical and religious burial site, which they name 'Sailor'. Since it is possibly the recent victim of a political murder, this literal unearthing of the hidden is tantamount to indicting the Sri Lankan government forces of killing their targeted political suspects and then attempting to cover up their misdeeds.

At this stage of the discussion, before I turn to an in-depth study of the novel, I wish to examine the ways in which the novel has been received and read, so as to contextualise Ondaatje's writing, and evaluate his goal(s) in departing from his norm by taking up such a contemporary topic.

The critical response to *Anil's Ghost* has been quite divided. On one hand, there are those who readily identify the thematic concerns of the novel: 'a vista of

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<sup>37</sup> There are various takes on Anil's job description, ranging from 'palaeontologist and bone expert' (Bayley 2000:44), 'a forensic anthropologist' (Hoffman 2000:448), to 'forensic pathologist' (Cook, 2005:7). My preference is for Hoffman's term, as Anil specialises in forensic investigations of human remains to draw conclusions on the details of their lives, instead of those of 'fossilised plants and animals' (palaeontology) or the 'cause, origin, and nature of disease' (pathology). (All definitions taken from *Collins English Dictionary: Complete and Unabridged* 2006). I wish to clearly delineate Anil's occupation as it is central to her commitment to human rights ideals, alongside the unique combination of scientific and sociocultural studies that her work entails, which lends the narrative well to an analysis of the dialectics inherent in such fields as postcolonialism, neo-colonialism, scientific discourse, as well as social and cultural studies.

the contemporary state and culture' of Sri Lanka (Bayley 2000:46), 'a triptych of civil chaos' within the country that is appropriately captured in a line from the Canadian poet Anne Carson's *Plainwater* and used in the novel, 'I wanted to find one law to cover all of living. I found fear...' (Hoffman 2000:446). This group of reviewers acknowledge Ondaatje's refusal – as well as the impossibility of so doing – to either take sides or lay the blame for the state of his country on any particular persons or organisation, much less to provide logical explanations for the massacre of the population.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, there are critics who have lambasted Ondaatje for failing to explicitly address and indict the responsible parties in Sri Lanka. Back in the 1980s, Arun Mukherjee had already taken issue with Ondaatje's supposed unwillingness, in his writings, to 'deal with the burning issues of his time, such as poverty, injustice, exploitation, racism, sexism, etc.' (1984:34).<sup>39</sup> Responding to *Anil's Ghost*, Tom LeClair (2000) writes: 'the author's apolitical gaze seems irresponsible when there's so much politics to see in Sri Lanka', and castigates the author for the same callousness which he alludes to the foreign reporters who write detachedly about the country and its problems. This accusation of a lack of political commitment on the author's part, a demurral for a literary space for political resistance and accountability, is an oft-repeated one directed at postmodern works, especially when they are compared to postcolonial writing. Interestingly, Simon During has emphasised the incompatibility of postcolonial and postmodern theories: 'the concept of postmodernity has been constructed in terms which more or less intentionally wipe out the possibility of post-colonial identity', because 'the conceptual annihilation of the postcolonial condition is actually necessary to any argument which attempts to show that 'we' now live in postmodernity'. For During, the goal of postcolonialism – the desire for an identity that is clearly marked by nationalist or ethnic loyalties – goes against the very grain of the notion of the unstable, diverse and heterogeneous postmodern self (1995:125).

To a certain extent, it is undeniable that Ondaatje shies away from any specific or detailed exposition of historical and political commentary in his works,

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<sup>38</sup> See also Kanaganayakam (2007:194)

<sup>39</sup> For more critique alleging Ondaatje's distance from Sri Lankan's political turmoil, see Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri (1992), 'Sri Lankan Canadian Poets: The Bourgeoisie That Fled the Revolution', *Canadian Literature* 132, pp. 60-79, and Ernest MacIntyre (1985), 'Outside of Time: *Running in the Family*', *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, Sam Solecki (ed.) (Montreal: Vehicule Press) pp. 315-319. All quoted in Marlene Goldman, 'Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil Ghost*', p. 27.

and thus it is easy to criticise him for being ambiguous or irresponsible towards his subjects and the history surrounding them. Furthermore, his writing favours fluid timelines and settings, as well as multiple viewpoints – these are all calling-cards of postmodernist writing – which reflects Brydon's delineation of such writing as focusing solely on 'the problems of representation, and on the impossibility of historical truth.' However, it cannot be said that Ondaatje, in his employment of such literary techniques, therefore eliminates any potential development of a postcolonial identity (During). On the contrary, I would argue that his use of such devices allows him to destabilise and subvert the western view of a linear historicity and temporality.<sup>40</sup> Even as we consider Ondaatje's disavowal of any attempt in explicitly linking his works with political polemics or with efforts towards an objective reportage of world events, we should pay attention to the gaps between his stated and implicit positions.

Replying to a query on his interest in the character of Billy the Kid in 1972, Ondaatje asserts that

I was writing about something that had always interested me, something within myself, not out there in a specific country or having some political or sociological meaning. I'm not interested in politics on that public level. The recent fashion of drawing journalistic morals out of literature is I think done by people who don't love literature or who are not capable of allowing its full scope to be seen.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, it is somewhat inconceivable to contemplate that when Ondaatje wrote about an iconic American cowboy he was in no way even conscious of its accompanying 'political or sociological meaning' of, as mentioned earlier, 'aspects of US culture'. In its very act of reconstructing the story of Billy the Kid from a childhood fascination with it, there are already overtones of colonial and imperial colouring of his imagination as well as a desire to appropriate and reconfigure this symbolic figure of the Western world for himself. Similarly, with *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje confesses to being wary of producing a work that would be taken as a commentary on the Sri Lankan civil war: 'What worried me is that this book would get taken as representative; I do backflips to avoid that... it isn't a statement about the war, as though this is the 'true and only story'. It's my

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<sup>40</sup> Other recent postcolonial authors who have adopted such resistant narrative techniques include Salman Rushdie, Ahdaf Soueif and Arundhati Roy. My choice of Ondaatje's novel, apart from personal preference, provides an opportunity for a simultaneous reading of Sri Lanka's post-independent complications when placed alongside de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case*.

<sup>41</sup> From an interview in *Manna* 1, March 1972, p. 20, quoted in Leslie Mundwiler, *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination*, pp.12-13

individual take on four or five characters, a personal tunnelling.' (Jaggi 2004:250) In this emphasis on his private experience of writing the novel – ‘a personal tunnelling’ – as well as that of the characters, Ondaatje signals the importance of privileging subjective narratives in literature, though he does not point out explicitly that such subjectivities can only gain greater resonance when set against the inexorable tide of public events that wash over ordinary lives. Both the public and the personal are irrevocably entangled and contribute to each other’s energies and stories. To gain any meaningful understanding of each version of narratives, therefore, we have to approach them together. In my opinion, Ondaatje’s novel emphasises the micro narratives to allow us to achieve a more nuanced comprehension of the macro historical and social events. In his avoidance of a direct political reading of the tumultuous civil unrest in his native country, the author strives to implicate each character in his surroundings so as to stage interaction and dialogue amongst conflicting parties. If this raises the objection that Ondaatje is thus guilty as charged by his critics for remaining aloof from the political fracas in Sri Lanka – an accusation that is, as mentioned earlier, lodged against many postmodern texts – I would say in response that the writer employs a postmodernist privileging of multiple voices in order to throw light onto the postcolonial experience that is bent on a coherent identity-formation, but without the dizzying technicolour effect of say, Salman Rushdie’s works; in short, Ondaatje’s novel can be said to go against During’s belief that the two discourses – postmodern and postcolonial – are mutually exclusive. Instead, through the limited (and liminal) third-person narration centering on Anil, *both* major and minor identities, voices and power relations are held up to the light and interrogated.

In effect, then, I am thinking of the progression of a type of postcolonial text that, in the new millennium, works towards an understanding of the impossibility of assigning blame for the chaos of decolonisation in so many countries squarely on a single party or organisation. In the twenty-first century, as Dennis Walder suggests, a reading of the postcolonial text should involve an awareness of ‘the history of the present’ being that of ‘a history of disruption and discontinuity on a global scale’ such that each and every one of us ‘in some sense, belong to the diaspora’; the question is, for Walder, ‘whether we – in the West as in Africa, Asia, or the Pacific Rim – will *admit* this condition, which also means

recognising and respecting difference' (1998:199). If the commonality of the experience of being displaced – not just territorially, nationally, regionally, but also psychologically, emotionally and culturally – is truly recognised among all, then it would be a step towards accepting the myriad narratives of dislocation and distancing embedded within it. To a certain extent, therefore, it matters little even if Ondaatje partakes of what his interviewer terms 'literary tourism' – a concept which can be linked, in a way, to Shivanathan's words in his final letter in *The Hamilton Case* – and which the writer himself writes about in *Anil's Ghost*; rather, it is the literary space that he constructs which allows for an imaginative and creative approach towards a greater understanding of the intricacies and complexity of the postcolonial and decolonised situation. Responding to the suggestion of his being a literary tourist, he declares;

I'm sure I'm just as guilty as anyone. That's why I didn't want to make assured judgments about what should be done – which is often incendiary and facile. I think there was a responsibility. It was easier to write *Running in the Family* because it was about my family; I could be jokey and outrageous. But that side of my writing wasn't in this book. I was very careful to try and avoid the easy solutions. (Jaggi 2004:253)

It would surely have been, contrary to the dissenting critics, morally irresponsible of Ondaatje – or any writer for that matter – to issue a definitive version of the ethnic entanglement of Sri Lanka. After all, one is always partial and implicated within the social and political narratives of one's native country. Remarking on the issue of a writer's duty, in such circumstances, Ondaatje points out that '[t]he morality comes with what you decide to write about, as opposed to what your judgments are...' (ibid:254)

It is indeed to excavate and articulate the 'unhistorical, unofficial' as well as examining their interaction with the hegemonic political forces many ex-colonies encounter after independence that Ondaatje's novel takes as its primary focus. From here, I turn to the novel *Anil's Ghost* to offer a reading that analyses its narrative techniques as well as their function in reflecting Ondaatje's concern with the challenges accompanying the meeting of differences. In particular, I am interested in the conflictual discourses between the grand narratives of history and human rights, and the local, contingent, and fluid. Moreover, I wish to explore how the novel presents the dichotomy between statements and actions, and the process of negotiating identity in the postcolonial world. Lastly, I will also work

through the ways in which this novel allows us to revise the postcolonial canon of literary works in the twenty-first century.

### Narrative Structure

The structure of the narrative, although divided into seemingly neat chapters with their individual headings, is disjointed and comes in almost piecemeal sections within each chapter. Ondaatje intersperses his plotline with flashbacks of intense personal memories and snippets of argument between various characters, which are further juxtaposed with official records of vanished civilians as well as the geographical makeup of the land, historical accounts of significant areas in the country, and which again are contrasted with sections of poetic descriptions of landscape and weather. As the narrative switches back and forth from a third-person point of view from Anil, Sarath and various other characters, including officious omniscient accounts of the atrocities committed by both government and insurgent forces, it is almost impossible to locate a fixed register in the narrative. An example in point is the prologue, which contains a miner's folk song as well as Anil's Guatemalan experience that mirrors to a certain extent that of Sri Lanka's. The first chapter, 'Sarah', contains Anil's thoughts at her return to her homeland after fifteen years, followed by a document of the destruction of a series of Buddhist caves in a remote China province, and the colonial rapacity of richer countries snapping up the ruins for their museums. The narrative then moves between Anil's memories in the country and her more current ones in the West, then those of Guatemala, her lover Cullis, a dispassionate account of the illogical turn of events that are a consequence of the myriad invested interests in the politics of the country, and so on.

What ensues is a somewhat familiar postmodern refusal to privilege a fixed, authoritative perspective on the narration. This is in many ways similar to Ondaatje's previous works such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in its testing of textual authority and linearity but the sheer hypertextuality of these earlier works, where more concrete interruptions pepper the narrative flow, such as photographs, marked indentations, and explorative lines that scour across blank pages, is missing. Instead of these examples of literary experimentation focusing attention on the formal aspects of the text, in *Anil's Ghost*, despite its interspersed episodes, the writer has largely adopted a smoother flow of narrative; the most

obvious departure from this is the italicised sections of the novel delineating the official accounts of Sri Lanka's past and present or random acts of killing. Yet, these sections do not jar; instead, they frame the characters' personal experiences and deepen the resonances between the public and private realms. It is also interesting to note that Ondaatje himself acknowledges the uniqueness of *Anil's Ghost* in his writing career; because of his affinity with his homeland, writing the novel means that 'the voice in this book is very different from the other books; it's a different vocabulary at work.' (Jaggi 2004:256) I take Ondaatje's reference to 'vocabulary' to indicate the generic experimentation and tone of his work, and not only the choice of words.

The multiple narrative viewpoints, as well as the interspersed individual and collective memories of historical and personal events, contribute to a detailed exploration of the shifting power relations invested in Sri Lanka's internal and external interests. One of the ways in which Ondaatje has explored the implications and legitimacy of narrating one's understanding of the world is seen in his interest in questions of identity and truth explored in his novel. This is partly accomplished via a reference to the genre of the detective story: who is the pieced-together Sailor? Why is Anil so adamant in uncovering his identity? How is this also a process of excavating her own sense of selfhood in her time in Sri Lanka?

### *The Detective Story Genre*

I have tried in the following pages to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but of course I have not succeeded. -- Leonard Woolf, *Growing: An Autobiography of the years 1904-1911*, 1961, p. 9

...it was my ability to see accurately and to speak the truth, without concern for convention or fear of reprisal, that made my name in a different sense...In these pages I intend to set down the facts of the matter at last. -- *The Hamilton Case*, p.5

The *Literary Review* magazine has criticised *Anil's Ghost* for its 'fey lyricism', with 'precious little dialogue to animate' the work, as well as for its neglect in sustaining narrative tension. The reviewer appears to prefer an account of an Indiana-Jones style of adventure in which Sarath and Anil race to identify the skeleton, nicknamed Sailor, and thus bring the evil government forces to justice: 'Unfortunately, their fascinating detective work gets swamped by other narrative material, and by the time Sailor's true identity is revealed, our interest in

him has petrified.' (Kellaway 2000:51)<sup>42</sup> It is not least ironic that the reviewer's use of the word 'petrified' in describing the reader's possible loss of interest in the narrative might be the very word Ondaatje would use to describe the civilian population of Sri Lanka as depicted in the novel, caught in the midst of nationalist politicking and warmongering, and the utter breakdown of the social and economic fabric of their country. Yet, although the reviewer is right to point out the basic format of the novel as a kind of detective mystery, she has failed to critically evaluate Ondaatje's utilisation – and subversion – of such a traditional English literary genre to explore the conflictual relationship between the colonised and the coloniser.

In the previous chapter, I have proposed that Sam's approbation – and appropriation – of the traditional English detective story genre is a kind of unconscious search for stable and legitimate origins, an act which resonates with the people of decolonised states as they embark on their nation-building experience. However, the function of the genre in the first place is, of course, a reflection of tension in nineteenth-century British society, with regards to its imperialist exploits and the infiltration of unfamiliar peoples, goods, and practices into the homeland. Late Victorian England, according to Yumna Siddiqi, experienced 'a current of anxiety about incursions from Empire, and its influence upon the established pattern of English life' (2008:18). Siddiqi argues that the popularity of detective stories from that period such as those by Arthur Conan Doyle rests upon the protagonists' ability to bring about order and coherence; he (it is invariably a male detective) 'demystifies alien incursions and thus renders the national space secure.' (*ibid*) Moreover, she also concludes, in a thoughtful and comprehensive essay on *Anil's Ghost*, that as a 'novel of intrigue', contrary to the *London Review* write-up, it is deceptive in its early delineation of the quest to identify Sailor, when what is more salient is how 'Ondaatje brings the domains of examination, reading and history together' (2008:198). Therefore, although at one level *Anil's Ghost* is a thrilling race to identify Sailor's identity and period/cause of death, so as to prove that the Sri Lankan government is indeed involved in extra-judiciary acts of violence, on another level, the playing out of this search for

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<sup>42</sup> Not just in terms of the erroneous identification of thematic focus, the review is also faulty in its record of basic details: for example, it states that the skeleton is headless, whereas it was discovered wholly intact and was decapitated by Sarath so that a model of its face could be made locally by an artist, Ananda, who has his own tragic story to tell.

clear answers can be said to be at once an attempt at assuaging the unsettling turmoil of decolonisation (ironically, as in the Victorian imperialist times) and at revealing the futility of ever arriving at neat conclusions and singular identities in the face of historical upheavals and political power struggles.

It is also noteworthy that such a novel, reflective of the crime writing genre that traditionally features a male hero physically and intellectually empowered to save the day, has a female protagonist. By challenging the figure of the traditional masculine English detective – usually inscrutable, brilliantly smart, and coldly logical – the writer’s transposition of the genre from its western birthplace to an ex-colony in Asia, as in *The Hamilton Case*, reveals the faultlines of power relations between these two worlds. Like Sam, Anil is western educated, and straddles the west and the east with ambiguity and uneasiness. But unlike Sam whose life is anchored in his country, Anil returns to Sri Lanka as an official of a western human-rights organisation to work with/against a male-dominated government; she seemingly possesses the authority of the traditional male detective, but her presence is repeatedly undermined by appeals to her national and racial identities, while her gender is an unspoken but possibly resented factor in her dealings with the masculinist Sri Lankan government. The ensuing antithetical ties, experiences, and commitments that Anil grapples with in the course of her time in the country will inform the rest of this chapter. My objective here is to structure a discussion that takes into account contemporary postcolonial, neo-colonial and decolonised narratives, and how they respond to, and tangle with, one another.

In the following sections, I will concentrate on how the notion of distance – physical, emotional, ideological, temporal, cultural – undergirds the novel; the effort exerted to approach the unfamiliar or the distant is perhaps one of the primary concerns for a decolonised nation and its narrative, for it holds out the possibility of extracting meaning from the often fraught interaction between differing groups or members of society. In Siddiqi’s reading of the conclusion of the novel – ‘in twinning the two Buddhas, the novel suggests that the enchanted and disenchanted exist side by side in this historical moment’ (2008:215) – lies an implied maintenance of opposing stances within a particular realm. Another way of looking at this – which I shall turn to later – is to think of the frequent use of the term ‘gesture’ in the novel, as a sign that incorporates a myriad of possible

interpretations and meanings, and thus of the novel itself as a gesture on Ondaatje's part to embody notions of conflict and harmony, the personal and the public, the intention to deflect or stall, as well as the move towards objectivity and truth.

### **Distance**

At the start of the narrative, Anil returns to Sri Lanka after fifteen years away in the West. Given this geographical and temporal distance, Anil confidently assumes that having been away 'long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distanced gaze,' and having 'read documents and news reports, full of tragedy' of her homeland, she is now an objective observer of the country, which 'no longer held her by the past' (11). This position of a 'long-distanced gaze' is subjected to Ondaatje's interrogation in the novel: how does this sense of removal impact upon the response and attitudes of the observer when brought up close to the reality of life itself? Can Anil ever be as detached an observer as she thinks she is at this stage; is it possible to overcome her emotional and familial ties to Sri Lanka? If Anil transforms into an actor with the ability to impact upon events previously viewed from a distance, what kinds of negotiation, compromise and/or changes would have to be undertaken? Ondaatje traces the trajectory of Anil's journey in Sri Lanka; more than just a homecoming, it will require her to rethink and re-examine her views of both herself and her country, not to mention all that she believes in with living in the west.

In response to Anil's impatience at the stop-start nature of the investigations and her tendency to insist on absolute concepts such as 'truth' and 'justice', Sarath exasperatedly tells Anil,

'You don't understand how bad things were. Whatever the government is possibly doing now, it was worse when there was real chaos. You were not here for that – the law abandoned by everyone [...] Terror everywhere, from all sides. We wouldn't have survived with your rules of Westminster then.' (154)

This uncompromising accusation – 'You were not here for that' – effectively points to Anil's inability to fully comprehend the extent of the tragedy at the start, for she is twice removed from it: physically and emotionally by her absence from the country and of any close relatives there, as well as culturally and ideologically by her western education and worldview. Each of these forms of distance will be breached in the narrative, not just for Anil to attain some kind of understanding of

both herself as well as her country's plight, but also to situate herself as an agent within the country's ongoing unrest, one who identifies herself to a certain extent with the Sri Lankans.

Another way to think about the idea of distance in the novel is to take into account Anil's name, which she had bought off her brother when she was twelve. We never know her real name, merely that she had deemed it 'entirely inappropriate' (67) for reasons unknown, whereas 'everything about ['Anil'] pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name' (68). As the protagonist chooses a specific identity for herself we wonder which aspects of herself she might have rejected and thus distanced herself from. Just as her native country crafts itself upon its independence, with identity (racial, ethnic, religious, class) as the main point of contest amongst different groups, so is Anil's choice of knowing and articulating herself subject to a process of selective distancing and foregrounding. Is there a price to be paid for this wilful articulation of identity? If Anil was forced to pay dearly for her name – 'one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse' (68) – what has Sri Lanka done to its people in its effort at nation-building?

It must be said, however, that Anil does not undergo a complete and irrevocable transformation during her time in Sri Lanka; there is no outright abandonment of her ideals or her beliefs that are couched largely in the language of human rights, objectivity and universal justice. It would have been too easy for the author to allow Anil to be the heroine embarking on a *bildungsroman* in Sri Lanka. What there is, I would argue, is a sense of fatigue and resignation on Anil's part, towards the end, when she barely manages to get away, having to abandon her notes and field samples along the way; 'she knew she wouldn't be staying here much longer, there was no wish in her to be here anymore. There was blood everywhere. A casual sense of massacre.' (283) One of the last images we have of her consists of her discovering Sarath's tape hidden in Sailor's skeleton, instructing her on her getaway plans. She winds the tape back and listens to it, '[l]istening to everything again.' (284) This is an act that symbolises Anil's lesson: to pay attention to the disempowered and the dispossessed, to catch the minor stories in the interstices of the dominant and authoritative ones. As

Ondaatje states, ‘Anil’s return is ironic, because she doesn’t really know the country very well; she has to relearn it.’ (Jaggi 2004:252) And she does; at her departure she is no longer the naïve and blunt human-rights officer that she was at the beginning, but a more cautious and thoughtful reader of the text that is her homeland. Anil closes the gap between herself and her home country, but at the same time, she cannot shed her life experiences in the west, and should not be expected to do so. There is acknowledgement of her personal history, as well as the public one of her country, and with this preoccupation of distance in all its myriad manifestations, Ondaatje signals the necessity of beginning to engage with – and hopefully sustaining – the encounter between differing elements invested with both macro and micro narratives.

#### *Geographical and emotional distance*

Apart from the exchange between Sarath and Anil that reveals her physical remove from the country, Anil’s absence also signifies a loss of emotional identification with her homeland. Both types of separation are inextricably intertwined, and can take place interchangeably. Whether she is in America or Sri Lanka, Anil has to constantly negotiate the expectations and assumptions that stem from her race and nationality, as well as her western education and work experience.

Anil’s return to Sri Lanka puts her in the immediate vicinity of the political mayhem, but that does not mean that the emotional distance between her and the other Sri Lankans is as easily bridged. Firstly, she is constantly identified in ways that are alien to her; the young official who meets her at the airport immediately labels her as ‘the return of the prodigal’ (10), and Sarath initially names her as ‘the swimmer’ (16) due to her earlier days of having won a national swimming competition. None of these descriptions agrees with her, so that she struggles to define herself in opposition to them even as she strives to communicate with those around her. Secondly, having left fifteen years ago, and therefore losing the right to identify herself as a Sri-Lankan in the eyes of her countrymen and women, the emotional distance experienced by Anil is brought home vividly to her during her visit to her *ayah* Lalitha, her childhood nanny. One of Anil’s first outings on her return to Sri Lanka is to visit her. Yet, because her fluency in the Tamil language

is much reduced, she fails to communicate effectively with the old woman. Instead, Anil has to rely on Lalitha's granddaughter to translate their conversation in English to Tamil. This linguistic gulf reinforces the sense of alienation that Anil feels towards not just a cherished part of her family memory, but also the country itself: after speaking to a stranger in Tamil in an earlier episode, only to be met with 'a blank stare,' she had been told that 'because of her lack of tone the listener didn't understand the remark. He could not tell if it was a question, a statement or a command.' (23) This lack of competency in her childhood language reflects her position as an outsider even though she is physically in her homeland. Worse still, Lalitha's granddaughter negates the sense of closeness between nanny and child when she tells Anil that Lalitha had brought '*all* of us up', and upon hearing that Anil's parents has passed away in a car accident years ago, she notes dismissively, 'Then you don't have any connection, do you?' (24) Ondaatje, in presenting Anil as being devoid of familial ties in Sri Lanka, makes it more difficult for her to identify with a general populace wrecked by ethnic and religious conflicts.

Geographical and emotional distances also work in reverse for Anil when she is in the west. It was precisely her homesickness that prompted her to marry someone who appeared to have 'turned up from Sri Lanka in bangles and on stilts' (142), but who proved to be a mistake when he brought to the marriage the gender-biased customs of their homeland as well. After a highly-wrought divorce, with his departure that symbolises the distance she feels towards her home country (Sanghera 2005:84), Anil deliberately sets aside her native culture and language – 'she no longer spoke Sinhala to anyone' (145). In an about-turn, she embraces a western identity: 'Anil had courted foreignness...She felt completed abroad' (55). But it is a move that is not without complications. Her application to the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva for the position in Sri Lanka had been 'halfhearted', thinking that chances could be slim for her to be accepted 'because she had been born on the island' (16). Presumably it would be perceived that she would not be objective enough – that is, sufficiently removed – because of her native ties with the country, 'even though she now travelled with a British passport' (*ibid*). Her lover Cullis, upon learning that Anil speaks no French, 'only English' and that she can 'write some Sinhala,' promptly asks 'Is that your background?' We can assume that he is not asking whether Anil is of English stock here; the desire to pinpoint someone's nationality or heritage, especially one

who appears different, is almost a reflex action in the face of perceived strangeness. Her reply is ambivalent: 'I live here...in the West.' (36) Anil's desire at that time to remove herself from Sri Lanka and to embrace the west clashes with those around her who inevitably locate her firmly in her homeland. Her answer to her lover, emphasising her locality but not her loyalties or affiliations, is perhaps revealing of Anil's association of physical with emotional distance while in America. Significantly, this equation is thrown off-kilter when Anil loses her bearings during her seven-week stay in Sri Lanka. As she flounders in the sea of opaque meanings and closed doors, she desperately clings to reminders of her life in the west: a postcard from her American friend Leaf, quotes from western classical and canonical literary texts, and the music of Tom Waits and Steve Earle.<sup>43</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that while she might not have abandoned all these completely at the end of the novel, such references are greatly reduced by the last two chapters.

In view of this, when she does respond to the plight of her people, there is a sense of her having conquered to a certain extent the gulf of emotional detachment separating her from the Sri Lankans and their tragedy. By this stage of the narrative Anil, situated within the very physical locality that undermines her objective 'long-distanced gaze' of the past, realises that 'it was a more complicated world morally. The streets were still streets, the citizens remained citizens. They shopped, changed jobs, laughed' (11). Being amongst them, she is no longer the removed observer, but has become an actor in the tapestry of the country. When Anil weeps at Sarath's tale of Ananda, the artist tasked to reconstruct Sailor's face, whose wife is one of the hundreds who have disappeared in the political chaos, it marks a significant closing of the distance between herself and her countrymen as she realises the degree of trauma that plague the civilians. Towards the end, when she publicly presents the evidence for the government's part in the murder of Sailor, Sarath notes that 'she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, "I think you murdered hundreds of us." *Hundreds of us.* Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us.*' (272). This swing towards an identification with her countrymen, however,

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<sup>43</sup> Both musicians are figures of transgression that reflects Anil's transnational identity. Tom Waits is an experimental singer-songwriter who fuses rock and jazz in his music, and is well-known for his distinctive low singing voice. Steve Earle, besides his music, is a published anti-war political activist and writer.

means that Anil steps away from her professional role as an impartial human-rights investigator, and vividly illustrates the counter demands made on the individual by different, but equally strong, commitments and identifications, especially for one such as Anil poised between two different worlds. Stepping towards a set of loyalties or ties, as Ondaatje shows in his novel, equates an increase in distance from those which one had previously cleaved to. This is made all the more significant in a country's post-independent flux, as attempts to forge a coherent national identity, as in Sri Lanka, are often interrupted by apparently irreconcilable claims and calls.

In thinking about the concept of distance, Ondaatje also explores the consequences of the brutality of the civil war on the civilians, and how they cope with the trauma by erecting an emotional barrier between themselves and their world. Sarath throws himself in his work and passion, archaeology, specialising in studies 'of the region in chronicles' from the past, especially of that of a lost ancient city (29). In its way, it is also a 'long-distanced gaze' of his country; instead of Anil's physical and emotional detachment, Sarath looks to the past for meaning; Anil 'suspected he found the social world around him irrelevant' (*ibid*). Unfortunately, this move fails to protect Sarath from the turbulence around him. His teacher, Palipana, tells of the experience of his own brother, a monk, who retreated from the world to a secluded monastery, but ultimately could not outrun 'passion or slaughter': he was killed by a radical novice monk. Therein lies what Palipana terms 'the paradox of retreat'; in the narrative of his brother, Palipana notes that 'you cannot survive as a monk if society does not exist' (103). Similarly, Sarath's passion for Sri Lanka's past cannot be meaningful if he withdraws from it in the present. What would there be left for future archaeologists if nothing is left of his society after this particularly tumultuous period in its history?

When Sarath and Anil rescue a man, Gunesena, found crucified in the middle of a road, we see Sarath emerging from his withdrawal to adopt a more active role in the unfolding of his country's destiny; Gunesena proves to be of invaluable aid by helping them to smuggle Sailor out of the country later. But just when 'he had returned to the intricacies of the public world, with its various truths' (279), Sarath is killed for his supposed betrayal to the authorities whom he works for. Still, Sarath's deed not only transcends the distance between himself

and his world, but also that between his country and the rest of the world; Sailor as the irrefutable evidence of the government's attempts to cover up their crimes could be a step forward in bringing about the end of the conflicts by international attention and pressure. Even though the novel does not explicitly state the realisation of such a hoped-for conclusion, the author gestures towards this when he completes Anil's role in the novel in her departure with Sailor from Sri Lanka.

Sarath's brother, Gamini, is another example of a character who in his own way removes himself from the civil unrest and violence. As a hospital emergency doctor, despite being an immediate witness to countless instances of injuries and deaths daily, Gamini withdraws emotionally from those whom he treats, as well as from the ordinary world of family and relations: Anil notes that upon meeting each other after some time, 'there had been no touching between him and Sarath, not a handshake' (129). During the long hours spent in the hospital, in this removed 'offstage battle with the war' (209), he tries in vain to arrive at 'some kind of human order' (128). Gamini's inability to make sense of the fatalities he faces each day 'made him come upon strangers and cut them open without ever knowing their names. He rarely spoke. It seemed he did not approach people unless they had a wound' (211). Simon Robinson's description of the stricken Sri Lanka – 'It's as if the entire nation is suffering from a slow-burning but destructive psychosis.' (2007:29) – seems to be embodied in Gamini. But emotional aloofness cannot shield him, or his brother, from the tragedies of the war. Even as he covers the faces of the photographed corpses as he records the cause of their death for Amnesty – so that 'there was no danger of his recognising the dead' (213) – Gamini ultimately recognises his brother from these very photographs even without seeing his face, from 'the wounds, the innocent ones' (287) from their childhood. It is only then that he abandons his emotional detachment to attend to his brother's corpse in the hospital morgue, cleaning his wounds and then sitting with him in silence. As Palipana puts it, 'He escaped the world and the world came after him' (103).

Thus far, I have examined the issues of physical and emotional distance, and how they are variously adopted as perspectives to make sense of the world. Be it within or without Sri Lanka, the characters have to begin to address the gulf between themselves and their surroundings, and engage with it fully if they hope to derive some kind of meaning in their life. Anil's identity as a diasporic migrant

is problematic when viewed in the western context, but even more so in her native country as it demands a readjustment not only in terms of physical and geographical distance, but also her emotional identification with it. On the other hand, Sarath and Gamini illustrate the resultant contemporary horror when the dream of decolonisation transforms drastically from the actual reality of a fragmented nation as it goes through what Loomba calls the “‘unforming’ of native communities’ (1998:2), as mentioned in the introduction this section. Besides the civil conflicts that tore Sri Lanka apart up till the first decade of the twenty-first century, the two brothers’ retreat from their society represents a kind of ‘unforming’ too; their very identity as members of a society inhabited by ‘a mad logic’ (186) only calls forth in them a desire to detach themselves from it. Such a response, according to the writer Nayantara Sahgal, is understandable; ‘passivity may be the result of a people who’ve had to lie low. And it may be a very active characteristic for it’s the only way to keep yourself whole and alive at certain periods of crisis.’ (Salgado 2004:142) On the other hand, the novel suggests that Sarath and Gamini’s act of distancing themselves from the chaos of their country is incomplete, since they are rooted irrevocably in it; Sarath tends to Sri Lanka’s past lovingly, while Gamini heals its people’s wounds. Therefore, both of them, like Anil, are also putting together the broken pieces of Sri Lankan society in their own ways, even as they maintain – at times are even forced to do so – a certain distance from it. Amidst the ever-shifting and competing power structures around them, this very act of balancing the demands of private and public responsibility is perhaps best summed up by Ondaatje’s description of a tightrope walker in his poem *Handwriting*:

That tightrope-walker from Kurunegala  
the generator shut down by insurgents

stood there  
swaying in the darkness above us. (5)

Without distinctive moral and ethical signs and directions in a society broken down by its ethnic and cultural conflicts – a situation captured in Ondaatje’s figure poised on a rope in the dark – *Anil’s Ghost* examines the difficulties and demands that characters who inhabit such a realm have to grapple with. In traversing the distance between these often contradictory claims, each step taken can be exacting but also exonerating at the same time, although equally it can also

lead straight into deeper darkness and confusion. There is no formula for a specific way to respond to these challenges, or a metanarrative to account for all the colonial, postcolonial, and decolonised tensions and injustices meted out on all sides, but only by acknowledging the impossibility for a singular interpretation of these historical events can there be hope of the tightrope walker breaking out of his frozen stance and taking a step (forwards).

#### *Cultural and ideological distance*

While the omniscient third-person style of narration means that we are also privy to the thoughts of other characters around her, the protagonist Anil remains the clear focal point of the story. Despite her Sri Lankan heritage, Anil represents – personally (to a certain degree), officially and professionally – the voice of the rational, Enlightened West. This is especially so at the start of the novel, and it is this voice that persistently cuts through the dreamlike narration of the novel to insist on the search and attainment of truth and justice for the political victims. In the following reading of *Anil's Ghost*, I will examine Anil's conflicted role as a representative of the Centre of Human Rights in her home country, as well as the potential of human rights discourse – as portrayed in the novel – as a kind of metanarrative in our world today.

#### *The crossing of lines and a quilted face*

The lack of presence and clout on the international political scene for many newly decolonised countries means that they are frequently subjected to western countries' dismissal and exploitation. We observe this in *Anil's Ghost* when foreign journalists fail to reflect a thorough understanding of the country in their reporting (an aspect I will examine in greater detail later), and in Anil's lover's friend's sneer towards Singapore's numerous air-conditioned public buildings – 'it was like being stuck in Selfridges for a week' – whereby Anil retorts 'I suspect people in Colombo would love it to be Selfridges' (36); this of course reminds us of Sam in *The Hamilton Case* basking in the material and sensorial abundance of Selfridges, and its locality at the centre of the imperial empire. Of greater significance is the west's exploitation of their experience in these decolonised regions, a tangent version – though no less powerful – of Shivanathan's writing of

the exotic in Canada in de Kretser's novel. In an inspired account, Gamini wryly puts forth this latest version of neo-colonialism as imagined from a movie shot:

He looks out of the window...The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit. (285-6)

It is a version of 'the colonial master narrative' (Shohat 1992:103) that is being played out here, the western visitor (whether well-intentioned or not) who after experiencing the turbulent east, 'gets on a plane and leaves. That's it.' (285). Within such a master narrative, then, lies a 'hierarchy of places' (Sarup 1996:4) that accordingly reflects the extent of international influence that has varied little since the colonial days, as well as an inclination from the west to casually shrug off its time and experience in these countries once it has fulfilled its agenda, since 'home' is one long flight away.

Indeed, we can even ask whether Anil is one of such characters who returns 'home' when she leaves with Sailor for Geneva, and the significance of her time spent in Sri Lanka. It can be argued that by bringing Sailor to the attention of the international community, she represents one of the few chances for her homeland to break the vicious cycle of mutual suspicion and discrimination. Despite this, her getaway is still problematic: Sarath's punishment by the authorities for his part in assisting her involves him being tortured before being killed, while Anil is left only with Sailor's skeleton but without her notes or other evidence to support her investigations. Thus, with not much concrete evidence to indict the Sri Lankan government of extrajudicial violence against its peoples, her attempt to convince the western authorities – who would require factual proof and corroborative verification – would likely to be fraught with difficulties. Moreover, is the west 'home' for Anil?

If the western hero(ine) can leave Sri Lanka for home when the situation turns uncomfortable, then Ondaatje shows that the very idea of 'home' is as important for the Sri Lankans, even if their nation is a war-torn and impoverished one, and they themselves are compelled to distance themselves from it in their own ways. While the west can put physical distance between itself and the supposedly unruly others, the latter have little choice but to work with that cracked dish of decolonisation. The characters of Sarath and Gamini depict the oft-untold tale of those who stay, which is compared to and contrasted with those

who leave – Shivanathan in *The Hamilton Case* – and those who visit and then depart – the westerners and Anil. Sarath and Gamini ‘spoke of how much they loved their country. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place.’ (285) They refuse to view their nation through the eyes of a west keen to utilise it as a narrative of hopeless Third World naivety, incivility or, simply, irrationality. These intertwining encounters and interactions reveal the novel’s concern with the complex evolvement of postcolonial/decolonised nations in the twenty-first century, as lines of personal interests and loyalties criss-cross with those of larger hegemonic organisations for legitimacy and agency. Anil, towards the end of the novel, articulates such a moment:

If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life? Would she talk to intimates about them, the two Colombo brothers? [...] Wherever she might be, would she think of them? (285)

In having Anil recognise the distance between herself and the brothers, the distance of two worlds temporarily bridged by her presence between the two brothers, the novel highlights their disparity but also the reality of their having met and crossed each other’s paths, and the resultant impact from the contact of all the associated ideological, cultural and social beliefs for each world. The narrative aims not towards resolution or full closure, but a recognition of the dynamics of power relations and possible lines of contact with those perceived as being utterly unfamiliar to us.

Alternatively, the way forward might be to think about such encounters today as a meeting of differences – be they of power, race or class – with universalising ideologies. We can discern this highly combustible but also potentially rewarding coming together of such dichotomous elements when we note Ondaatje’s description of Ananda’s commission by the government to reconstruct a blown-up Buddha statue:

During the months of assembly, Ananda had spent most of his time on the head. He and two others used a system of fusing rock. Up close the face looked quilted. They had planned to homogenise the stone, blend the face into a unit, but when he saw it this way Ananda decided to leave it as it was. He worked instead on the composure and the qualities of the face. (302)

The deliberate decision made by the artist not to ‘blend the face into a unit’, but to allow the cracks in the face of the statue to be discernible, points to a desire to

retain its ‘history’ of having been destroyed and a recognition of that act as a part of its being. This accommodation of a violent history and an attempt to put the pieces together again without denying the past can be read as a reflection of Brydon and Tiffin’s vision of the direction of contemporary postcolonial debate by as discussed earlier in this chapter; that is, the emphasis on decolonising fictions that move away from the western metropolis to allow for alternative worldviews and living conditions (1993:11). Instead of a drive towards total reconciliation or retribution for the country’s harrowing civil war, Ondaatje uses the cracks in a religious icon’s face that traditionally symbolises harmony and compassion to suggest the impossibility of any complete closure or, by extension, a sense of peace from having painful questions answered. But the face is still made whole by Ananda in the end, and thus the author, while invoking a recognition of the struggles of coming to terms with a fractured decolonised nation, also holds out the hope that the cracked dish of newly-independent states might be made serviceable again. The cracked Buddha’s face acts as a reminder of the acknowledgement as well as the effort to transcend historical fissures in a country or community, an act that does not attempt to deny the past and its broken psyche, but to bring the pieces together for a fragmented totality that allows for some form of nationhood in future.

Ondaatje is interested in the process of negotiating histories and identities in our current world that often pits the singular against the universal in a win-or-die struggle. In *Anil’s Ghost*, he has muddied the waters of contemporary political and social discourses that invariably resort to the blaming game whenever contests of beliefs erupt into more serious warring acts, as in Sri Lanka’s ongoing civil war, and at the time of this writing, the invasion of Gaza by Israel troops. The struggle for ascendancy of particular groups at the expense of others in Sri Lanka is a microcosm of the world writ large. In the following section, I will examine the discourse of human rights as articulated both on the international and national scale in the novel, with a focus on Anil’s challenging negotiation in Sri Lanka between her representation of – and belief in –universal human rights, and her difficulty in reconciling its implementation in her homeland.

### *The discourse of human rights*

Much has been written about the history of human rights and its place in the United Nations, as well as various other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The growth of the latter has been especially significant in the last decades of the twentieth century as increasing numbers of nations recognise the role of humanitarian intervention internationally (Barnett 2006:xv). What warrants our attention in today's dynamic occurrences of national and international signing of treaties, boundary expansion or defence, and global trade is the unequal power relations between nations supposedly represented equitably by the United Nations, especially in the arena of rights talk that goes beyond the first generation of political and civil rights set up in the aftermath of the Second World War. Critics of the establishment of the Covenants of the United Nations recognising socioeconomic and cultural rights (second generation), solidarity or development rights (third generation) and indigenous rights (fourth generation) have highlighted the way in which western nations drag their feet over the years before they deign to ratify these treaties, often due to vested national trade and economic interests (Messer 1993, Cheah 1996, Koshy 1999, Oberleitner 2007). The double standards practised by countries such as the United States in appropriating human rights talk as tools to force open overseas markets and liberalise state-owned enterprises for its own benefit is well documented (Koshy 1999, Douzinas 2007). By pointing out the entanglement of trade policies with human rights discourse, Koshy highlights the 'arena of contestation' that is the result of aggressive Euro-American governments who adopt such a strategy to control the economies of Third World nations (1999:13). In the course of such neo-colonialist strategies, the discourse of identity pursued by decolonised countries and its peoples become even more entangled with the domineering political and trade practices of First World nations.

Ondaatje's novel presents the predicament of Sri Lankan civilians caught in the crossfire of the covert and overt battles between government forces and insurgent military groups; every strata of the society is affected, from the truck driver to the artist to the doctor. As the population is swept up helplessly in a whirl of political and ethnic murders, executions, and disappearances, it is clear that there is a need for the international community to intervene in order to ensure the basic rights of ordinary Sri Lankans. Yet, the author complicates NGOs' band-

aid attempt in applying the traditional ideology of human rights to such states of unrest, which the political critics Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss term as a ‘classicism’ stance involving ‘the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and consent’ (2006:85). On the other hand, in the late twentieth century, these writers note the advent of ‘solidaritists’ who ‘empathise and side with selected victims, publicly confront hostile governments, advocate partisan public policies in donor states, attempt to skew the distribution of aid resources, and ignore on many occasions the sovereignty of states’ (*ibid*). It is this conundrum between the two sides of the humanitarian debate that Ondaatje explores in *Anil’s Ghost*, reflected in the protagonist’s official position as a human-rights investigator, a forensic anthropologist, as well as her private identity as a western-educated Sri-Lankan with no remaining familial ties in her home country.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, President Katugala, having ‘to placate trading partners in the West’, is pressurised by international welfare organisations to allow for investigations into claims of ‘organised campaigns of murder’ (1999:16). However, Anil, representing the Geneva-based Center for Human Rights, is met with defensiveness and resistance from the government, largely due to her adoption of rights-talk that cuts like a blunt cleaver through the country’s complex, warring political, cultural and social elements; Koshy terms such acts as an instance of ‘neocolonial strategies of power’ (1999:1). Postcolonial critics have also noted the negative impact of such an asymmetry of power relations on many decolonised nations in the past decades, for example Robert Young’s assertion of neocolonialism’s ‘deep complicity’ with ‘rights talk’ (1991:232), and Homi Bhabha equating the implementation of human rights laws as ‘coercive conditionality’ (1994/2003-4:xiv) at times. While Koshy notes the efficacy of NGOs such as Anil’s in supporting local groups and drawing international attention to the struggles of marginalised peoples, she also warns that ‘the institutionalisation of NGOs within the UN reflects the very power differences that their activities try to counter, since current arrangements favor the resource-rich Western-based NGOs.’ (1999:19) Nevertheless, Koshy also problematises the discussion in noting that non-western countries often adopt a counterargument that centers on cultural relativism, stressing the singularity of particular historical,

regional, and cultural backgrounds (12).<sup>44</sup> While the adoption of an absolute relativist or universal stance towards human rights has limited effect in overcoming differences, the hegemonic authority that rights groups possess, as can be seen in Koshy's argument, indicates a skewing of agency and efficacy towards the mostly western political organisations and parties: 'Moral righteousness is central to the actions of the humanitarian empire [...] the aim is to protect (us) and save and correct (the others)' (Douzinas 2007:140-1).

This dialectic tension between the macro and micro narratives of human rights and contingent claims is manifested in Ondaatje's narrative when Anil initially believes that the identification of Sailor would open the floodgates to a human rights review of the atrocities perpetuated in the country: 'Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest.' (57) Yet, as the investigation progresses, Anil has to acknowledge that 'in all the turbulent history of the island's recent civil wars, in all the token investigations, not one murder charge had been made during the troubles' (176). It is this admission that loosens the tight demarcation of "us" and "them" that Anil had initially maintained, and in return is reflected in her dealings with the local people. Even as she still adheres to her principle of bringing justice to the victims to the end, Anil can now begin to differentiate between 'a question, a statement or a command'. She begins to draw nearer towards a greater awareness of another way of life that cannot be ordered as coherently as she thought it might: 'She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection of the self' (55-56). The victims and their families, caught in the vortex of violent forces totally beyond their control, in 'the surreal turn of causes and effect' in that society (42), demand a different type of consciousness to illustrate their pain and loss: a type of consciousness that involves distancing oneself from the chaos emotionally, even if this detachment could very well be temporary or insufficient in the long run, as seen in Gamini and Sarath. Since fighting 'has gone on for so long now that it has brutalised an entire society, creating a culture of violence that haunts the country whether there is fighting or not' (Robinson, 2007:27), an

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<sup>44</sup> See Koshy (1999) and Cheah (1996) for in-depth discussions on the debate of cultural relativism versus universalism as played out between Asian countries and the United Nations.

imported human rights rhetoric applied to these complex decolonised societies with a strict adherence to the rule book promises little in terms of conviction or effectiveness.

It can be argued that it is precisely the lack of adherence and recognition of human rights that has resulted in Sri Lanka's civil bloodbath; on the other hand, as I suggested above in my discussion on the way in which democratic political institutions and laws are assumed to be universal and thus easily implemented in post-independent nations, the ideals of human rights remain an unfamiliar concept in many Asian societies, where ethnic, religion and class divides were entrenched even before colonialism impinged itself on their social fabric (Lal 2002:61-3). Moreover, as Koshy notes, the call for human rights recognition is greatly compromised when nations resort to culturally relativist forms of resistance as 'a response to the power differences between nations and the lack of inclusiveness and reciprocity in the formulation and enforcement of international human rights norms' (1999:22). It is not that the ideology of human rights is wrong, but when it is formulated as a norm that allows for no alternative perspectives or views, it tends to become problematic in non-western societies.<sup>45</sup> In Sarath's account to Anil of the discovery of the water tomb in China, with the accompanying coffins of an emperor and his twenty women musicians – the latter buried alive – lies an appeal for a more nuanced approach – however macabre or strange the situation under consideration may initially appear – towards differences and contesting identities: "You must understand their state of acceptance somehow of such a death. The way the terrorists in our time can be made to believe they are eternal if they die for the cause of their ruler" (261). This reference to the workings of terrorists strikes a chord in our contemporary times, when western media and governments, portraying these dissidents as the other, unknowable and uncivilised, eliminates any possibility of addressing the root cause of their grievances: the unequal global distribution of wealth and power. When Anil understandably insists on focusing on the "twenty murdered women" (*ibid*), Sarath tries again, "It was another world with its own value system that came to the surface" (*ibid*). Ondaatje's depiction of this scene vividly illustrates the different worldviews represented by Sarath and Anil, and highlights the almost

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<sup>45</sup> It must be said that western societies also struggle with issues such as the rights of its immigrants; their right to keep their culture in their adopted homeland versus the duty to integrate and assimilate.

inevitability of the resulting impasse. The human rights discourse – voiced by Anil and many westerners – clashes here with a context that entail entirely different histories, customs and beliefs. How, then, should this impasse be managed?

The ideological distance between Anil and her birth country is reflected in Gamini wondering aloud whether Anil understands the implicated positions of many Sri Lankans in the turmoil of the nation. Gamini emphasises the materiality of the crisis, and criticises attempts by international organisations that consist of ‘armchair rebels living abroad with their ideas of justice’ (133), no matter how well-meaning, to arrive at quick solutions. Indeed, Hoffman and Weiss argue that ‘the politics of war-torn societies’ resist a macro narrative of applied humanitarian ideology: ““One size fits all” is neither tenable philosophical position nor operational orientation’, and thus, ‘[d]espite an understandable tendency to look for a central dispute and a clear cause, agencies must also be aware of regional and local dimensions that give most armed conflicts a multifaceted character’ (2007:95). The particularities of each instance of civil unrest have often been neglected in the search for answers and blame-laying; as the anthropologist Ellen Messer suggests, ‘different rights take precedence in different cultures, particularly under conditions perceived to be stressful’, hence ‘the key to comparative analysis and promotion of human rights may lie less in the particular “rights” and more in the social categories that are included or excluded from their protections. Contextualisation, interpretation, and negotiation are crucial’ (1993:223).<sup>46</sup> It is indeed Messer’s call for care and patience in negotiating the social and cultural contexts in the implementation of human rights laws that Ondaatje has explored in his novel, through Anil’s gradual realisation of the multiple possible ways of interpreting her country’s troubling journey from a

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<sup>46</sup> In response to the recent Sri Lankan government’s military successful push to corner and defeat the Tamil Tigers in the northern and eastern parts of the country, many commentators have inveighed on the former’s negligence of civilian casualties from the resulting civil strife. Examples of western-based concern for the violation of human rights laws is seen in the journalist Annie Kelly’s report, ‘Traumatised Tamils live in fear of new crackdown’ (2009), and the Indian writer Arundhati Roy’s article ‘This is not a war on terror. It is a racist war on all Tamils’ (2009). However, none of these writers reflect on the historical causes of the ethnic unrest, as does Sri Lankan author Romesh Gunesekera in his piece ‘A long, slow descent into hell’ (2009), who presents both sides of the ethnic friction: ‘Many Tamils felt heavily discriminated against in the increasingly Sinhala-focused agenda of successive nationalist governments in Sri Lanka, whereas many in the majority Sinhala population saw the government’s changes as redressing the imbalances instituted under British rule.’ (6) Failing to take into consideration the involved parties’ grievances and motivations, as I have argued, lessens the legitimacy of interventionist attempts at establishing the Sri Lankan victims’ human rights, and contribute to the imbalanced power distribution within and without the country.

colonial to a postcolonial and independent state: it certainly violates many human rights laws with its violence and murders across political and ethnic lines, but the country has also inherited – from its colonial masters – an asymmetrical parliamentary structure where the majority Sinhalese dominate and harass the minority Tamils. As well as religious and cultural differences, Sri Lankan society at that time also suffered from an absence of effective judiciary and policing structures. Therefore, it is unsurprising that rights-talk can only have limited applicability in such a state unless, as Messer has pointed out, the necessity of contextualisation, interpretation, and negotiation on all sides are recognised and put into action.

#### *Science and narrative*

Apart from the discourse of universal human rights, Anil's thinking also favours the Cartesian mode of thinking in much of western science, such that 'she had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries. Information could always be clarified and acted upon' (145). Furthermore, with the end of her marriage, all things Sri Lankan, including its culture, are cast aside by Anil: she was 'caught up in the application of the forensic sciences to human rights...She was alongside the language of science' (145). In order to approach an understanding of her native country, Anil ultimately has to overcome the part of her that favours direct interpretation, fixed meanings and stable categorisation. A discussion during her medical training highlights the ambiguity inherent even in scientific knowledge, and which might have stood her in good stead in negotiating the chaos in Sri Lanka. A professor tells Anil that the amygdala is 'the dark aspect of the brain [...] A place to house fearful memories.' He stresses that it remains unconfirmed as to whether this is due to nature or nurture.<sup>47</sup> But because it is made up of personal memories, each individual's amygdala, concludes Anil, differs from the next, 'even if they are from the same family. Because we each have a different past.' (134) In spite of this, Anil reflects that the name 'sounds Sri Lankan...Some bad god.' (135), as if she can already relate fear exclusively to the Sri Lankan makeup, something innate in the country shaped by its distinctive historical narrative. Such a recourse to a local and contingent interpretation of the

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<sup>47</sup> This point of the ambiguity of scientific interpretation and pronouncements – as against its traditional association with factual and accurate readings – will be discussed in greater length in Section III.

brain prepares us for a subversion of the certainties of Anil's technical and scientific training, and points to the possibility of multiple readings of not just Sailor's skeleton, but also Sri Lanka's turbulent history and its peoples' fate.

In Anil's assessment of Sailor's skeleton, we can discern her faith in scientific accuracy and hence, a truthful account of events and happenings. In the act of summarising the facts of Sailor's death in her forensic report, she believes she can arrive at 'the permanent truths' (64): the diagnosis of wounds and marks inflicted that reveal specific causes and thus, a particular narrative of causality. In a direct oppositional address to this, Palipana tells Anil, 'We have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones.' Yet she insists, 'We use the bone to search for it. "The truth shall set you free." I believe that.' Anil's faith in both science and the concept of an uncomplicated or unblemished truth is removed from Palipana's relative view of her universalist pronouncements; he announces, 'Most of the time in our world, truth is just an opinion' (102). In another instance, Anil appeals to Sarath, 'You're an archaeologist. Truth comes finally into the light. It's in the bones and sediment', whereupon he replies, 'It's in character and nuance and mood.' (259) Palipana and Sarath's emphases on subtlety and subjectivity is reflective of Anil's failure to grasp the tonality of the Tamil language. This binary of worldviews is familiar in many postcolonial (and colonial) writings and debates, and helps to draw out the differences and distance in the contending ideologies and cultures between the west and the rest. But it also often results in a stalemate whereby both sides dig in their heels and refuse to budge.

The structure of the novel pivots upon its constructed binaries and dialectics between science and fiction, objective and subjective, male and female, as well as local and global, presenting both sides of the story but withholding from a fixed viewpoint. As with Sam in *The Hamilton Case*, whose determination to root out the true murderer is an impulse towards the promise of tidy resolutions and clear-cut identification brought about by the application of cold logic and attention to the materiality of the case, Anil's initial faith in her forensic training to identify the victims of the political chaos is equally driven by a need to overcome the murky nebulousness of post-independent Sri Lanka and to bring the human-rights offenders to justice. Sharing de Kretser's refusal to offer easy solutions to such complex issues as racial, ethnic, and political identities and

rivalries, Ondaatje problematises his narrative by overturning thoughts of linearity, gender associations and traits, as well as expectations of a neat conclusion in his novel. Sarath associates Anil with the figure of a *makamkruka*, whom he describes as a man who is ‘a churner, an agitator. Someone who perhaps sees things more truly by turning everything upside down. He’s a devil almost [...] Though a *makamkruka*, strangely, guards the sacred spot in a temple ground.’ (165). Anil – whose scientific investigative work in Colombo disrupts the delicate balance of illicit operations and open enmity among the political triangulation of insurgents, soldiers and anti-separatists – can easily be seen as just such a transgressive figure. In Anil’s excavation of corpses as well as her close study of their skeletons, she forces guilt and responsibility to the surface, while her anxious guarding of Sailor throughout the novel is reminiscent of the traditional mythical figure protecting the temple’s holy spot. Her gender is also subverted by her vocation as a trained scientist – traditionally a male domain – as well as in her name wrested from her brother in her youth, while Palipana and Sarath articulate the call for greater subjectivity usually linked to a more feminine stance.

It is Ondaatje’s insistence for a more open-ended reading of his novel – as discussed earlier in this chapter – that is reflected in *Anil’s Ghost*, as he overturns and questions prejudices and presumptions, so that in the process the distance between groups, identities, and interests is broken down, or that their relationship is shown to be capable of imbrication and overlap. In this way, there is less room for the hegemonic establishment of totalising narratives or universal value systems. Building on this discussion on the necessity of complicating relationships and connections between seemingly diverse voices, I wish to briefly assess in the following section the significance of the term ‘gesture’ which crops up frequently in the novel, for its contextual usage draws attention to the gap inherent between action and discourse, which is of particular significance in the decolonised state as political motives, personal grievances and interests, as well as a variety of narratives jostle for supremacy.

## Gestures

Gesture is a kinship experienced in the body. Yet it is also a kind of writing, an interchange of meaning stabilised between actor & viewer. -- Gillian Beer, *Open Fields*, 1991:25.

- noun*
1. a motion of the hands, head or body to emphasise an idea or emotion, especially while speaking
  2. something said or done as a formality or as an indication of intention: *a political gesture*
  - obsolete*
  3. the manner in which a person bears himself; posture (Collins, s.v. 'gesture')

The direct causal relationship that is assumed in the first definition, where a gesture is understood to indicate a particular idea or emotion, can be observed in the novel when Anil quotes from Archilochus' Greek tragedy: '*In the hospitality of war we left them their dead to remember us by*' (11). The ancient practice of the victors leaving behind the slaughtered is an overt proclamation of their triumph, as well as a sign of intimidation. It is also a political gesture – as in the second definition – in its assertion of the dominance of the Greeks over their vanquished. However, Anil notes that, in Sri Lanka, this system of signs breaks down: 'Yet the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit [...] [Unlike the Greeks] there was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was.' (11) Indeed, this lack of a clear identification of one's foe, or a reason for the death and disappearance of loved ones, distorts reality as well as multiplies the signifier indefinitely. As social order – of justice, proper burial customs, accountability – breaks down the sense of surrealism in the civil war is heightened; killings are 'committed by all sides' such that there is 'no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are' (18). This includes the relatively straightforward 'public gesture' of heads on stakes – by unknown perpetrators – witnessed by Ananda's wife at a bridge she passes everyday on her way to work (174-5). The western classical model of objectivity, causality and linearity cannot be applied in this context of utter chaos and random violence. The absence of a gesture that would identify causes or name perpetrators signals the departure from the kind of order imposed by a Greek classicist tradition in western societies. Beer's delineation of the term 'gesture', as 'an interchange of meaning stabilised between actor and viewer' is therefore *destabilised* in Ondaatje's portrayal of Sri Lanka's civil war.

The classical symmetry of Greek culture meets its challenge, in another way, in the form of two gestures depicted in the novel, the Asian Nod and Sarath's drawl:

'Right. Right,' he said in a drawl she would become familiar with, a precise and time-stalling mannerism in him. It was like the Asian Nod, which included in its almost circular movement the possibility of a no. Sarath Diyasena's 'Right', spoken twice, was an official and hesitant agreement for courtesy's sake but included the suggestion that things were on hold. (16-17)

Both gestures here can be said to be acts of slippage that defy any straightforward interpretations or readings. Sarath's drawl, 'a precise and time-stalling mannerism,' works only when there is no expectation of a determinate conclusion that can be drawn from it. It fills the gaps in awkward moments and conversations, but holds off any attempts to reach a closure, thereby buying time and allowing space for nuances, hesitation, subtleties and even contradictory stances to be considered. Likewise, the Asian Nod, with its seemingly unambiguous indication of acquiescence and agreement, is undermined by 'its almost circular movement' that stretches the interpretation from a positive to a possibly negative one. Departing from the dictionary definition of just one 'idea or emotion', these two gestures announce from the start of Ondaatje's novel its intention to question and rethink readings of a non-western country drawn from differing contexts and histories.

It is noteworthy that for the second definition of the term, the example given for it is the phrase 'a political gesture'. Indeed, Ondaatje interrogates the idea of a political action that serves mainly to stave off further unwanted attention, to appease oppositional voices or to display sufficient motivation prior to any concrete acts. The Sri Lankan government 'eventually made the gesture of an offer to pair local officials with outside consultants' for the investigation of alleged misdeeds with regards to its population, after bowing to international pressure 'and to placate trading partners in the west' (16). Again, there is a difference between stated intent and realised actions; Anil rightly pinpoints the government's unwillingness to assist in her work when she complains to Sarath, 'Doors that should be open are closed. We're here to supposedly investigate disappearances. But I go to offices and I can't get in. Our purpose here seems to be the result of a gesture.' (44) This discrepancy between statement and motivation or action means that the veneer of cooperation for the foreign

investigation vanishes when real progress appears to be made, and when the situation turns threatening, Anil has to leave the country in a hurry, forced to abandon her paperwork and instruments. Earlier episodes also point to how the Third World governments' seemingly open public gesture in allowing international investigative efforts into their country belie their actual willingness in truly cooperating with such inquiries. Anil's experience in the Congo comes to an ignominious end when 'one Human Rights group had gone too far and their collection of data had disappeared overnight, their paperwork burned'; 'So much for the international authority of Geneva. The grand logos on letterheads and European office doors meant nothing where there was crisis.' (29) Towards the end of her time in Sri Lanka, Anil recalls 'what a woman at the Nadesan Centre had said to her, "I got out of the Civil Rights Movement partly because I couldn't remember which massacre took place and where"' (283).<sup>48</sup> If international attention and influence can only achieve so much in such beleaguered nations, then the importance of the gestural element in their works – a formal act that indicates specific intentions, according to the second definition of the term, but which forestalls concrete results or changes in the entangled interests of various political interests – should be duly noted. Identity and power, therefore, are inextricably intertwined in both the agendas of political parties, as well as the competing racial and ethnic claims of such newly-independent nations. The limited success of outside interventionist attempts at resolving such crises, as the author has illustrated in his novel, can be largely attributed to a failure in recognising and considering the details of such situations.

An example of this very lack of attention can be seen when Ondaatje criticises western journalists for their 'flippant gesture towards Asia' (156), in the form of irresponsible reportage and representation; in this case, it is a combination of a personal act of assessment of the country and its people on the reporters' part, as well as a public act of disseminating such conclusions to others. Both approaches include the failure to comprehend what Sarath demands of Anil, 'to understand the archaeological surround of a fact' (44), that would have prevented 'new vengeance and slaughter' (157) that invariably arise from inaccurate or

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<sup>48</sup> The Nadesan Centre for Human Rights Through Law was established in the 1980s in memory of Sumasunderam Nadesan Q.C., a founding member of the civil rights movement in Sri Lanka since its independence. See [http://www.tamilnation.org/nadesan/nadesan\\_centre\\_for\\_human\\_rights.htm](http://www.tamilnation.org/nadesan/nadesan_centre_for_human_rights.htm) for further details.

inflammatory media reports that stoke the flames of unrest and grievance. Sarath warns Anil against being ‘like one of those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel. That false empathy and blame...’ (44) From Sarath’s condemnation of the western reporters’ tendency to judge others only according to their own standards of judiciary fairness and accountability, we can observe how such a gesture signals the imbalance of power between less developed and advanced countries, and worse, contributes towards the former societies’ chaos and impoverishment.

The last meaning of the term ‘gesture’ – the ‘manner’ and ‘posture’ which a person adopts – involves a more personal interpretation in the novel;<sup>49</sup> we can extend it to include the physical or philosophical representation of belief, feelings and intention. It is seen in Palipana’s ‘gesture’ of apparent betrayal when he published his interpretations of runes that are subjective and thus unverifiable, much to the chagrin of the established archaeological organisation in his country (82). It is also found in Anil’s act of bathing by the well, ‘the mantra of gestures’ (90) of pouring water over herself, almost as if to wash away the ideological baggage that she has brought with her from her time abroad.<sup>50</sup> Lastly and most significantly, it is observed in the rock carving from another century of a woman bending over a child, studied and read by Sarath in a dark cave: ‘All the gestures of motherhood harnessed. A muffled scream in her posture’ (156-7). The personal and thus the quieter acts of signifying intentions are vividly rendered in these examples. Of note is that the distance between statement and action or feelings is perceivably narrower compared to the more public ones discussed above. The private sphere of the term ‘gesture’, therefore, involves a more equitable relation between intention and action, and thus is more heartfelt and poignant. It is also more fragile, especially when pitted against the larger scope of politics and ethnic violence. When we consider the fact that the dictionary delineation of this term is actually obsolete, it is clear that the personal realm – in terms of its identity and agency – struggles valiantly but also somewhat vainly against the larger forces of society.

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<sup>49</sup> See also ‘Buried 2, iv’ in *Handwriting*, pp. 24-25, for Ondaatje’s lament of ‘what we lost’ in the private world.

<sup>50</sup> Ondaatje has depicted this very act of bathing by a well in ‘Wells, i’ in *Handwriting*, pp. 48-49.

At the end of his fictional memoir *Running in the Family*, in the acknowledgement page, Ondaatje confesses that ‘the book is not a history but a portrait or “gesture”’, and in response to any objection to the imaginative element of his account, he can only apologise and ‘say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts.’ (1983:206) This blend of the factual and fictive, the personal and the public, is a precursor to his portrait of Sri Lanka and her people in *Anil’s Ghost*. In this novel, Ondaatje has employed the term ‘gesture’ in its various possible delineations to emphasise the array of possible readings and interpretations when thinking about issues of identity and power in decolonised narratives and experiences. Across the spectrum of the personal gesture of grief to the political and official pronouncements, the denotation as well as connotation of the term refuses a monolithic, simplistic preoccupation with either pole, private or public.

## **Conclusion: Rethinking the Postcolonial approach to Differences**

Edward Said, in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000), analysed Lyotard’s ideas on the demise of the legitimacy of metanarratives in modernity through the lens of postcolonial theory. In his view, Lyotard has de-historicised postmodernism by the failure of his work *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) to consider ‘the non-European world, and the consequences of European modernism – and modernisation – in the colonised world’ (312). In other words, apart from Third World migration to the metropolitan center, the birth-pangs and aftermath of the experience of decolonisation – and to an extent, neo-colonialism – deserve greater attention with regards to the relevance and/or workings of totalising presence and narratives.

Both de Kretser and Ondaatje have, in their novels studied in Section II, created narrative spaces not just for the often marginalised voices of decolonised states in the late twentieth century, but also explored the challenge of reconciling these voices with universal ideals such as truth, justice, and fairness. Yet, if Said is right in his view that ‘we are still in the era of large narratives, of horrendous cultural clashes, and of appallingly destructive war’ (2000:383), it is equally true that, as shown in both novels examined here, any exclusive recourse to particularities would only be at the expense of other (peripheral) groups. The

realisation that the ideologies of multiculturalism and hybridity are somewhat inadequate to overcome racial and ethnic conflicts today is observed not just in advanced nations (Lal 2002:164),<sup>51</sup> but also in many post-independent Third World communities. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Bhabha's suggestion of paying attention to the 'in-between spaces' – a kind of postmodern emphasis on differences that strives to go beyond 'originary and initial subjectivities' (1994:2) – suggests not just recognising but embracing the impure, the contingent, especially for the silenced communities and non-western populations. This argument is furthered in his later emphasis on 'the awareness of the ambivalence in our identifications' that leads to a demand to 'negotiate what is incommensurable' (1997:438). Ondaatje's portrayal of the characters in his novel reflects the complexity of contemporary postcolonial identities, while de Kretser, in *The Hamilton Case*, posits that if formerly marginalised groups resorts to totalising or absolute identities as those that had suppressed them in the past, such communities could very well descend into chaos. Ashcroft rightly notes that national elites invariably replace departing colonists – as illustrated in de Kretser's novel by the character of Jayasinghe and his political cohort – so that the very idea of 'resistance' is 'nothing less than *a failure to resist* the binary structures of colonial discourse.' (2001:21).

Ashcroft's recognition of the difficulty of post-independent populations to transcend their colonial history and culture is a useful starting point in addressing the issue of the imbalance of power dynamics. His call for all postcolonial peoples to 'engage the medium of narrativity itself' such that they 'subvert the unquestioned status of the "scientific record" by re-inscribing the "rhetoric" of events' (2001:92) might, at first reading, to be precisely what the two authors and their works discussed here have attempted. Both novels can be read, and have been in certain parts of this section, as a re-articulation of the history and metanarrative of colonialism and decolonisation. What Ashcroft calls the act of "re-vision", taken as "to re-inscribe the "heteroglossia", the hybrid profusion of life, into the linear and teleological movement of imperial history and, by doing so, to change our view of what history is" (*ibid*:98) is somewhat reminiscent of Bhabha's notion of the 'in-between spaces'. Both critics privilege the

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<sup>51</sup> See also Barnor Hesse (ed.) *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms*, especially his 'Introduction: Un/Settled Multiculturalisms', pp. 1-28.

heterogeneous identities within contemporary societies – be they advanced nations or decolonised ones – and thus advocate a subversion of the official version of history articulated mainly by the western hegemony. I would argue, however, that while the insertion and interruption of imperial history can be achieved by alternative histories, the core structure and trajectory of the grand narrative of History remains a Western-dominated one and thus the binary relationship remains frustratingly between margin and center; worse, those formerly in the periphery might optimistically imagine that it is now their turn to be the center, and thus relegate the former hegemon to the margins, which means the see-sawing polarity stays intact. De Kretser's novel portrays not just the various tensions and conflicts within ethnicities and colonist-colonised, but also the resultant dangers from triumphalising one's tribe at the expense of others. Thus, while totalising ideologies such as national and racial identities can and should have their places in everyday existence, along with them should come the awareness of the fluidity and instability of these artificial boundary markers. In short, it is a consistent balance of accommodating 'grand' and 'micro' narratives at the same time, as seen in the Buddha's quilted face in *Anil's Ghost*, the metonymic embodiment of such an effort.

In re-thinking the postcolonial approach to fiction, I believe it is also necessary to step back and assess the types of works that have thus far received the greatest attention from both critics and readers, and which ultimately played a part in influencing my choice of primary texts for this chapter. I agree with Robert Young's observation that colonial discourse tends towards 'the dominance since [Said's] *Orientalism* of India as an object of attention among those working in the field', in other words 'a noticeable geographical homogenisation of the history of colonialism' (1994:16) that assumes an equivalent mode of discourse for all colonies and ex-colonies extrapolated from India's experience. Young proposes that 'in the postcolonial era', such a 'homogenisation of colonialism needs to be set against its historical and geographical particularities.' (ibid:17) While there are undeniably similarities among many postcolonial states, the reluctance or negligence to make the effort to differentiate among the various nations implies that the tendency to settle on representative narratives that either facilitate ease of communication (English being the dominant *lingua franca* of both the Indian and western cities) or reflect selective political concerns at a particular time. A case in

point is with regards to fictional works by non-white authors in the Man Booker prize list of winners (for works produced in the Commonwealth and the Republic of Ireland). The dominance of Indian writers or works set in that continent is discernible,<sup>52</sup> an occurrence that has generated mixed feelings even in India itself,<sup>53</sup> in the form of a debate that resonates with de Kretser's portrayal of Shivanathan's writing of the postcolonial exotic, as well as Ondaatje's controversial position as a diasporic author writing on Sri Lanka. With the Gulf war and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, narratives from/about this region have preoccupied the American and British reading public, for example Azar Nafisi's *Reading "Lolita" in Tehran* (2003), Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2004) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008). All these have ensured that intellectual debate has stayed riveted on issues that grip the imagination and reflect the concerns of western nations, and as such can be seen as a subtle form of neocolonial influence that perpetuates cultural dominance. This is not to imply that critical and imaginative works from these developing nations are lacking in any way, but that one a willingness to explore beyond the proffered texts in the mainstream, for both western and non-western readers – the latter especially so, since major publishing houses are invariably sited in Euro-American countries. de Kretser and Ondaatje's texts, with the relatively unfamiliar setting of Sri Lanka in contemporary literature, discussed at length in this section of my dissertation, would hopefully contribute to a widening of interest in postcolonial literature.

I have attempted, in this chapter, to analyse the details and implications of a meeting of differences – geographical, cultural, and ideological – in our current times. My reading of the two literary works and especially their setting, the colonial history and post-independent traumatic experience of Sri Lanka, aims to present the postcolonial discussion with another layer of difference: firstly to move the debate away from the western metropoles in order to examine the complicated entanglement that the rhetoric of pluralism often overlooks in such areas, and secondly to pay attention to the relationship between major and minor

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<sup>52</sup> V.S. Naipaul's *In a Free State* (1971), Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975), Paul Scott's *Staying On* (1977), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Yann Mantel's *Life of Pi* (2002), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2007).

<sup>53</sup> See 'Commentary', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 October 2006, p. 16.

narratives with regards to postcolonial identities in the twenty-first century. As the author Anne Enright writes, ‘I know I am interested in gestures, for example in the way people relate within a space.’ (2008) If mine is ultimate thus also a ‘gesture’ it is my hope that this chapter has illustrated both the coming together of diverse people as well as the importance of this ‘space’ that facilitates this meeting.

### **Section III: The Metanarrative of Science in the Twenty-First Century**

One of the common topics raised in the last two chapters on unequal power relations within feminism and postcolonialism is the role of science: its hegemonic influence that insists on objectivity, detachment, and logic clashing with identities (gender, decolonised) that, in many ways, defy such a worldview. In the twenty-first century, science – especially the metadiscourse of genetics – in both the public and private consciousness is an increasingly important practice and discourse, in particular when it is partnered by technological development and funding provided by capitalist ventures. This chapter aims to examine the interrogation and re-imagination of the role of science in our contemporary society through a close reading of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. With special interest being paid to the oft-fraught relationship between science and humanities – as well as between science and other institutions – these two novels provide an insight into hierarchical relations between these two disciplines through a range of narrative techniques and motifs. Indeed, asymmetrical power relations, as explored in the earlier chapters, are at the centre of these two texts: Atwood's challenges stereotypes – gender, disciplinary (science being traditionally thought of as a masculine practice) – with her first sustained male protagonist, while McEwan's dissects the social and intellectual primacy of science in twenty-first century England against those who are left out of this march of progression.

The history of science is one that is preoccupied with power. Indeed, from the Enlightenment onwards, the idea of power systems has never been far from any of its permutations, such that within the academic and intellectual fields, there have been varying degrees of ambivalence, anxiety towards, and even attempts to appropriate, scientific authority. Artists and thinkers, in particular, from William Blake to the Romantics, from Matthew Arnold to F.R. Leavis, have grappled with not just the power relations, but also the implications of the distinction between, as well as the symbiotic relationship of, the rational and the aesthetic.

During the Renaissance the discipline of science and the humanities enjoyed a close and complementary relationship, ‘a shared sense of knowledge’, (Spiller 2004:3). Elizabeth Spiller argues that the terms ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ are

historically and culturally specific (*ibid*:1), and stresses the sense of artificiality of both poems and compasses at that period as part of the epistemology of interpreting the world. Such an inclusive approach towards producing and spreading knowledge continued into the eighteenth century, when imperial exploration reached its zenith. Tim Fulford suggests that during this time poetry and science were both ‘parts of a Janus-faced inquiry into the principles that animate both mind and nature’ (2004:4), as naturalists, botanists, explorers, writers, government administrators, and other keen social commentators responded to the new world made available to them – first-hand or through reports – by the technological inventions of that time.

While the Renaissance and the Romantic tradition of a largely inclusive view of science and humanities continued into the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>54</sup> change was afoot that heralded a split between the disciplines. During the Victorian era, technological inventions such as the steam engine resulted in rapid changes to both landscape and lifestyles, with the pace of scientific advancement outstripping the public’s attempts to comprehend these changes. To the extent that supporters of the aesthetic and the scientific began to view each other only across a wide gulf, T.H. Huxley – who defended Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) against his detractors – in his 1880 address at the opening of the working-class technological and financial Mason College, argued strenuously for the place of science on the national curriculum which had been traditionally of a classical emphasis.<sup>55</sup> The cultural critic Matthew Arnold, whose *Culture and Anarchy* was referenced in Huxley’s speech, responded to Huxley in his Rede lecture of 1883,<sup>56</sup> insisting that while a good education should include studies of tracts such as Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* and Darwin’s text – what he identified as ‘instrument knowledge’ (1974:63) – it is the ‘humane letters’ that would help in establishing ‘a relation between the new conceptions, and our instinct for beauty, our instinct for conduct’ (*ibid*:66). Essentially, despite the groundbreaking work

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<sup>54</sup> Gillian Beer writes, ‘scientists still shared a common language with other educated readers and writers of their time’ in the mid-nineteenth century; ‘they shared a literary, non-mathematical discourse which was readily available to readers without a scientific training. Their texts could be read very much as literary texts.’ (*Darwin’s Plot*, 1983:4). See also her *Open Fields* (1996:174-5).

<sup>55</sup> T.H. Huxley, ‘Science and Culture’, in *The Major Prose of Thomas Henry Huxley*, Alan P. Barr (ed.), pp. 224-238.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew Arnold, ‘Literature and Science’, in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 10, R.H. Super (ed.), pp.53-73. Further references to this essay will be given with the date of publication (1974) of this edition of the collection.

done by Darwin and his peers that revolutionarised our view of mankind's relationship with nature, Arnold's firm belief in the superior attributes of the humanities – integrative, enlightening, civilising – is an example of the departure from the pre-Victorian integration of these two fields of study.

In the mid-twentieth century, this simmering quarrel was re-ignited by C.P. Snow's *The Two Cultures* (1959). Pointing to the need for a reformation of the English education system, he advocated for a movement away from the emphasis on classical studies for 'a tiny elite' towards one that equips the country with the knowledge and skills to meet the challenges of twentieth-century industrial and scientific revolution (1959:19). Yet, despite acknowledging the 'gulf of miscomprehension' between the two disciplines (*ibid*:4), and that 'the dialectic is a dangerous process' (*ibid*:9), Snow does not attempt, in any sustained manner, to bridge this distance between them. Rather, his writing supports their dialectical relationship by insisting on a particularly negative perception of literary intellectuals as 'natural Luddites' (*ibid*:21), slow to respond to changes around them compared to the scientists (*ibid*:8). It is this rather partial treatment of the issue that contemporary critics such as F.R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling strongly objected to. For Leavis, Snow's failure to acknowledge the contribution of the humanities towards our understanding of the Industrial Revolution, especially in the form of Victorian artists and writers who had articulated and mediated the immense changes wrought upon human lives by this ascendency of technology and science, was the main sticking point.<sup>57</sup> While Trilling agreed with Leavis on this point, the former's even-handed argument also noted the all too personal attack that Leavis staged against Snow (his novels, his social position, etc) that was not only 'cruel' but also neglectful of the various implications of Snow's views.<sup>58</sup> Pointing out Snow's failure to offer 'a single substantive proposal about education' (1966:160), Trilling also considered the political ramification of his conviction that science would help in overcoming differences between the West and the Soviet Union which was largely unspoken in his lecture (1966:162-3). In the end, Trilling comes out in support of literature's ability to question our society's beliefs and practices, which is a task that science, he

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<sup>57</sup> F. R. Leavis (1962) *Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow* (London: Chatto and Windus). The first version of this is in the form of the Richmond Lecture, "The Significance of C.P. Snow", in Cambridge on 28 February 1962, and then published in *The Spectator* (9 March).

<sup>58</sup> Lionel Trilling (1966) 'The Snow-Leavis Controversy', in Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, pp.145-177, 150.

argues, is unable to undertake. Both Arnold and Trilling were of the same mind as to the greater benefits to be gained from the study of the humanities, as opposed to science. Yet, as the mid-twentieth century advanced, it became patently clear that science was on the ascendance; the pendulum had begun to swing the other way.

As Patricia Waugh notes, over the years the quarrels between the two intellectual realms ‘have been most intense when one form of knowledge lays claim to the exclusive title to all knowledge’ (1999:34). What has changed from Snow’s time is the current dominance of the scientific discourse in our society. While previous assumptions of the irrevocable split between the empirical and the artistic were challenged in the 1980s by the postmodern aesthetic view of relativism that echoed and reflected the shift in the study of physics to include Werner Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and Neils Bohrs’ Principle of Complementarity, as well as Thomas Kuhn’s notion of paradigm shift (Waugh 1999:38-42), any optimistic anticipation of a continuing synergy between the two fields is short-lived. According to Waugh, by the 1990s, science, in a series of ‘imperialistic moves’, crossed into the realm of the humanities and their traditional concerns of man’s cultural and social roles (2005:71). At the same time, Joseph Carroll proposes that a theoretical vacuum had sprung up in literary studies in the late-twentieth century, with no new political or intellectual impulse capturing the imagination of scholars and thinkers (2004:xi). It appears, then, that the time was ripe at the close of the twentieth century – with the impetus from the discovery of DNA at the start of the century and the subsequent research on genetics science – for a resurgence in interest in the origins of life, although this time the social and cultural aspects of the discourse are more explicit than Darwin’s time. Indeed, both Waugh and A.S. Byatt identify the seeping of Darwinism into ethics, politics, and even the novelistic domain, the process arguably inaugurated by Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene* (1976) (Waugh 2005:60; Byatt 2000:65). Ian McEwan himself describes natural history and biology as ‘a descriptive science’ (2001a). Does this expanding area of interest in both science and narrative writing herald a much longed for consilience of two old opponents? Or is there more to this old couple of science and arts than meets the eye?

Science in recent years has taken on new partners and forged new alliances. In the late twentieth century the scientific academia’s engagement with

commercial ventures, according to the sociologist and historian of science Steven Shapin, opens up ‘new possibilities for biomedical scientists: new ways of making large sums of money; new institutional forms for doing science; a new practical and moral texture for the scientific life’ (2008:5). Jürgen Habermas also notes the recent interrelationship between biotechnological research, investors’ interests, and ‘the pressure for success felt by national governments’ (2003:18). He sees a need for a review of scientific practices as we know them, as well as ‘the distinction between the “grown” and the “made”, the subjective and the objective’ (*ibid*:23). All these developments, together with public debates on the effects of climate change and the inexorable depletion of natural resources, have led many to question the implications of the predominance and hegemony of scientific practices today – even as the humanities are relegated to second-cousin status<sup>59</sup> – and its close ties with financial, political and at times military interests and organisations.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, while it appears that Snow’s fight for science to receive its due respect and recognition has been successful, we have to further or update his argument by taking into account not just the subordinated position of the humanities, but also how power relations represents and mediates between the arts and science, as well as the various players with a hand in scientific research and development.

This section proposes to critically examine the nature of this power struggle between these two disciplines by analysing how two contemporary authors, in their individual novels, frame, negotiate and complicate this issue. Susan Merrill Squier points out that most critics interested in this debate have ‘tended to cluster in Victorian studies and postmodern literary theory’ (2004:25), while Earl G. Ingersoll, in *Representations of Science and Technology in British*

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, the government cuts in funding and staff for social sciences and arts for the major universities in Britain in 2009, while grants for science research remains stable or has actually increased; Polly Curtis and Anthea Lipsett, ‘Top universities face cuts in research funding’, *The Guardian* (5 March 2009), p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> For discussions on the political and commercial influences upon scientific research, see, for example, Kyla Dunn, ‘Cloning Trevor’, *Atlantic Monthly* 286:6 (June 2002), pp. 31-52; Steven Shapin, ‘I’m a Surfer’, *London Review of Books* (20 March 2008), pp. 5-8; and Clive Cookson and Demetri Sevastopulor, ‘Obama go-ahead for stem cell funds’, *Financial Times* London (UK), (10 March 2009), p. 6.

For reports on how the recent financial downturn has affected government funding and commercial investment in scientific research, see, for example, Heidi Ledford, ‘Biotechs feel the pain’, *Nature* 457:7226 (8 January 2009), pp. 136-7; Elias A. Zerhouni, ‘Beyond the Stimulus’ (Editorial), *Science* 323 (20 February 2009), p. 983 and in the same publication ‘Science Wins \$21 Billion Boost as Stimulus Package Becomes Law’, pp. 992-3.

For a view of the military’s role in spearheading research in technoscience, see David Hambling, ‘Nanotechnology goes to war’, *The Guardian* (5 March 2009), p. 6.

*Literature Since 1880* (1992), has concentrated on English writers who address the contemporary responses to science and technology in their works, such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four* (1949) and William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955). I hope to expand the current discussion with my reading of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005); while keeping an eye on how the debate of science versus art unfold over the decades, I intend to draw out the nuances and tensions inherent in the debate of science versus art by analysing the implications of Darwinian ideas on evolution and nature, issues of positionality and power, as well as their association with sympathy and compassion. Most importantly for me, both Atwood and McEwan draw on the ever-increasing prominence of genetic knowledge in their narratives, so that both literary spaces and voices articulate, exchange and problematise existing views of our attempt to come to terms with this new-found biological perspective into our bodies, identity, and nature; as with the other two preceding sections, my focus will be on the criss-crossing of lines of discourses and practices with unequal power distribution – in this case the interplay of humanities or the ways of being humane, with the authoritative narratives of science and technology.

With science leading the way into the second millennium (Turney 1998), the possibility of an equitable relation with the arts remains unfulfilled. Lyotard's view of a declining faith in totalising narratives, likewise, has proven to be too presumptuous; in fact, as Gillian Beer has asserted, his claim 'is, naturally, the grandest narrative of all', and 'authoritative narratives have a way of re-forming' (1996:193-4).<sup>61</sup> Despite past debates that have strongly argued for the constructivist nature of scientific practices and beliefs,<sup>62</sup> instances of the recurring insistence on the legitimising agency of technoscience continue to surface in contemporary intellectual writing, as seen in E.O. Wilson's recent claim that 'Science is neither a philosophy nor an ideology', nor is it 'an idiosyncratic contrivance of Western civilisation'; 'The knowledge it generates is the most

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<sup>61</sup> See also Waugh (2005), pp.71-2.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Sharon Traweek's 'Unity, Dyads, Triads, Quads, and Complexity: Cultural Choreographies of Science', *Social Text* 46/47 (Spring-Summer 1996), pp. 129-139. In the essay Traweek advocates thinking beyond singularities in our references to generic terms such as 'science' and 'truth', and asks 'Why is mental monogamy required?' (137). While I agree with her exhortation to think beyond singularities or binaries, I also want to explore in this dissertation the complexities that come not just with her suggested stance of multiplicity, but persistent authoritative statements and beliefs that weave through the advocacy of heterogeneity in much of our current intellectual debates and works.

inclusive and transparent, as well as the most democratic, available to all humanity'.<sup>63</sup> My critical reading of *Oryx and Crake* will address this impulse towards a totalising view of scientific potentialities and knowledge that underline our contemporary view of the human body as well as nature itself, even as the humanities interrogate such claims to power. Similarly, though from a different approach, *Saturday* portrays the inherent tension within the 'two cultures' debate in the twenty-first century, and from there questions our moral responses towards a genetic knowledge of the other in our lives.

One of the main focuses of this chapter will be on the significance of the scientific perspective and the authority it confers on the supposedly impartial observer. Critics such as Amanda Anderson (2001) as well as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (1992) have highlighted the Victorian cultivation of manners of detachment, objectivity, and self-discipline in their development of a scientific discourse and practice. This approach has a part to play in man's evolving relation to nature up till today. Indeed, Jon Turney comments on how with modern scientific research, the term 'Life' itself 'has become less recognisable' as laboratory work prioritises empirical and factual data, culminating in the ultimate reductive view of the human body as 'encoded information', 'a vessel for the propagation of DNA', that facilitates manipulation, interference and radical changes (1998:44-5). Invasive scientific work that comes with the invention of the microscope, according to Evelyn Fox Keller (1996) – involving objects to be scrutinised prepared initially by slicing and dissecting them, and later with the electron microscope the facility to inject or pull apart genetic material – further substantiates the implicit power of the scientific observer and worker. Both Atwood and McEwan explicitly address this enhanced ability of the biological scientist and medical personnel respectively in their work, revealing the associated problems and questions, especially in conjunction with issues such as the rampant commercialisation of scientific research, interpersonal relations and moral obligations.

An example of how scientific and biological perspectives can be considered side by side with fictional narratives can be seen in the two novels to be discussed in this chapter. Beer's identification of the influence of Darwin's

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<sup>63</sup> E.O. Wilson, 'Foreword from the Scientific Side', in Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (eds.) (2005), *The Literary Animal*, pp. vii-xi, x.

evolutionary theory in narrative structures reveals the tension between the causal theory of natural selection and Darwin's description of the 'superfecundity' of life forms developing through the ages (1983:6). In *Oryx and Crake*, the novel's neat alternating numbered chapters, further divided into titled sections, is interrupted by its protagonist's frequent recollections as well as by the myriad transgenic beings that stretch our recognition of what is termed 'natural'. McEwan's *Saturday* displays similar marked chapters that are undermined by a sense of uncontrollable events and fluid memories. Each chapter occupies a particular space: the protagonist's home, his car, a squash court, shops, and then home again. With the narrative consistently broken up by the protagonist's thoughts, ruminations and mental struggles as he goes through his Saturday, the novel juxtaposes his love of control and clarity in his life with a spiralling sense of a profound helplessness as the day progresses. This tussle between a materialist and empirical outlook on life and the impossibility of enforcing a sense of order and predictability on reality is also seen in how both novels stress the affinity – or lack thereof – of the protagonists with their worlds, which in turn raises questions about how we interpret and negotiate one of the great narratives of our times: the evolution of human beings from both a Darwinian and genetic viewpoint.

In the following chapters, I will firstly examine Atwood's representation of our current position vis-à-vis the 'two cultures' debate in *Oryx and Crake*: science is now a major presence in almost all areas of our lives, what place, then, is there for a humane – and humanistic – understanding of our place in such an empirical and material discourse? I will also explore the metanarrative of scientific progress as depicted in the novel, particularly with regards to how it affects our comprehension of our relationship with nature and, by extension, our humanity. Following this, I will analyse the power differentials entrenched in and resulting from commercial enterprises and academic institutions that spill over to the entire society: traditional class distinction gives way to those possessors and dis-possessors of scientific knowledge and finance. Summing up this discussion of Atwood's novel, I shall employ the features of the dystopia/utopia genre as a way to approach the conundrum of the 'two cultures' debate in our time. My reading of McEwan's *Saturday* in the final chapter of this dissertation centers on the protagonist's resolutely scientific approach to life and to others around him; departing tangentially from my discussion of Atwood's novel, I will critique the

privileged scientific man looking at the ‘other’ in the midst of his society – except that, in this case, it is not based so much on differences shaped by race or gender, but, in some ways, by education, and more importantly, genes. Thus, I move from an examination of the relationship between man and nature to one between man and man, and its attendant implications for moral perspectives. The ethical and moral stance is in turn affected by the aesthetic perspective that encourages empathetic understanding and compassionate responses, and this is played against the calculating and detached world view of the protagonist in *Saturday*. My conclusion will sum up the main issues that have preoccupied my reading of these two novels, and point to a few salient considerations to our approach towards science and the humanities in the coming years.

## Chapter 5: Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: Interrogating Nature, Bodies, and Genres

When Atwood describes the novel *Oryx and Crake*, in an interview with Martin Halliwell in 2003, as representing a type of ‘twentieth and twenty-first century zeitgeist’ (Halliwell 2003:257), she firmly anchors the text in the concerns of our times, although the setting is a futuristic one. The experience of reading the novel is akin to entering a world – or part of a world, namely the Compounds – where science dominates both private and public spheres of life in ways that radically challenge familiar concepts and acts that are recognised as “natural”, “human” or “animal”. The literary-inclined protagonist, Jimmy/Snowman, is a misfit in such a society, but his best friend, Crake, is the brilliant scientist who does wondrous work with genetic engineering, and as a manifestation of the pinnacle of his skills and knowledge, creates an improved version of humanity, the Crakers. Giving a new twist to the term *tabula rosa*, Crake proceeds to annihilate all humanity (including himself) so as to allow his creation to thrive. As a safeguard measure, however, he lets his childhood friend survive the catastrophe, and thus Jimmy/Snowman ends up as the guardian of the new humanoid species.

My focus is on the novel’s mediations of, and meditations on, the ways in which the grand narrative of scientific progress in our modern society is perpetuated, manipulated, subverted, as well as resisted. In our current moment, when scientific methods, processes and operations claim to offer the best solution to our problems and troubles in modern society, Atwood considers how the humanities have responded to this phenomenon by having its artistic protagonist inhabit a technoscientific society. Furthermore, the writer shows that within the discourse of scientific rationality there are also references and appeals to mythical images, fictional narratives and imaginary states, albeit largely unacknowledged. At the same time, Atwood also questions the value of the literary emphasis on the erudite and lettered when such practitioners are removed from the business of ordinary life to appeal only to the converted.

In the earlier sections, I have shown how gender and race/class are impacted by tussles for power and control; here, while keeping in mind that discourse, I would like to focus more specifically on science and its displays and performances of power, especially in the light of Darwin’s theory of evolution and

our ever-greater capability to fundamentally alter our surroundings as well as ourselves. Even though we are now familiar with the postmodern destabilisation of traditionally fixed referents such as Nature, Man and the body, the narrative of the novel, with its dizzying examples of boundary- or species-crossing, demands that we rethink the power, effect, and efficacy of technoscience. Add to this the impact of corporate capitalism – a presence that is to be reckoned with in all biotechnological undertakings today – the balance of power between literature and science is taken to another dimension.

The novel is thus a densely imagined narrative that is constantly preoccupied with how we are to live in the near future, if our present western industrialised society continues as it is. At the heart of the narrative is a concern with our tendency, despite postmodernism's avowal of heterogeneity and fluidity, to (re)lapse into dualistic modes of thinking and perceiving that invariably problematise – instead of relieving – long-standing issues of power structures and relations. *Oryx and Crake* constructs a dialogue between these various players that updates Snow's concept of the 'two cultures' in the twenty-first century.<sup>64</sup>

### The “two cultures” debate still?

Identifying Jimmy as 'a Humanist figure' and Crake as 'a Science figure' in his review of *Oryx and Crake*, Daniel Mendelsohn complains that these 'clanking schemas leave you cold' (2003:46).<sup>65</sup> Jimmy indeed exhibits a greater affinity for the literary than the numerical; Atwood describes him as a 'word person', 'out of step with his times' since his world is one in which scientifically-inclined people such as Crake are rewarded (Halliwell 2003:256). Atwood's admission, then, appears to confirm Snow's notion of the 'two cultures', and thus to agree with Mendelsohn's opinion that the author has constructed two-dimensional characters that play out such a binary relationship, ostensibly with the protagonist defending the literary corner against that of science and mathematics. Both within and away from this novel, Atwood has indicated that her response to this issue is definitely more nuanced.

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<sup>64</sup> Is there a connection between the word-lover Jimmy's choice of a nickname, 'Snowman' (with all its attendant mythological and legendary associations), with C.P. Snow and his debate on the merits of science over the arts?

<sup>65</sup> He also describes Oryx as a 'Love/Beauty' figure, the relevance of which I have discussed in my chapter "Feminism".

Although Atwood has admitted that her characters approach caricature, she grounds them firmly in her reflections on society: ‘my writing is closer to caricature than satire – distortion rather than scathing attack – and as I say, it’s largely realism.’ (Sandler 1976:35-6) Because her aim is not to censure but to magnify certain traits of well-known personas such as the scientist and the artist in this instance, and because she takes pains to ensure her characters do not depart too far from reality, the characters are stereotypical up to a point only. Beyond that, Atwood’s depiction of their interactions with each other, and with their society, diverges from familiar patterns of behaviour. Jimmy, the apparent sole human survivor, appears to be vindicated in his literary bent, while Crake, perishing in the viral epidemic that wipes out almost the entire human race, seems to have had his comeuppance for daring to tinker with nature. Yet, the novel sets up these archetypal scenes and personas only to subject them to a thorough interrogation.

Jimmy’s world is contrary to Snow’s perspective of his times. It is one that is shaped, controlled and mediated almost entirely by science, technology and capitalist motives, a recognisable – if radicalised – representation of both our current moment and what she describes as the setting of her book, ‘the not-so-distant future’ (Halliwell 2003:253). Atwood thus reflects a situation that is quite different from Snow’s concern for the dominance of the humanities during his time. Gillian Beer also notes this contemporary divergence:

In the mid- and late nineteenth-century the humanities were still in the ascendant in schools and university studies, whereas now the appeal to authority is usually in the direction of science. In that way our present situation differs [...] from that described thirty years ago by C.P. Snow in *The Two Cultures*. (1996:174)

Since Beer wrote these words, science has been the legitimating discipline more than ever in the twenty-first century, especially with the current interest in the promise of genetic research. It is thus unsurprising that Atwood denies that *Oryx and Crake* is a working-out of the “two cultures” debate, especially for her protagonist:

For Jimmy it’s just the way the world is. It is not an argument; it just reflects how things are. You know, you don’t have an argument about whether or not there are trains – there are trains. You can then talk about how well they run, but that’s a different conversation. (Halliwell 2003:256-7)

The hegemony of scientific discourse is therefore no longer a matter of deliberation but as ‘how things are’; it is difficult to even imagine the tide turning to that of Snow’s time again. The novel then asks: How would things turn out if we carry on with such a state? How will it affect the way we see ourselves and our lives? What is the role for those of us with an aptitude more for the arts than the sciences, for people such as Jimmy/Snowman? In the following discussion, I will examine Atwood’s depiction of each end of the polarised relations between arts and science – as represented by Jimmy/Snowman and Crake respectively; I am particularly interested in the continuum between these two disciplines that the writer has revealed as a more insightful and rewarding position to adopt than that of a polemical one.

### **Jimmy/Thickney/Snowman**

One of the best ways to read the protagonist of *Oryx and Crake*, I believe, is to think about the meaning of his name(s). After all, he is the self-appointed collector of obsolete words in a society that views language in purely economic or functional terms. In the novel, the name ‘Jimmy’ is used solely in the sections that precede the viral meltdown, that is, the protagonist’s childhood before, and later his life in, the exclusive Compounds. In contrast, both Crake and Oryx’s names are taken from a computer game, ‘Extinctathon’, the boys played in their teenagers, where players challenge each other’s knowledge of extinct animal species in the last fifty years. While Crake is named after the ‘Red-necked Crake’, a rare Australian bird (98), Oryx’s name derives from ‘a gentle water-conserving East African herbivore’ that is, by then, extinct (373-4). I have earlier discussed the significance of Jimmy/Snowman not knowing Oryx’s real name – it emphasises the limitation of his ability towards comprehending the Other, and his agency over her at shaping and imagining an identity for her. As for Crake, who rejects from his youth his given name of ‘Glenn’, the protagonist colludes with this shift in identity – ‘for Crake’s later persona blotted out his earlier one’ (85); the brilliant scientist has come to be inextricably associated with his creation, the Crakers. In a world where new life-forms can be conjured with the help of biotechnology, one’s name and identity is thus increasingly susceptible to manipulation and transformation, such that the meaning of the term ‘original’ is

no longer apparent or stable. As with Sam in *The Hamilton Case*, Anil in *Anil's Ghost*, and Sister in *The Carhullan Army*, names – given, bought, or adopted – have become one of the most fluid markers of identity in the twenty-first century, subjected to power dynamics across gender, class, and racial lines.

For Jimmy, he suspects that Crake's chosen name for him, 'Thickney', denotes not just an extinct creature – 'a defunct Australian double-jointed bird that used to hang around in cemeteries' (84) – but also of the connotation of imbecility associated with it (98). Thus, the difference between the two childhood friends cannot be greater: Crake's superior command of factual details eventually enables him to become a Grandmaster of the game, and perhaps from there the seeds of ideas such as the extermination and creation of living organisms began to germinate in his mind. The irony, of course, is that these chosen names of extinct animals foreshadow not just the death of Crake and Oryx themselves in the novel, but also the annihilation of the entire human race. Jimmy's name of 'Thickney' also bears a double association with death and loss, reflected in his subordinate social position in the Compounds due to his lack of affiliation with the sciences, his obsession with long-lost words, and his eventual fate as the last man on earth. Poignantly, when alone with the Crakers, Jimmy rejects Crake's vision, and flouts the rule of their childhood game:

It was one of Crake's rules that no name could be chosen for which a physical equivalent – even stuffed, even skeletal – could not be demonstrated. No unicorns, no griffins, no manticores or basilisks. But those rules no longer apply, and it's given Snowman a bitter pleasure to adopt this dubious label. The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edge of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints [...] For present purposes he's shortened the name. He's only Snowman. He's kept the *abominable* to himself, his own secret shirt hair. (10)

Apart from Crake's empirical and detached attitude evidenced in the above quote, Jimmy's choice of a 'new' identity – Snowman – can be interpreted as a subversion of Crake's rule, a way of wresting some kind of control over his fate as a forlorn later-day Robinson Crusoe. Paralleling the earlier literary figure of the lone survivor accompanied by an innocent, child-like native, Jimmy/Snowman is forced to re-examine his identity as a word-lover, for identity and language in the absence of historical references are destabilised: the Crakers 'don't know what a snowman is, they've never seen snow' (10). Do new words have to be invented

for their shared world? What are the roles of storytelling and literature in the face of the rapid biotechnological development in our time?

On another level, the reference to the liminal status of The Abominable Snowman, ‘apelike man or manlike ape’, brings to mind Beer’s discussion of the Darwinian process of natural selection, specifically the concept of the missing link between apes and man as proof of the evolutionary process (*Open Fields* 1996). This discourse of the search or belief in concrete manifestations of man’s gradual evolution from primates, according to Beer, fed into the imagination of the Victorian public, and had literary, social, and political implications. The suggestion here of man’s ancestral development can be helpful when referencing the Crakers and Jimmy/Snowman, which I will take up in a later section in this chapter. Jimmy’s act of truncating the name to just ‘Snowman’ denotes his vulnerable and aberrant status on a planet that is undergoing global warming. Indeed, the protagonist admits that ‘Maybe he’s not the Abominable Snowman after all’, but merely a snowman ‘set up as a joke and pushed down as entertainment’. In this comic figure, he perceives the aptness of the name that points to his very real state of precariousness, of him not merely being ‘the last *Homo sapiens* – a white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow, so easily shoved over, left to melt in the sun’ (271), but also the usefulness and relevance of a word-smith in a ruined world.

It is this rich interplay of meanings – at times contradictory – that makes the protagonist’s name(s) so significant. Viewed against the backdrop of evolutionary and scientific pressures, Jimmy/Thickney/Snowman represents the ideas of extinction, the vulnerability of life itself (as transient as a snowman’s presence) and the state of the earth to come in the narrative. In the post-apocalyptic narrative of Jimmy/Snowman, Atwood uses both names together to problematise attempts at demarcating clearly the past and present, the concrete and the fictional, the objective and the subjective, and identity itself. Similarly, Crake’s demise as well as Jimmy/Snowman’s severely compromised existence after the apocalypse is an undermining of the seemingly irrevocable oppositional and polemical relationship between science and art, and its associated implications: this will be the main focus in the next section.

### **Jimmy's Words**

Jimmy, though living a privileged life in the Compounds thanks to his father's position at a prestigious biomedical company, is a misfit. At school, he was 'a mid-range student, high on his word scores but a poor average in the numbers column' (211-2). Probably the most humiliating moment for him was the Student Auction at his high school graduation, where various university-like EduCompounds compete for the best students. Needless to say, the brainiest students are snapped up by these institutions funded primarily by wealthy companies, who see them as likely future contributors to their research and thus profit margins. While Crake, being top of his class, was quickly welcomed into the folds of the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute, Jimmy 'was knocked down at last to the Martha Graham Academy; and even that only after a long spell of lacklustre bidding' (212-3). This reductive view of students, ranked according to the premium placed on their aptitude for the 'harder' subjects of mathematics and science, is reflected in Jimmy's relegation to the run-down, poorly-funded liberal-arts academy that struggles, as the protagonist did, to find its place in a society (as in Lyotard's delineation of a postmodern society) that values scientific accuracy and performativity. There, the curriculum is geared towards 'utilitarian aims' reflected in the school's motto "Our Students Graduate with Employable Skills" (229), and Jimmy is taught the skill of what he calls 'window-dressing', that is, 'decorating the cold, hard numerical real world in flossy 2-D verbiage' (229). His act of rebellion is to wilfully 'pursue the superfluous as an end in itself' by compiling lists of 'words of a precision and suggestiveness that no longer had a meaningful application in today's world':

He memorised these hoary locutions, tossed them left-handed into conversation: *wheelwright, lodestone, saturnine, adamant*. He'd developed a strangely tender feeling towards such words, as if they were children abandoned in the woods and it was his duty to rescue them. (238)

Jimmy's identification with the literary is complete when we note the similarity between his observation of the sense of abandonment inherent in these anachronistic words, his own neglect by both his parents as well as society, and Snowman's loneliness and anguish after the apocalypse, when he 'feels the need to hear a human voice' (13). His sense of isolation and displacement also foretells his later somewhat ambivalent feelings towards the child-like Crakers, of whom he is the sole protective guardian. Here, Atwood identifies one of the ways in

which the subordinated literary realm responds to the domination of science and technology; Jimmy draws consolation from these defunct words, perhaps as a form of identity, or even as resistance against the overwhelming tide of the mechanistic world he inhabits, his attempt to carve out a viable space for himself. But is this attempt at shoring up the crumbling literary edifice sufficient, and how would his love for words help in his dealings with the Crakers, an entirely new species of being lacking the referential knowledge of mankind?

Jimmy/Snowman is the third-person focalizer of the novel: the story is told from his perspective. As the narration alternates between Snowman and Jimmy's stories, the present and the past are reflected not only in the twining of his names (Jimmy/Snowman) as mentioned earlier, but also in the tenses used, and as previously mentioned the respective naming of the protagonist in each section denoting pre- and post-apocalypse. This clear temporal and spatial division, reminiscent of a tidy, logically-sequenced scientific or mathematical manual, is complicated – and undermined – by the apparently random single-word naming of the subsections in each chapter, as well as the selectivity and, at times confusion, of Snowman's memories and impressions. Take, for instance, Snowman's piecemeal recollection of his bioscientist father:

What did his father look like? Snowman can't get a fix on it [...] he can recall his father only in details: the Adam's apple going up and down when he swallowed, the ears backlit against the kitchen window, the left hand lying on the table, cut off by the shift cuffs. His father is a sort of pastiche. Maybe Jimmy could never get far enough away from him to see all the parts at once.  
(57-8)

Jimmy/Snowman has associated the work of his father – a genographer working at the cutting-edge of gene manipulation in animals and humans – with that of his view of him as a person. This splintered image reflects the postmodern fragmentation of hitherto coherent entities, and reinforces the sense of alienation that Jimmy experiences growing up in a world where words and language are valued only for their contribution to the profit-oriented machinery of powerful companies. The narrative thus reveals Jimmy/Snowman's struggle to construct a coherent, logical overview of his life and identity; of course, he fails miserably as all around him, familiar entities and beings are reconfigured and transformed in unprecedented ways. Adding to his sense of displacement is his father's disappointment with his son's lack of aptitude for all things scientific and

mechanistic. What the protagonist identifies with – words, language, the figurative – irrevocably locates him in an untenable position in his world.

In addition, another contributing factor towards Jimmy's sense of displacement is that language itself – the very last bastion of familiarity and mastery for him – has also been made to accommodate new meanings and referents, as seen in the ‘spliced’ names of the hybrid animals created in the Compound (Wolvogs, Rakunks), in the names of commercial companies (OrganInc, RejoovenEsense, AnooYoo), and Crake’s laboratory Paradice. Is this then the way forward for literature and language? Recent existing companies in our time, such as Genetech (Shapin 2008:5) and Sensatex (a textile company creating T-shirts that monitor bodily functions),<sup>66</sup> resonate with the novel’s inventions. When Jimmy becomes Snowman, Atwood appears to partake of such a modern approach to life forms and institutions, in the form of the protagonist’s morphed and compound identity; the twist is that the Abominable Snowman is mythical, while a snow man is simply transient and insubstantial. These are possibly the ways in which the protagonist understands his position in the post-apocalyptic world populated only by Crake’s humanoid beings.

In the later parts of the novel, the sense of a breakdown of identity and language intensifies: ‘Rag ends of language’ run through his mind in a stream that he is barely able to halt or direct (181). That they have lost their meaning and any form of stable referent is signalled by his eventual recognition that he is ‘lost in the fog. No benchmarks.’ (287). Signifier and signified are detached and free-floating. While he could still sneak some of his archaic words into his earlier conversations at Martha Graham, now with only the infant-like Crakers as companions, they threaten to vanish and dissolve, unanchored as they are in concrete reality:

From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can’t reach the word. He can’t attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space. (45-46)

“Hang on to the words,” he tells himself. The odd words. The old words. The rare ones. *Valance*. *Norn*. *Serendipity*. *Pibroch*. *Lubricious*. When they’re gone out of his head, these words, they’ll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been. (82)

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<sup>66</sup> Cathy Newman, ‘Dreamweavers’, *National Geographic* 203:1 (January 2003), p. 50. This article also highlights the various technoscientific innovations that eerily echo what Atwood has described as the work of the Compound scientists.

Without a shared sense of history and experiences, Jimmy/Snowman's store of words is useless, and he is reduced to clutching at them as though at thin air as they fade away from disuse, as immaterial as the connotation of his nickname. Atwood thus signals that language is only efficient and effective when it is part of the social materiality of one's world, not hoarded as esoteric artefacts, kept away from handling and usage, as what the protagonist has done. Although Jimmy/Snowman tries to hoist his references onto the Crakers – their exchange concerning the meaning of the word ‘toast’ is especially relevant and grimly humorous (118-9)<sup>67</sup> – having not inhabited a western civilisation, understandably they have no inkling of what he is trying to say. The Crakers’ world is the reality for Snowman, and it is difficult to find a place for his wordlists in the aftermath of the catastrophe, when all signs of life – as an advanced society would know it – have been wiped out. By extension, should the pace of scientific advancement outstrip that of the ability of the linguistic and literary to catch up and satisfactorily reflect meanings and voice arguments, the onward march of ‘progress’ will be one that is historically void and intolerant of alternative mediating views, which is especially important for without it – as seen in *Oryx and Crake* where the partnering of science and capitalism dominates society to the exclusion of all other forms of ideology – we are impoverished intellectually and spiritually.

The discussion thus far has focused on how names and language – and thus identity – are challenged by a radically changing environment that knows itself only by its scientific work and discoveries, depriving human emotions and imagination of effective representation. After Jimmy’s mother is executed by the state for participating in the underground resistance movement against the commercial research companies, Jimmy notes the failure of language to accurately reflect his emotions: ‘Language itself had lost its solidity; it had

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<sup>67</sup> Snowman’s attempt to explain the meaning of the word ‘toast’ to the Crakers consists of multiple references to practices that are completely alien to the latter, such as baking, milking and agriculture, as well as the use of electricity. When that failed to elicit any form of understanding from the Crakers, Snowman finds it easier to simply spin a fictional version incorporating elements of anthropology, mythology and history, showing effectively how difficult it is to escape from our epistemological structure: ‘*Toast was a pointless invention from the Dark Ages. Toast was an implement of torture that caused all those subjected to it to regurgitate in verbal form the sins and crimes of their past lives. Toast was a ritual item devoured by fetishists in the belief that it would enhance their kinetic and sexual power.*’ (118-9) Nevertheless, this exercise also shows his power over them, who are ‘like blank pages, he could write whatever he wanted on them.’ (415) It is power that is entirely different from Crake’s, and reflects the ‘two cultures’ debate in the contrast between the imaginary and the performative.

become thin, contingent, slippery, a viscid film on which he was sliding around like an eyeball on a plate. An eyeball that could still see, however. That was the trouble.' (315) This image of a single eyeball, its close connection to Jimmy's narrative positionality, and the inability of language to articulate our worldview, will be the focus of the next section of this chapter.

### *Narrative Perspective and Authority*

At the beginning of the story, among Snowman's meagre possessions salvaged from his past life are his treasured sunglasses – they are essential now that days on the ravaged earth are scorched by the 'punishing sun' (8). But it has one lens missing, thereby prompting the questions as to *how* Snowman sees through this implement, and *what* he can see. The implication of partial and incomplete perspective compels us to pay attention to his story: what kind of narrative does this supposedly 'Humanist figure' construct? What does he miss out, or half-understand? At the same time, a telescope or magnifying glass utilises a single lens,<sup>68</sup> through which one concentrates upon particularities. What does the narrative therefore focus on and why?

The symbolism of the broken sunglasses and the allusion to the single eyeball are significant when we consider Atwood's use of the imagery of a lens in her work:

A lens isn't a mirror. A lens can be a magnifying or focusing lens, but it doesn't merely give a reflection. It gives a condensation [...] I recognise my work more as a distillation or a focusing. (Hammond 1978:68)

This delineation of the process of selecting, prioritising, concentrating and defining (or refining) in Atwood's approach to her creative writing highlights not just its constructive nature, but more importantly her very awareness of it. In *Oryx and Crake*, this is discernible in Snowman/Jimmy's narrative. Snowman's recollection of his past life as Jimmy magnifies his aberrant status within his high-tech world. At the same time, from the symbolism of the single-lens sunglasses, the protagonist's vision of the concrete – as well as imaginative – world lacks perspective: he fails to discern Crake's ulterior motives until it is too late, and struggles in vain to understand Oryx. For scientific knowledge and expertise

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<sup>68</sup> Beer notes, as an early example of the encounter between science and literature, that the microscope and the telescope were influential tools in opening up a world of possibilities 'beyond the present and apparent world' for the Romantic intellectuals, with important implications for both scientific and literary writing of that age (1983:141-2). See also Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (1992) "Images of Objectivity".

might open up the world of the physical world and the human body, but it does not facilitate deeper understanding of human emotions and their interpersonal interaction. Jimmy/Snowman represents the experience of a literary-inclined character in a science-oriented society, even as his narrative critiques the limited efficacy of voicing only one side of the science/art debate.

On one level, the narrative voice obviously privileges Jimmy/Snowman's perspective, and thus his identity as a word person. On another level, although we acknowledge Jimmy's need to preserve and ruminate over his wordlists, just as he is alienated from his life at the Compound, his treasured but defunct words and phrases have loosened themselves from their former moorings, their context, so that though Snowman/Jimmy may strenuously attempt to retain them, they dissolve as quickly in his mind, as discussed above. The image of the single lens/eye reflects Snowman/Jimmy as the focalizer of the narrative who represents only a certain viewpoint; some events and people are magnified in his mind, while others remain hidden or interpretable for him only to a limited degree. Keeping this in mind allows us to address the criticism of numerous reviewers of the novel – that Oryx and Crake (the very title of the novel) are undeveloped characters<sup>69</sup> – with the argument that they are seemingly thus because we come to know them only through a particular partial perspective, that of one who is out of sync with his world and the people around him. Just as Jimmy fails to identify fully with his life in the Compounds, he cannot approach any full understanding of Crake who is so at home within it, even if they do spend many hours together, many of which consist of computer games and online broadcasts. This gulf between them is reminiscent of that postulated by Snow in the ‘two cultures’ debate; Atwood is concerned about the consequence of this difference, for Jimmy, as his one-lens sunglasses suggests, knows too little about Crake’s research or even his ambitious nature, being too caught up in his wordlists – a charge that is often levied on the reclusive scientist, not the literary-inclined. When he does realise the extent of Crake’s endeavours, it is too late.

I have analysed the portrayal of Oryx in her aloofness and mystery in my previous chapter, and will not belabour the point, except to emphasise again how Jimmy wilfully insists on (re)constructing Oryx’s life based on a familiar plotline

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<sup>69</sup> See Natasha Walter (2003) “Pigoons might fly”; and Joan Smith (2003) “And pigs might fly...”.

of her haplessness in the face of sexual and commercial exploitation by others, while ignoring her consistent challenges to such a narrative – a clear example of his one-eyed perspective. Atwood shows that such an act is not as far from Crake's production of the Crakers as one might think; in Jimmy's relationship with Oryx, we perceive the power of the imagination and language to engender – if not new physical beings – identities and histories, even if his compulsion to construct for her an acceptable narrative reveals his failure to challenge the paradigm of knowledge framing his own worldview. For Crake, the scientist who would be objective, he is also caught up in establishing his own narration of humankind through his God-like act of creating the Crakers, and it is this most traditional form of narration that the Crakers themselves turn to through Jimmy/Snowman: the story of their origin.

### *Telling Stories – New and Old*

*Oryx and Crake*, apart from having a protagonist who is obsessive about words and their meanings, is also, on another level, about the need for such words to come together to form narratives that offer a coherent account of our world. Atwood's novel questions the postmodern attempt to debunk authoritative narratives; she explores the lingering need for such overarching stories through the Crakers' persistent badgering of Jimmy/Snowman for an explanatory narrative of their origin. The story that he tells them contains most of the narrative elements within all such creation stories – with a clear beginning, middle and ending; familiar characters; the inevitable mystification of the creation process. However, this is also an ad hoc, quasi-religious story that is self-reflexively ironic. Nevertheless, Jimmy/Snowman finds in the process some form of consolation or comfort for himself, which in its way points to the saliency of such narratives in a time when their very legitimacy is said to be waning.

Atwood, in her portrayal of the Crakers' gradual development of a desire to know their origins, gestures towards our innate need to construct and shape our view of the world through narratives in order to arrive at an understanding of ourselves. Even as Crake, the empirical scientist, declares that 'God is a cluster of neurons' (192), and tweaks the Crakers' genetic structure so that they are supposedly no longer susceptible to any religious urgings, Jimmy/Snowman finds to his exasperated fascination that they nevertheless want to know how they have

come about. This works for and against the protagonist, who barters with them (a fish a week) in exchange for more (actual or fictional) details about their origin, but who also has to constantly face the frustration of shaping bits of biblical narrative and folkloric elements into a believable account. Thus, he explains the inability of animals to speak:

*Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake [the Crakers] out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out, and that is why the animals can't talk.* (117)

This originary story contains familiar references from western culture: Greek and Christian influences, the gender differentiation that gives Oryx the ability to reproduce (as discussed in Chapter 2), and the dominance of mankind over animals. On one hand we cannot escape from narratives – and its accompanying process of drawing on our sphere of experiences for its structural foundation – even as we query the credibility of some of those that try to provide authoritative explanations of our lives. On the other hand, Jimmy/Snowman, the word-lover, is now the creator of a ‘new’ Word: the religious testimony of the Crakers’ existence. Intriguingly, his invention slowly turns into ‘dogma: he would deviate from orthodoxy at his peril’ (126-7). What is ironic is that much as he resents this role that the Crakers have thrust upon him – ‘Why don’t they glorify Snowman instead [...] Why can’t Snowman revise the mythology?’ (126) – in the end he has to admit that in telling about the Crakers’ origin, he is also validating his own existence, for he is ‘the prophet of Oryx’ to the Crakers; ‘He needs to be listened to, he needs to be heard. He needs at least the illusion of being understood.’ (127)

The act of recording and validating our experiences lies primarily in telling and listening to stories, a process that is inextricably intertwined with identity-formation for both the Crakers and Jimmy/Snowman. Though this act is of paramount importance for both parties, the protagonist is painfully aware of its constructivist nature, and thus performs it ironically and self-mockingly. He scrambles together the raggedy ends of the Bible and myths, and ‘made it up as he went along. He knew what an improbable shepherd he was.’ (420) The author thus highlights the conundrum of our age: while we might still hanker after

narratives of our origins, the postmodern scepticism towards the legitimacy of such accounts throws doubt on the entire enterprise. Yet, that incredulity has not completely erased recurring attempts at providing just such determining accounts, the latest of which can be said to be the epistemology of genetic biology, as the later section on Crake and his world view will illustrate.

Another way to approach this is to think about how Atwood's novel touches upon the genre of the apocalyptic narrative, which is preoccupied, more than any other forms of stories, with temporality, the coming of The End. James Berger suggests that the very unfolding of the catastrophe that would destroy everything is marked by the fact that we tell stories about it, so that the apocalypse itself at times is interrupted by continuing post-apocalyptic stories (1999:34). In Atwood's text, the interweaving of past (pre-apocalypse) and present (post-apocalypse) narratives serves to highlight the disparity between the life of 'Jimmy' and 'Snowman'. Yet, both narratives drive towards the same destination: Crake's laboratory Paradise, the site of the beginning of the end. Time as a linear progression – with clearly sign-posted past, present and future – is thus overturned; Snowman's watch no longer works, signalling the 'absence of official time' (5), but his very awareness of his physical survival means he also knows that with the passing of days 'time is running out' (46-7). This double consciousness of temporality can be translated into an understanding of the act of narration: any attempt to construct a linear narrative that provides a totalising view of our lives is, in the postmodern tradition, suspect, but it does not preclude us from recognising our need for such orderly narratives, as seen in the Crakers' and Jimmy/Snowman's experiences above. And it is this last element – the human need to translate our experiences into stories – that Atwood views as the role of the arts in the contemporary age of science, as embodied in Jimmy/Snowman.

Against characters such as Crake with a positivist and mechanistic attitude to the world, Atwood states:

it's still the human imagination, in all its diversity, that propels the train. Literature is an uttering, or outering, of the human imagination. It puts the shadowy forms of thought and feeling [...] out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what our limits may be. (2004:517)

Literature and the arts articulate the unarticulated, shape the fluid, and enlighten the subterranean parts of us, moving us towards comprehension and clarity, but it

does not mean that Snow's 'two-cultures' debate has been won by the arts, as the reviewer Natasha Walters suggests in her reading of the novel as Atwood's attempt to convince us that the wordsmith finally wins over the scientist: 'Perhaps Atwood intends us to believe that language, imagination and a religious sense will ultimately overcome scientific engineering, that the word people will inherit the earth' (2003:26). On the contrary, I argue that *Oryx and Crake* accepts that there is an imbalance of power relations between the two realms; it aims instead to explore how the individual as well as society respond to this disparity, which I will discuss in detail in the next section. Furthermore, the novel does not always present the practitioners of the liberal arts or humanities in a favourable manner. An example is the character of Amanda Payne, Jimmy's 'conceptual artist' girlfriend at Martha Graham (291), and her two male flatmates – also artists – who look down on those from the Compounds (292). One of the flatmates having attempted suicide in the past, and the other drugs, both decide that such acts of existential rebellion confer upon them moral permission to critique authoritatively on the evils of mankind, even as they themselves contribute nothing to better it but ineffectual and pretentious artistic endeavours. Therefore, while it is true that at a level, as Carol Ann Howell has pointed out, the protagonist defends the literary – 'his narrative celebrates words' (2003:20) – of greater note is the author's examination of the negative outcomes when the two cultures are distanced from each other such that each views the other with suspicion, enmity or incomprehension, and her attempt to deconstruct the stereotypes and prejudices that each holds of the other.

Yet, despite Jimmy/Snowman's anguished love for words that irrevocably marks him as an aberrant in his world, as I have argued above, the author does not seem to view the gap between the two realms of knowledge as irrevocably unbreachable. Ideas in fiction, Atwood has suggested, 'are closer to algebra' than commonly thought – especially in the form of 'taking a hypothesis and pushing it as far as it goes' (Sandler 1976:22), as what she has done in *Oryx and Crake*. In this way, she encourages a view of continuity between the polemical positions occupied by science and arts, a dialogue between the disciplines that would bridge the distance between them, with neither party emerging as clear victors in the debate. Furthermore, Atwood has alluded to her family of scientists as an influence in her interest in evolutionary science, while also indicating her

childhood reading material – ‘fairy tales and religious stories’ – as having contributed to her fascination with ‘miraculous changes of shape’; the writer cites *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* as the most influential book she has ever read (Sandler *ibid*:24). This interplay of hard science and mythical or fantastic tales points towards the possibility of a fruitful interaction that throws light on both oft-polarised disciplines, and encourages a move away from oppositional readings.

This section has analysed the character of Jimmy/Snowman and his identification with the artistic. Atwood, using the protagonist’s double names, his singular perspective, and the structure of the novel, explores the fluidity of formerly stable identities and referents today, and thus interrogates not just the easy target of a science that forgets the human, but also the use of language that fails to engage effectively with science. From the Crakers’ demand for details of their origin, the novel also questions the way we tell stories about the world through a linear and coherent structure. But this does not mean that narratives – grand or minor ones – are thus irrelevant. On the contrary, Atwood stresses the role of the arts to continue to provide questions and narratives in order for us to be critically aware of hegemonic scientific practices and beliefs, and is itself an example of a striving towards a meeting of these two polar positions with its blend of scientific and fictional inventions. So, it is now necessary to consider the other component of this debate: Atwood’s portrayal of the scientific community in the novel, particularly its investment in the metanarrative of progress.

### **The Hegemony of Science: Crake’s ‘nature’**

Crake, Jimmy’s childhood friend and later the science genius fought over by well-funded biotechnological firms, is a character that appears to be the antithesis of Jimmy. Detached, aloof, coolly rational and brilliant, he is ‘sinisterly Godlike’ (Mendelsohn 2003:46), part of the familiar literary lineage of ‘mad scientists, from Dr Moreau to Dr Strangelove’ (Showalter 2003). While Crake is neither the creator nor the prime motivator of the novel’s futuristic world, he is its feted and valued member. In the name of progress and achievement, he has ironically engineered the destruction of mankind as we know it today, including himself. This section will discuss Atwood’s challenge of the metanarrative of inexorable scientific advancement in the novel: the ramifications of such a mode

of viewing the world, as well as our relation to it. In addition, how the novel imagines Crake and other Science figures such as him, especially in terms of their dominant relationship with nature, will also be examined. I will then analyse Atwood's portrayal of the idea of perfection inherent in the metanarrative of technoscientific progress, as well as its impact upon humanity. Throughout my argument here, I will refer to Darwin's theory of natural selection, as well as Raymond Williams' discussion of the historical discourse of nature; *Oryx and Crake* is preoccupied with the former as a kind of originary scientific metanarrative of humankind, and the latter which updates and furthers our understanding of the term 'natural'.

#### *The Metanarrative of Scientific Progress*

At the beginning of the section titled 'Fish' in *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman watches the sun set, and marvels at the rich splashes of colours. For their creativity in conferring such evocative names to colours, he celebrates 'the namers of oil paints', though in the next breath, Jimmy proceeds to link it to 'high-class women's underwear'. He thinks,

Rose-Petal Pink, Crimson Lake, Sheer Mist, Burnt Umbra, Ripe Plum, Indigo, Ultramarine – they're fantasies in themselves, such words and phrases. It's comforting to remember that *Homo sapiens* was once so ingenious with language, and not only with language. Ingenious in every direction at once. (120)

The delight in this recollection of the list of colours (or lingerie names, if you will) is palpable for the reader. This applause for mankind's intelligence and level of civilisation, however, is interrupted when we recall the protagonist's inability to understand women, and thus his association of nature with lingerie seems to point to both a tainting of his word-skill and sexual desire bordering on fetishism. Furthermore, Atwood forestalls this congratulatory mood with the following paragraph:

Monkey brains, had been Crake's opinion. Monkey paw, monkey curiosity, the desire to take apart, turn inside out, smell, fondle, measure, improve, trash, discard – all hooked up to monkey brains, an advanced model of monkey brains but monkey brains all the same. Crake had no high opinion of human ingenuity, despite the large amount of it he himself possessed. (ibid)

This juxtaposition of contrary views of human development and achievement is a primary concern of the novel. Crake's view of humanity is firmly entrenched in the originary source of its evolution, the primate; six times the term 'monkey' is

repeated in that excerpt, leaving little doubt as to his reductionist view. While this is not too surprising, considering Crake's training as a genetic scientist, it does shape his attitude towards his work and, more importantly, its contribution or impact upon others. If he is also ironically describing himself in this instance, especially in 'the desire to take apart', and to 'measure, improve, trash, discard', the last line of the excerpt is a chilling forewarning of his decision to re-new humanity by hitting the 're-start' button.

Atwood has noted that scientists, as a particular type of humankind, are mainly 'problem-solvers' (Halliwell 2003:259), tending 'to be single-issue, single-focus thinkers – how to solve the immediate problem of what they're doing.' (*ibid*:260) This drive to address and eradicate perceived weaknesses in the environment or the human condition is also found within Crake, who sets about changing the 'ancient primate brain' to divest it of what he deems to be its 'destructive features' (366) in his work at the Paradice, his custom-fitted laboratory. Central for Crake and the rest of the scientists is the concept of not just the possibility, but the desirability and then, the essentiality, of solving *the* problem: how to improve (on) the 'model' of mankind.<sup>70</sup> That humanity is 'improvable' is never doubted, and this has a long history in western scientific discourse that still impacts upon our lives today. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to note that Crake chooses to improve *upon* humankind by replacing it with a better model. Thus is Darwin's theory of natural selection extended in *Oryx and Crake*, when man takes it upon himself to hasten the natural evolutionary process at one go.

Raymond Williams, in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980:67-85), highlights man's view of nature before Darwin as one that emphasised 'constitutive properties' and 'classification of orders'. To know one's place in nature was to know one's fixed and stable relationship with God. Darwin's evolution theory put forth the idea that 'natural forms had not only a constitution but a history', in the form of nature as a selective breeder who actively shaped and

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<sup>70</sup> This intertwining of the elements of knowledge, experimentation, and transformation is illustrated in the anthropologist Paul Rabinow's description of the Human Genome Project: 'the object to be known – the human genome – will be known in such a way that it can be *changed*. This dimension is thoroughly modern; one could even say that it instantiates the definition of modern rationality. Representing and intervening, knowledge and power, understanding and reform, are built in, from the start, as simultaneous goals and means.' (emphasis as original) 'Artificiality and enlightenment: from sociobiology to biosociality', in J. Crary and S. Kwinter (eds.) (1992) *Incorporations* (New York: Zone Books), p. 236; quoted in Jon Turney, *Frankenstein's Footsteps*, p. 2.

intervened in all life-forms through time (1980:73) – an act that Atwood has clearly identified with Crake’s scientific work in her novel. These elements of historicity and selection imply that although Darwin’s theory encompasses the selection of characteristics that benefits the organism within its environment, other characteristics, or certain organisms themselves, would be left behind or annihilated in the process of development. Yet his theory has been viewed, throughout the years, as one that is inherently aspirational. This is noted by Gillian Beer: ‘Darwin, whether we like it or not, frequently links the idea of selection with that of improvement’, for although natural selection does not produce perfection, ‘Darwin does draw the idea of improvement tightly into his understanding of its outcome.’ Beer locates Darwin’s work, thought and perspective ‘in the Victorian belief in progress and the hierarchical views of race-theorists, which colour Darwin’s efforts even as he tries to think himself free of those assumptions.’ (2009:9)

What this means is that when Williams suggests that natural selection ‘could be interpreted either way’, either as ‘a simple unemphatic description of a process, or with the implication of nature, a specific force, which could do something as conscious as select’ (1980:73), it is the latter perspective that has emerged as the powerful narrative and personification of agency from the nineteenth century onwards. That the theory of evolution has, in effect, traversed the biological field to enter and mark the understanding of society and the condition of man, is noted by Beer:

despite its tendency to undermine, the evolutionary metaphor has become [...] a means of confirming our value, suggesting that we inherit the world at its pinnacle of development and are the bearers of a progressive future. The apparent historical determinism of evolutionary ideas loosely applied, moreover, tends to justify society as it now is, as a necessary phase in progress. The idea of development makes it seem that all past has constantly aspired towards becoming our present (1983:14)

With its view of the development of society as part of a natural outcome that nevertheless contains within it the goal of scaling the ladder of perfection, Beer’s argument alerts us to how we legitimise our past and present actions when viewed through the lens of evolution. In Atwood’s novel, the concepts of progressive improvement of mankind is taken to another level, for it is not only that Darwin’s theory of evolution validates the past, but more importantly, it promotes a course of action that destabilises the materiality of the body while fixing its eye firmly on

the future, with the grand narrative of progress an ubiquitous refrain running through it. As the science of genetics evolves from evolutionary theory to radically transform the world and humanity, *Oryx and Crake* can be seen as an attempt to ask: What does it mean to be – and remain – human in a world dominated by science?

### *Man in Nature and the nature of Man*

At one point in the narrative, Crake confesses to Jimmy that he does not believe in Nature, at least ‘not with a capital N’ (250). Interestingly, this scientist is unimpressed by the intricate wonders of nature, demoting its status from a proper noun with its singular referential authority to one that takes its place with other simple nouns. Thus is nature’s hold on man loosened. Williams has commented on this relationship between ideas of nature, man and society:

What is often being argued, it seems to me, in the idea of nature is the idea of man; and this not only generally, or in ultimate ways, but the idea of man in society, indeed the ideas of kinds of societies. (1980:70-1)

That the idea of man is bound up in the idea of nature, according to Williams, and man as a social animal actively constructing the very world in which he inhabits, has direct implications for our thoughts on the identity of man. Williams traces the historical tradition of Nature being associated with God, evolving as God’s ‘minister or deputy’ to its secularisation as ‘the absolute monarch’ (1980:71). But this does not mean that nature is therefore held sacred; on the contrary, Williams proposes that the process of separating man from nature begins at this point; ‘the practical distinction between nature and God’ took place so as ‘to describe the natural processes in their own terms; to examine them without any prior assumption of purpose or design, but simply as processes, or to use the historically earlier term, as machines.’ (ibid:76-77). The terms delineating nature – ‘processes’ and ‘machines’ – signal the turn towards a more detached and mechanistic attitude towards the interpretation of man’s relationship with nature, one that demythologises and depersonalises nature. In fact, Williams asserts that such a shift in our worldview is essential ‘before any question of intervention or command, and the method and ethics of either, can arise’ in any forms of thinking about nature (ibid:75). Insofar that this reflects on ‘the idea of man in society’,

Williams indicates that it is not just ‘a separated mind observing separated matter: man looking at nature’, but that

much more of it was active: not only observation but experiment; and of course not only science, the pure knowledge of nature, but applied science, the conscious intervention for human purposes. Agricultural improvement and the industrial revolution follow clearly from this emphasis, and many of the practical effects depended on seeing nature quite clearly and even coldly as a set of objects, on which man could operate. (77)

I have quoted Williams at some length here because it is this act of active intervention, of deliberately harnessing and exploiting nature ‘for human purposes’, that links Darwin’s thoughts on artificial selection with that of Williams’ discussion of the impact of ‘applied science’ on the agricultural and industrial revolution, and its current form as depicted in *Oryx and Crake*, the genetic modification of both natural and human forms. The advent of both the agricultural and industrial revolution brought about deep-reaching transformations for their societies: the break-down of traditional social hierarchies and the formation of new ones, a greater acceptance of technological applications in daily life, and a tremendous increase in crop and factory output which is matched by an even greater rise in consumption levels. If – as Atwood suggests in her novel – we are going through another revolution today with genetic engineering, then it is timely that we again study and scrutinise the impact of applied science and technology on our societies, lifestyle, and worldview.

It is indeed this sense of wonder at the profusion of potentialities to alter the world in formerly unimaginable ways, with the help of genetic engineering tools, that Atwood has vividly (and even gleefully) explored in *Oryx and Crake*. Jimmy’s parents are members of the elite group of society – the scientists – who work at the forefront of this new field; his father is a genographer ‘splicing against infections’ (27) while his mother is a microbiologist working on the development of pigeons, transgenic pigs bred as infection-resistant customised hosts of human-transplant organs, as well as in skin-related technologies. Other such transgenic inventions include the wolvogs (a cross between wolves and dogs bred by the Compounds’ security branch, the CorpSeCorps), bobkittens (created to control the big green rabbits escaped from the laboratories), the spoot/gider (a ‘goat crossed with spider to produce high-tensile spider silk filaments in the milk’ for bulletproof vests (242)), Rockulators (fake rocks that store water in humid periods

and release it during drier ones (242-3)), and my personal favourite, ChickieNobs (genetically-altered chickens that would make Jamie Oliver faint in shock and outrage, for all supposed inessential body parts have been bred away, leaving only ‘a large bulblike object’ with multiple edible parts, such as the breast or the legs, growing like tumours on it (246-7)). And the list goes on. It is a veritable buffet of organic parts and capabilities that the genetic scientists deconstruct, select, and build again in entirely new formations. But even as *Oryx and Crake* shares with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) the creation of beings made up of disparate organic parts, and the subsequent impact upon their creators as well as the world around them, these bioscientific endeavours are now closer to reality for us than they were ever so in the nineteenth-century, thanks to the wonders of genetic engineering today.

Atwood deems the development of modern molecular science ‘the great toy box we have now opened, namely gene-splicing’ (Halliwell 2003:256), as well as ‘the smorgasbord of human alteration’ (Atwood 2005:296). In these phrases, an element of a childlike relish is discernible in the survey of the exciting possibilities that biomedical technology can bring us in its interaction with genetic research, as manifested in the Compound scientists’ experiments. The urge to intervene and create new species is such that even in their leisure time these researchers cannot leave their work well alone. An example is the rakunks – a cross between skunks (but with their odious spray removed) and racoons (with their bad temper genetically erased) – which had ‘begun as an after-hours hobby’ of one of the biolaboratory technicians and eventually adopted as pets. With no obvious or direct benefit from this creation, they reflect the increasingly casually-wielded power of genetic and molecular science. Described as a type of ‘create-an-animal’ experience, its attraction lies in that ‘it made you feel like God’ (59-60). The rampant experimentation of the genetic scientists in *Oryx and Crake*, therefore, illustrates man’s mounting power and authority over nature using the tools of science, a form of domination that permeates the most basic unit of the basic building blocks of life. In the process, nature as we used to understand it – as it appears in the Latin form *natura* to delineate ‘the essential constitution of the world’ (Williams 1980:68) – is now subject to man’s thorough as well as casual interference. Thus, the study of natural sciences has shifted from a privileging of the traditional study of ‘constitutive properties’ and the process of the

‘classification of orders’ that Williams has described, to a view of ‘knowledge which enables manipulation’ (Turney 1998:45).

When Darwin considers the activities of man in selectively breeding domesticated animals, he emphasises the changes made as those ‘on external characters’ (1859:378); although he does not elaborate on the precise nature of these ‘characters’, we can presume that they refer to physical features or capabilities within the organisms themselves, such as thicker or lesser fur, greater production of eggs or milk, etc. Admirable though this ability may be, Darwin stops short at his belief in man’s capability to create entirely new species of beings:

the possibility of making distinct races by crossing has been greatly exaggerated. There can be no doubt that a race can be modified by occasional crosses, if aided by the careful selection of those individual mongrels, which present any desired character; but that a race could be obtained intermediate between two extremely different races of species, I can hardly believe. (1859:18)

In the time since then, as discussed above, advances in technologies of cloning and genetic intervention means that it is now possible not just to alter the external physicality of beings, but also their internal makeup, their ‘essential constitution’, in Williams’ terms (1980:68). Such an unprecedented access to what was once shrouded in mystery raises the possibility of a time when, in Darwin’s words above, ‘a race could be obtained intermediate between two extremely different races of species’, as Atwood has envisioned in her novel with the hybrid organisms. Therefore, when Beer states that cloning is ‘the contrary of evolution’ (1983:xxiii), this suggestion of a state of the unnatural – if we take the evolutionary idea as constituting the natural after Darwin – leads to a re-examination of our existence today, mediated in so many ways by technology, science and medicine. How are we to describe ourselves when the very notion of what is natural is being totally re-written? What does it do to our sense of self-identity?

The mutant organisms in the novel are recombined forms of distinct creatures, created only to meet certain demands in our lives: the pigoons as transgenic organ producers, the wolvogs as security guards, and the spoot/girder as spinners of high-tensile silk for bulletproof vests. While Atwood’s description of them is far from the pained ‘forced hybrids’ of Wells’ *The Island of Dr.*

*Moreau* (Beer 1996:122), their unnatural state is nevertheless unmistakable even as their component identities are clearly visible. These hybrid creations are reminiscent of Donna Haraway's vision in her seminal essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" in the eighties, where she advocates 'a powerful infidel heteroglossia' that involves 'both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories.' (2004:39) Yet, as Atwood has imagined in her novel, when Darwin's theory of evolution has been re-figured in this age of genetics, when flora and fauna have been broken down and transmogrified, when we are now 'initiates in a new biomedical personhood mingling existence and nonexistence, organic and inorganic matter, life and death' (Squier 2004:4-5), there is a palpable sense of unease, a struggle to reconcile ourselves to these re-worked forms of life. This sense of liminality, or the 'in-between or marginal zone' of being (*ibid*:4), is expressed as a sense of displacement 'as we move between the old notion that the form and trajectory of any human life have certain inherent biological limits, and the new notion that both the form and trajectory of our lives can be reshaped at will' (*ibid*:9). Such confusing states of materiality and instability can only mean that 'we are finding it harder and harder to define what life is, much less to decide whether we should attribute a variation to forces of nature or culture' (*ibid*:7). Squier, writing at least ten years after Haraway, adopts a more cautionary approach towards this subject, as does Atwood. The moment when Jimmy, gazing at the wolvogs, asks himself 'Why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?' (250), is also the instance that many of us are familiar with, as we gaze with disquiet at what science promises for our future. On the horizon at the apex of genetic science, Atwood postulates, lies the creation of the Crakers.

#### *Science and the Perfection of Humanity: the Crakers*

The culmination of the Compounds' scientific endeavours can be said to be Crake's dome-shaped state-of-the-art laboratory, the Paradice. Surrounded by 'a dense, climate-controlling plantation of mixed tropical splices above which it rose like a blind eyeball' (358), its structure recalls the single eyeball that Jimmy/Snowman alludes to earlier in this chapter. While Jimmy/Snowman likens himself to a *seeing* eyeball sliding on the fluidity of language, Paradice, however,

is compared to an *unseeing* one.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the blind focus of Paradice can be read as a deliberate shutting out of the world – of nature itself – so as to turn inwards to focus on the application of science on the human body. This reading is supported by the portrayal of the laboratory as being armed and self-sustaining, capable of being detached from its surroundings if it so wishes: it contains ‘a whole arsenal’ (185); ‘it would reform itself after pressure and automatically repair any gashes’; it has ‘the capacity to both filter and breathe, like an eggshell, though it required a solar-generated current to do so’ (358–9); and lastly its front entrance can be air-locked ‘to seal off the building if needed’ (359).<sup>72</sup> This removal from the everyday world is disturbing and bodes ill when we remember Frankenstein’s very own laboratory during his creation of the monster, as a site of both life as well as death: ‘In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a galley and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation; my eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment.’<sup>73</sup> Two points to note here: firstly, the allusion to the effort of concentrating one’s vision so as to discern nature’s secrets is reminiscent of both Frankenstein and Crake’s attempts to create life, be it an external focus on creating a semblance to man for Frankenstein, or a genetically-engineered internal view of the human body by Crake. Secondly, the irony is that the entire procedures as well as the creators, in both instances, are blind, removed from nature and even society itself. Beer suggests that the scientific laboratory can be viewed as ‘a dystopic site where experiments release threatening forms of the future’ in Gothic literature (1996:183), a perspective that scientists such as Crake would surely object to. In naming Crake’s workplace ‘Paradice’, Atwood conjoins the words ‘paradise’ and ‘dice’ to denote the ambiguous nature of what emerges from it: a chance or a gamble to improve the lot of mankind, or the beginning of its indiscriminate destruction – or indeed, both. Moreover, the idea of paradise as

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<sup>71</sup> This brings to mind the Greek mythological beings, the Cyclopes, especially when Odysseus blinded their leader Polyphemous. The Cyclopes, a race of semi-human borne of the Greek figure of Mother Earth, are ‘builders of gigantic walls and master-smiths’ (Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: volume 1*, 3.b.2. London: Penguin). The suggestion of their construction skill brings to mind Jimmy and Crake (both associated with the image of the single eye) who in their own ways compose their world in terms of their individual vision and ideals.

<sup>72</sup> The reference of the ‘eggshell’ – even if artificial – hints that the laboratory is also the incubating site for Crake’s ultimate invention, the Crakers.

<sup>73</sup> Mary Shelley (1818), *Frankenstein* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), J. Paul Hunter (ed.), p. 32.

at once removed from the ordinary world, as well as a site dedicated to (near) perfect beings, is referenced as well.

Paradice is thus the locality for the metanarrative of scientific progress in our times, especially in the light of the earthly paradise Eden as the location of the first step of humankind towards knowledge (eating of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge), and thus, hubris and death are invariably associated with this situation. This is illustrated in Crake's first invention: the BlyssPluss Pill that promises the public sexual prowess while offering protection from sexually transmitted diseases, and the possibility of prolonged youth. But it is its unannounced capability that sinistly loops the narrative back to a negative offshoot of the discourse on natural selection, for it also acts as 'a sure-fire one-time-does-it-all birth control pill' for both sexes, thus 'automatically lowering the population level' (355); as with Rith in *The Carhullan Army*, the issue of fertility control appears to be a priority in dystopic communities. Crake thus justifies his invention:

Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply *for everyone*. With the BlyssPluss Pill the human race will have a better chance of swimming [...] Fewer people, therefore more to go around. (356)<sup>74</sup>

While for Darwin it is natural selection that would ensure that the fittest survive in numbers that are sustainable by the limited resources of the environment, for the scientists in Crake's world, artificial selection is the preferred method when our belief in mankind's progressive development – what Crake calls the 'tide of human desire, the desire for more and better' (357) – is exploited by drug companies.

It is not the BlyssPluss Pill, however, that is the most powerful tool up Crake's sleeve, but the Crakers: *sui generis* humanoid beings that seemingly approach the apex of human perfection. All the undesirable or troublesome traits – according to Crake – of 'the ancient primate brain' have been engineered out: racism, hierarchism, territorialism, a preference for meat, vulnerable immune systems, sexual drive, and so on (366). So, what is wrong with this prototype of the newly created humans? Kept within a greenery-filled enclosure, with a

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<sup>74</sup> Darwin himself echoes this Malthusian view of population growth outstripping resources in chapter 3, "The Struggle for Existence", *The Origin of Species*.

projected sky above them that cycles through day and night and variations of weather, the Crakers are watched by the scientists without their knowledge – a perverted form of the Panopticon structure – that throws up questions involving the God-like authority of those who look down into the enclosure and its inhabitants. Furthermore as mentioned above, the Crakers' nakedness and innocence, among the trees and plants, depicts Paradise in Paradice. This juxtaposition of biblical, genetic and prison-like allusions creates a dizzying spiral of thought, and is further complicated when we take into account nineteenth-century theories of evolution, progress, improvement, and degeneracy.

The question of man's evolutionary progress is largely observed through his striving for perfection. However, this standard of perfection is entirely subjective and often ambiguous. In the aftermath of the disaster that Crake has created to wipe out all other human beings so that the Crakers would have a clean slate to start with, Jimmy/Snowman 'watches them with envy, or is it nostalgia?' (8) Is their engineered perfection to be desired, or are they simply animal-like in their habits and understanding of the world, macabre reminders of how man has evolved naturally throughout the millennia? Then again, what is Jimmy/Snowman when placed next to the 'more evolved' Crakers? Observing their orderly sexual dance and subsequent copulation, Jimmy/Snowman feels 'dejected' and 'bereft' when he considers how his own sexual behaviour, as man would know it, now appears primitive and uncivilised; if he tried to participate in the Crakers' mating rituals, it would be

as if an orang-utan had crashed a formal waltzfest and started groping some sparkly pastel princess. He can imagine his own dismay too. What right does he have to foist his postulant, cankered self and soul upon these innocent creatures? (206)

This reference to the primate returns the scene to the Darwinian evolutionary process, and we cannot help but note that our protagonist has been demoted in the lineage of mankind simply by the creation of the Crakers. Williams states that Seneca deems 'the state of nature as a golden age, in which men were happy, innocent and simple', which for him, coincides with

the myth of Eden: of man before the fall. But sometimes it did not; the fall from innocence could be seen as a fall into nature; the animal without grace, or the animal needing grace. Natural, that is to say, could mean wholly opposite conditions: the innocent man or the mere beast. (76)

This liminal state that contains within it the possibility of both the untainted and the bestial complicates the pursuit of perfection for humanity. As we supposedly march towards a better world and life with the help of science, are we travelling nearer to or further away from nature? The protagonist has indeed suffered – in Williams' term – ‘a fall into nature’, brutish next to the impossibly perfect Crakers, the beast peering into the forbidden paradise.

Max Nordau's *fin-de-siècle* theory of degeneration (*Degeneration* 1892) – published in the few decades after Darwin's *The Origins of Species* – comes to mind here. The concept of scientific observation of a devolvement to a lower species, an inferior type, preoccupies Nordau; both physical ‘morbid deviations from the normal form’ (cranium malformation, for example) (1892:16) and mental irregularities denote signs of degeneracy. Interestingly, Atwood in her novel plays with this supposed scientific view of normalcy and regression: among the lists of ‘scientific’ characteristics of Nordau's delineation of degeneracy are some that Jimmy/Snowman possesses, such as emotionalism, pessimism and inane reverie (*ibid*:19-21), as opposed to the detached and rational Crake who never remembers his dreams. Yet, Crake himself suffers from what Nordau deems as the primary defining characteristic of degenerates: ‘moral insanity’, a lack of ‘the sense of morality and of right and wrong’ – which springs from ‘unbounded egoism’ and ‘impulsiveness’ (*ibid*:18). If the Crakers themselves are the epitome of mankind's progressive evolvement, however, we can also view them as ‘morbid deviations from the normal form’, in Nordau's words: they all have luminescent green eyes and emit a citrus-like anti-mosquito smell (123-4), but with a variety of skin colour (‘chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey’) (10); the men do not have facial hair, while the women all resemble ‘retouched fashion photos’ (121). Their engineered perfection leaves Jimmy/Snowman cold, since it was ‘the thumbprints of human imperfection that used to move him, the flaws in design’ (121). Thus, improvement/degeneration, perfection/imperfection, evolvement/devolvement – the lines between these definitions are shown by Atwood to be pushed hither and thither by science and technology, such that the metanarrative of scientific progress becomes increasingly problematic and untenable.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> I will take up this point further when I analyse McEwan's *Saturday*, specifically with respect to Nordau's notion of degeneracy and the discourse of genetic science: McEwan, albeit in a different approach

Crake's attempt to have the Crakers as the endpoint of man's evolutionary history and thus of having arrived *at* perfection illustrates Atwood's concern that science – in place of traditional metadiscourses such as Marxism or Christianity – has acquired the power to hasten and then declare a termination of what has been naturally occurring since the beginning of time. It is as if the writer, in her novel, were challenging Darwin's view that 'the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world', so that 'we may look with some confidence to a secure future of equally inappreciable length' whereby 'all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection' (1859:395). The ability and desire to control and identify perfection is so tightly bound up in the discourse of science and its inherent forward-driving philosophy that our understanding of nature, lashed to this vessel of inexorable betterment, has now become irreparably fissured. For Atwood the idea of perfection, represented in *Oryx and Crake* by the 'amazingly attractive' Crakers (10),<sup>76</sup> is fundamentally unnatural: 'Even the physical universe is not "perfect", that is, wholly symmetrical, closed, finished. There's something in the nature of things that's against closure' (Hancock 1986:95). More recently, she has directly addressed the tenuous link between the concepts of perfection and progress, employing the very tools of logic and objectivity that science favours to debunk its emphasis on altering and refining mankind and his environment in a never-ending bid for perfection:

the perfectibility of mankind rests on a logical fallacy. Thus: Man is by definition imperfect, say those who would perfect him. But those who would perfect him are themselves, by their own definition, imperfect. And imperfect beings cannot make perfect decisions. The decision about what constitutes human perfection would have to be a perfect decision; otherwise the result would not be perfection, but imperfection. (Atwood 2005:303)

Hence, for anyone to attempt to disseminate and insist upon a particular view of a desirable destiny for mankind – not least scientists such as Crake, who are apt to obscure the imperfection of both themselves and humankind behind a screen of rationality and causality – is to adopt presumptions and preconceptions that I have examined in this section. By extension, the persistent grand narrative of the progressive development of humanity should also be questioned, as the

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from Atwood, also considers physical and mental deformity in the light of the metanarrative of scientific advancement. Both writers also discuss the role of art in the near future in their respective works.

<sup>76</sup> This issue of the perfect species of man, of course, has resulted in the 'science' of eugenics, which is unfortunately too large a topic for this dissertation. For discussions on this topic by critics cited in this chapter, see Williams (1980:92-93) and Beer (1983:197-198). What I would like to stress here is how the hegemony of the discourse of science weaves itself tightly around our lives, and limits instead of expanding our view of the world; 'almost all eugenicists believed that social problems had both a biological basis and, to some degree, a potential biological remedy.' (Buchanan *et al.* 2000:41).

writer has appealed to us to do; “‘Progress’ has deluded many, but surely its pretensions as a rallying slogan have been exploded by now’ (Atwood 2005:302). What remains to be examined, then, are the interested parties invested in this notion of the inexorable impulse towards mankind’s improvement.

## Power Differences

Man’s attempt to exert himself – his power, his belief, his vision – over nature is reflected in the very social relations he has with other members of humanity, such that ‘the conquest of nature, the domination of nature, the exploitation of nature – are derived from the real human practices: relations between men and men’ (Williams 1980:84), and if I may add, since nature is associated with women, relations between men and women as discussed in Chapter 1. Indeed, both capitalism and imperialism, according to Williams, are also reliant upon these terms of ‘domination and exploitation’ that view ‘both men and physical products as raw materials’ (*ibid*). In our times, the influence of science and biotechnology is on the ascendant, and it is their interaction and ties with capitalism that Atwood also examines in *Oryx and Crake*.

In the novel, the biomedical and pharmaceutical organisations in the Compounds can be viewed as the physical manifestation of the economics of science, that is, the ways in which scientific practices are partnered by capitalist organisations and their motivations. The Student Auction, as discussed earlier, is a clear indication of how financially-powerful companies warp the social fabric: by their preference for the scientifically-inclined such as Crake who will repay their investment in them via a smooth procession from well-funded student to well-paid researcher churning out profitable biomedical products and services. Thus is the Tree of Knowledge harvested by these commercial corporations for their own use, for, according to Iain Hamilton Grant, with the modern disbelief in grand narratives, ‘science can no longer justify itself or legitimate its practices by appealing to the innate value of ‘knowledge in itself’ because ‘knowledge in itself is not a saleable commodity’.<sup>77</sup> This was discernible even during C.P. Snow’s lifetime in the mid-twentieth century, when he commented in *The Two Cultures* on the pay difference – and thus of their social status – between science and humanities graduates:

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<sup>77</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant, “Postmodernism and Science and Technology” in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Stuart Sim (ed.), pp. 65-77, 75.

It is not only that the young scientists now feel that they are part of a culture on the rise while the other is in retreat. It is also, to be brutal, that the young scientists know that with an indifferent degree they'll get a comfortable job, while their contemporaries and counterparts in English or History will be lucky to earn sixty per cent as much. (17)

Jimmy and Crake's experience after high school to their first jobs bears out Snow's observation; as the former languishes in the shabby liberal-arts Martha Graham academy, while the latter practically buzzes with robust health in Watson-Crick Institute; upon graduation, Jimmy is grateful to be hired by a small outfit AnooYoo producing self-help media publications, while Crake is at RejoovenEsense, 'one of the most powerful Compounds of them all – and climbing fast' (305).

More troubling in Atwood's narrative, apart from the appropriation of science by capitalism, however, is the divided worlds of the pleeblands and the Compounds. Only those who are employed – and their families – by the large corporations live in the protected, privileged and self-contained world of the Compounds, where 'you could find the full range of goods and services there when there were shortages everywhere else' (186). On the other hand, the pleeblands, that is the city itself, is deemed by the Compounders to be unsavoury. Its very name denotes its subordinate position in relation to the Compounds' elite scientists; it is the place inhabited by those rejected by the scientists and the capitalists, 'the loose change – the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies' (34). Yet, this sense of a sprawl of diverse beings contrasts ironically with the Compounds, whose inhabitants' attempt to control and thus manipulate nature's structural and biological makeup, is devoid of a palpable sense of life. The Compound that Jimmy grows up in has a mall filled with fountains, plastic ferns and 'warm-bathwater music' (89) while the employees' residences are 'laid out like a garden suburb with large houses in fake Georgian and fake Tudor and fake French provincial' (274). Walls, gates and searchlights keep the pleeblanders out while in turn imprisoning and entombing the Compounders themselves.

On one level this divided world appears to be stratified by the familiar class system, the haves and the have-nots, and thus is in some ways reminiscent of H.G. Wells' creation of the world of the Eloi and the Morlocks in *The Time*

*Machine*.<sup>78</sup> But there is more to it than the battle of the upper and working classes; the essence of its difference is discernible only when Jimmy's visit to the pleeblands is taken into account. This does not take place until Crake obtains the necessary paperwork to allow them both to leave the Compound. For Jimmy, everything in this world 'seemed so boundless, so porous, so wide-open. So subject to chance' (239), and the pleeblanders 'didn't look like the mental defectives the Compounds were fond of depicting'. On the contrary,

there were real tramps, real beggar women, just as in old DVD musicals; Jimmy kept expecting them to kick up their battered bootsoles, break into song. Real musicians on the street corners, real bands of street urchins. Asymmetries, deformities: the faces here were a far cry from the regularity of the Compounds. There were even bad teeth. (347)

Despite this colourful and energetic display of life, unmediated and exuberant, Jimmy remembers the Compounds snubbing it because 'there was no life of the mind'. If the Compounds emphasise and celebrate the intellect, then the pleeblands reflect all that are fleshly, material, physical, even carnal and bestial: that is, as discussed above, a version of nature itself. The extent of the artificiality of rejecting this aspect of one's being, in order to attain perfection and regularity, is seen in Jimmy's marvel at the sight of bad teeth. This dualism of the mind and the body, the intellect and the flesh, is an old western construct that refuses to die. Resurrected and perpetuated by the capitalist biomedical firms in the novel as they seek to control the human body and nature through the minds of man, the (im)balance of power cuts through class and caste to settle on scientific intelligence coupled with that of capital. That, Atwood implies, is the new social division, and that the powerful should take advantage of the weaker members of the society is almost a given. The pleeblands supply the Compounds with prostitutes – 'Naturally they're inspected for diseases' (252) – and act as marketplaces for their products, as in the case of HelthWyzer's contaminated vitamin pills sold in the pleeblands, for which the pharmaceutical company also develops the antidote to the illness it causes, but only in small doses so as keep prices high (256). But the scale of exploitation increases for the BlyssPluss Pills, which draws its human trial subjects from the poorer countries, sex clinics,

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<sup>78</sup> Atwood discusses Wells' *The Time Machine* in the context of her introduction to *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Penguin Books 2005), which is included in her collection *Writing with Intent*, "Ten Ways of Looking at *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H.G. Wells", pp.386-398. Further references to this essay will be denoted by "Ten Ways...".

brothels and prisons, ‘the ranks of the desperate, as usual’, nonchalantly noted by Crake (357).

At this point of the discussion, can we then state definitively that Atwood has portrayed the scientists and capitalists as the villains of this narrative, with all others who do not fit into these identities perceived as victims?

In my chapter on “Feminism” I have discussed how the character of Oryx, who is exploited by, but who also in turn exploits, capitalist practices means that Atwood’s approach towards this topic requires careful attention. Just as Snow argues that the industrial revolution ‘looked very different according to whether one saw it from above or below’, since it ‘looks very different today according to whether one sees it from Chelsea or from a village in Asia’ (1959:26), so too the historian and sociologist of science Steven Shapin asserts that for the development of drugs that save lives or alleviate painful conditions or terrible illnesses, ‘you need to become part of the capitalist nexus’, and thus the links between science and commercial institutions are ‘as vital as it is sometimes uneasy’ (2008:7). Atwood herself has stated that it is the extreme condition depicted, in the narrative, of power handed over to the exclusive and elitist partnership of technoscience and profit-oriented commercialism that is problematic, and not either one of the elements taken singularly; ‘the bad thing is making all science completely commercial, and with no watchdogs’ (Halliwell 2003:260-1). Crake’s rise to power and his egomania is a result of a culture that fetes its scientists as miracle-makers and problem-solvers. On their own, as Atwood has depicted in her earlier novels *Life Before Man* (1979) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), scientific workers are not Gothic or evil (Meyer and O’Riordan 1992:160). But they cannot provide us with all the answers to life’s problems, for they are ‘not the people who should be deciding our future. Asking [them] is like asking ants what you should have in your backyard. Of course they would say “more ants”.<sup>79</sup> Thus the prevalent focus on science and biology as the sole perspective from which to view the human body and thus also its identity is limited and short-sighted, akin to viewing the world with only one eye or lens, as the novel has illustrated. This is why I disagree with Showalter’s reading of Crake as the epitome of the mad scientist figure, who would destroy rather than create life (2003:35), because that

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<sup>79</sup> Atwood, “Enough”, p. 302.

distances him, making it easier for us to dismiss such fantastic characters. Crake is in fact fixated on improving (on) the human species, on creating a totally new and better type of life form. And once he has succeeded in achieving that, it is not for personal gains but with the protectiveness of a father for his child that he wipes out all other sources of threat or competition to allow his ‘offspring’ to thrive, including himself. He does that because he can: a brilliant scientist allowed immense power by corporate greed. And also because of his very human responses to shield his creation, as well as his need for a narrative with a better, happier ending.

### **Conclusion: *Oryx and Crake* as a Utopian/Dystopian Narrative**

The novel *Oryx and Crake* vividly imagines – in a very Lyotardian sense – the hegemonic role of science in advanced industrial societies, and notes the resultant devaluation of the humanities, as well as the conversion and reduction of all things and beings to measurements of functionality, performativity and profitability. Concepts such as the ideal human race and the optimal living conditions for us – in short, the perfect world that science promises to bring about – drives the narrative, and takes the form of a classic utopian/dystopian narrative tension. Right at the start of the novel, Atwood presents us, via Jimmy/Snowman standing on a beach, with a vision of a destroyed yet still beautiful world; the dawn is

a rosy, deadly glow. Strange how that colour still seems tender. The offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette against it, rising improbably out of the pink and pale blue of the lagoon. The shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic. (5)

This contrasting view of nature (contaminated and blighted but still somehow alive) and man (contaminator but now almost extinguished by his absolute faith in science) raises questions concerning the progress towards the goal of utopia for humanity. What price paradise?

Williams refers to Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* when he discusses the struggle for existence among all beings in his essay “Social Darwinism” (1980:86-102), noting the element of competition controversially embedded within Wells’ version of Utopias:

Instead of the static Utopias of pre-nineteenth-century writing, where men would find an ideal condition, an island or some point in the future, where

their social problems would have been solved, Utopias now, as Wells observed, must be dynamic: they will not stand still. That is what we learn from Darwin, he said: there has to be progression through higher stages. Moreover, they are fraught with great threat: there is inherent danger and conflict in them. Wells' Utopias characteristically are arrived at only after a period of exceptionally destructive conflict. (1980:99)

Williams' interpretation of Wells is supported by the fact that as the possibility of hitherto-undiscovered paradisiacal islands is snuffed out by the geographical expeditions and conquer of distant lands since the Enlightenment, the imagination must stay home, or somewhere nearby, and carve out a space as a repository for its dreams and hopes. Problems arise when these lands are occupied; where previously it had been enough to escape and sail to faraway lands, now, to reach utopia, there must now be 'exceptionally destructive conflict', whether it be the ejection and/or elimination of native occupants, the clearing of primary vegetation or the excavation of raw materials. Atwood herself believes that in recent times, 'there is a definite tip-over into a darker view of sudden attempts to change everything around', following twentieth-century catastrophic efforts at achieving a utopian society under Stalin and the Nazis. But she also observes the saliency of the biblical model where the Book of Revelations indicates that we must undergo catastrophes before getting to the New Jerusalem, and identifies all these as the 'typical utopias/dystopias' of the twentieth century, citing Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984* as literary exploration of this phenomenon (Halliwell 2003:257-8). *Oryx and Crake* updates Wells' imagined process of reaching utopia by postulating not physical warfare or battles as that which the modern pilgrim must endure before reaching paradise, but a form of capital-funded, technoscientific act of creation followed by an act of biological terrorism that wipes out mankind itself, the work of one man who would see the extinction and the rebirth of the human race. At its conclusion, the novel asks, what kind of utopia is left after this disaster?

Commenting on Darwin and Huxley's influence on Wells, Atwood argues that the Wellsian vision of man's destiny is irrevocably tied up with his nature. She believes this would

account for his veering between extreme Utopianism (if man is the result of evolution, not of Divine creation, surely he can evolve yet further?) and the deepest pessimism (if man came from the animals and is akin to them, rather

than to the angels, surely he might slide back the way he came?) *The Island of Dr Moreau* belongs to the debit side of the Wellsian account book.<sup>80</sup>

If this is so, then *Oryx and Crake* contains both possibilities. It can be read as a depiction of ‘extreme Utopianism’ in the form of the Crakers, but problematised by them being the product of artificial, not natural, selection; this thus complicates our traditional understanding of human identity arising from our history, literature, customs, and social bonds. On the other hand, Jimmy/Snowman, divested of civilisation’s accoutrements and tools, approaches the possibility of ‘the deepest pessimism’ in his primitive, scavenging lifestyle, especially when compared to the Crakers, yet they are also in their own way, animal-like in their genetically-conditioned habits and thinking. Fiona Tolan, in her analysis of the conclusion of the novel, states that with Jimmy/Snowman poised at the moment when he decides whether to join the group of three human beings he has just discovered – leftover wrecks from the disaster, just like him – or slip away to continue living with the Crakers, this ‘ambiguous indecision’ compels the reader ‘to question his or her own ideas of humanity’. In providing ‘a dynamic space of introspective ethical choices’, Tolan argues, Atwood’s text is affirmed as a dystopia (2007:296).

It is indeed true that Atwood, by not developing the narrative further to show Jimmy/Snowman’s decision, focuses our attention on his internal debate as to the best course of action. But what could also be highlighted is the reductive manner in which Jimmy/Snowman thinks about his next act. In his evaluation of this group of fellow beings, we can see the protagonist’s identification of them based on the simplest of markers: they are armed (a spraygun); they are ‘[t]wo men, one brown, one white, a tea-coloured woman’ (441); the female might ‘have been pretty once’; they have food (a roasting rakunk) (442). All social bonds and rules are invalid except for the most basic: survival of the fittest – he has nothing to trade which would have ensured his usefulness to them; he is outnumbered and they could just grab his spraygun and kill him; ‘if he starts killing them and then stops, one of them will kill him first. Naturally.’ (422-423). Should Jimmy/Snowman fight or flee? Should he seek company in a group or remain isolated in order to ensure his own survival? In short, what is the best course of action to guarantee his *own* life? The narrative focus has returned us to the idea of

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<sup>80</sup> Atwood, “Ten Ways...” p. 390.

natural evolution and survival at this point, and this is placed side by side with the utopian presence of the Crakers, whose future natural/artificial development is still questionable. Hence, as much as this conclusion is about our ‘ideas of humanity’ as Tolan has suggested, it is, to be more specific, a literary effort that imagines the possibility of both a utopian/dystopian mode of being, of recognising a position where numerous potentialities can be considered. Of course Jimmy/Snowman must ultimately make a decision, but it is significant that this does not seem to be a priority in Atwood’s narrative. Rather, it is this state of balance and poise that the narrative finally privileges, a vantage point that allows access to seemingly dualistic natures – between literature and science, natural and artificial selection, progress and degeneration, utopia and dystopia, optimism and pessimism.

In this section, my discussion critically reads Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* beyond the obvious dialectical figures of Jimmy/Snowman and Crake, illustrating how the binary construction of representations of the arts and the sciences, with all the attendant power asymmetries, can be undermined and challenged. While the author’s earlier work *The Handmaid’s Tale* also explores a dystopian world that insists on its utopian vision and ideals, as discussed in Chapter 1, in this novel the supposed utopian elements (ostensibly located in the Compounds) are glaringly dubious. What Atwood has achieved in *Oryx and Crake* is to employ a largely dystopian setting that sets up a dialogue between science and literature: neither discipline is explicitly privileged, but both are thoroughly and imaginatively interrogated. On the one hand, literature, in the form of narratives and myths and without a valid presence in a technocratic world such as the Compounds, is reaffirmed by the Crakers’ demand for originary accounts of themselves and their world, and their recourse to symbolic constructions in the absence of concrete presences. On the other hand, Jimmy/Snowman, the Art figure of the novel, survives the apocalyptic end of the human species, but finds it quite impossible to survive without the tools of our times, be it a tin-opener, sun-block, or a gun. Ultimately, *Oryx and Crake* points to the undesirability of privileging particular authoritative narratives at the expense of others, as it indicts the asymmetrical power relations that arise from such interactions, and the terrible fall-outs resulting from these biased worldviews. The complexities of our times requires a positionality that is seen in Jimmy/Snowman’s balancing between two

apparently irreconcilable realms, even if it is for that brief moment, so that insight and understanding across these discourses can be achieved.

## Chapter 6: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*: Medicine, Literature and Sympathy

*I have performed many operations, and flatter myself that I possess at least some of the qualities of a good operator – a steady hand, an unflinching eye, perfect self-control, and a thorough knowledge of relative autonomy. I have rarely failed to accomplish what I had set out to do [...] My knife was always guided by a thorough knowledge of the case, and, I have reason to believe, by sound judgment, strengthened and sobered by the light of experience and the dictates of common sense [...]*

‘Autobiography of Samuel D. Gross, M.D.’<sup>81</sup>

Ian McEwan’s 2005 novel, *Saturday*, continues the narrative tradition of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), charting a day in the life of a singular character. Henry Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon, loving father and husband, and an all-round good fellow, wakes in the early hours of the morning, sees a plane descending to Heathrow airport with its tail on fire, tries to find out the story behind it throughout the day, has a minor car accident while on his way for a game of squash, shops and returns to cook in anticipation for a family party in the evening, deals with intruders in his home, and ends the day with a surgery before dragging himself home exhausted. As with his literary precursors, however, it is not so much the action within the narrative that the reader concentrates on, but the experience of inhabiting the protagonist’s mind throughout that twenty-four hours, in which time and space expand beyond their boundaries, while memories, ideas, opinions, ruminations and beliefs jostle for mental and narrative airing, subside, and rise again to form an indelible impression of a man living in a twenty-first-century, advanced western city.

At first glance, there seems to be limited scope for a critical reading of McEwan’s *Saturday* following Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*. They belong to entirely different genres, and each has its distinctive literary style and concerns. *Oryx and Crake* is set in a futuristic world, its plot pushes at the boundaries of current scientific discoveries and potentialities, and its narrative focus consists of a humanist protagonist who loves words and stories; *Saturday* is set in the near past, specifically on Saturday, 15 February 2003, the day when London witnessed its largest anti-war demonstration in response to the impending invasion of Iraq. The protagonist is a neurosurgeon grappling with events that, while certainly distressing, can be seen as relatively familiar in a metropolitan context. Despite

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Michael Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*, p. 2.

these differences, *Saturday* is useful for a continuation of my discussion of *Oryx and Crake* on the implications and consequences of the imbalance of power relations between the arts and sciences as explored in twenty-first century fiction: if Atwood's novel is an interrogation of how Darwinian evolution impacts upon the role of language and narrative in our lives as well as how we view nature and our place in it, then McEwan's proffers a scientific worldview tirelessly sustained and privileged by the protagonist, a worldview closer to Crake's and thus dialectical to Jimmy/Snowman's. The tussle between the arts and science is re-enacted in Perowne's more or less philistine response to the literary works foisted on him by his poet daughter. Of greater magnitude in *Saturday*, however, is how the imaginative capacity is inextricably aligned with Darwin's idea of human sympathy that quite often sits uncomfortably with his theory of natural selection. In a way, this flow of debate can be interpreted as a move from Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) – which I have frequently referred to in my critical reading of Atwood's text – to his *Descent of Man* (1871), a central secondary reference for my analysis of *Saturday*; this allows for a progression from thinking about man in nature to thinking about man in society. Furthermore, in shifting from Atwood's textual juxtaposition of a literary protagonist wedged uneasily into a society saturated with the influences of science and biology, to McEwan's text which amalgamates (scientific/medical) protagonist and setting seamlessly, I propose that a close study of these situated experiences allows us to explore how literary writers respond to and interrogate the ascendancy of biomedicine, science and technology in the twenty-first century.

Daniel Zalewski's recent profile of McEwan states that the author himself declares he has 'what he calls an "Augustan spirit", one nourished equally by the poems of Philip Larkin and by the papers in *Nature*' (2009:46). Like Atwood, McEwan is preoccupied with the dynamic relations between science and the humanities; Joseph Carroll suggests that he can be placed in a 'lineage of literary Darwinism that includes Aldous Huxley, William Golding, and Kurt Vonnegut' (2004:ix), while Christopher Taylor identifies works such as *The Child in Time*, the short story "Solid Geometry" in *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), and *Atonement* (2001) as examples in which the author 'engages with the literary and scientific tension' (2005:31). McEwan's latest novel *Solar* (2010) continues his examination of the tension between science and one of the most important

questions literature explores: what does it mean to be human? It is, however, McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997) that has generated the most academic interest in terms of this ongoing debate thus far. The story of Joe Rose's rational outlook in life being challenged both by a tragedy and an irrational stalker, not to mention his Romantic scholar wife's differing views, sets up the polemical structure of the 'two cultures' dichotomy. Indeed, both *Enduring Love* and *Saturday* are somewhat similar in terms of plot structures (Greenberg 2007:116 n.4).

My interest in *Saturday* lies in the difference between the protagonists in the two novels: Joe Rose is a pragmatic popular-science journalist who chafes at the tension arising between his writing that demands a narrative framework and the content that strives towards the factual and objective. This uneasy fit between the protagonist and his job is a mirror inversion of Atwood's Jimmy/Snowman in the Compounds, who pimps his love of words for a living. It is this proximity between the situations of both these characters that has influenced my choice of *Saturday* instead of *Enduring Love*: after *Oryx and Crake*, my intention is to study an aspect of the arts/science debate that is dialectical to Jimmy/Snowman and Crake. In *Saturday*, we see a realistic portrayal of a man entrenched in a First World western society's scientific infrastructure, who inhabits it without really questioning his entitlement to the benefits he accrues from it, who right up to the end of the novel largely retains his rational and pragmatic stance that allows for such a snug fit between himself and his world. Crucially, Perowne is not at all like Crake, who is wont to be cast in the alienated figure of the mad scientist by critics and readers. Instead, he is a respected and successful surgeon with a loving family, and friends who play squash with him. As such, he is a familiar figure to many western middle-class readers, unthreatening and apparently uncomplicated, a professional member of society without the angst that plague characters such as Jimmy/Snowman. Yet, in selecting *Saturday* as the last novel to be studied for this dissertation, I wish to explore how a character such as Henry Perowne – with his social position and a particular worldview – interacts with and interprets others in his life. How does his affluence and social power perpetuate, or even further, the disinterestedness and detachment in his life that comes with the hegemony of scientific discourse – and hence aligning him with Crake? What of literature in such a milieu? What of sympathy and morality?

The epigraph of the novel, from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), in which Bellow attempts to evaluate 'what it means to be a man', signals its thematic concern. It is not just any human being placed under the authorial scrutiny, but one

In a city. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organised power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanisation. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. [...]

The very specificity of Bellow's positioning of his protagonist, Herzog, after the mid-twentieth century anchors his novel in a realm that resonates with the first decade of the twenty-first: urban surroundings characterised by technoscientific discourses, infrastructure, inventions and even interpersonal relationships. It is precisely this last element of modernity that both Bellow and McEwan examine in their individual works. In Bellow's epigraph, the 'beautiful supermachinery' facilitates 'a new life for innumerable mankind' that leads inevitably to 'the pressure of human millions', bringing to mind the population pressures that Darwin himself writes of in the process of natural selection and annihilation. The ensuing dilemma, in the words of Bellow, strikes at the heart of 'what it means to be a man' among other men:

Would you deny them the right to exist? Would you ask them to labour and go hungry while you yourself enjoyed old-fashioned Values? You – you yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest. Or else an ingrate, dilettante, idiot.

My critical approach towards *Saturday* takes as its main focus Bellow's challenge: an individual re-envisioning of oppositions to acknowledge the interconnected relations between us. Although *Enduring Love* also deals with the issue of one's moral duty towards others, Joe Rose's struggle is part of a larger general questioning of mankind's capacity for altruism; he is placed neither socially above or below his fellow human beings in the narration. In contrast, Perowne is strategically positioned in the narrative – detached, elevated. Consequently, his survey of his society is potentially more powerful and far-reaching in its interpretation and reactivity than Joe's.

The following discussion will first examine the significance of Henry Perowne as the representative of the twenty-first century scientific man in contemporary society, and by association, the role of the literary arts in such a context. I will reference not just Darwin's writing in my analysis, but also the

viewpoints of T.H. Huxley, and other critics such as Matthew Arnold, whose poem ‘Dover Beach’ plays a pivotal part in the plot. The positionality of Perowne in the narration will subsequently be studied in detail, leading to an examination of how the imagination and human sympathy are portrayed, negotiated and resolved in the novel. I will conclude by discussing the extent to which Perowne would be able to declare himself a ‘brother to all the rest’, in Bellow’s words, and thus implicitly McEwan’s recognition of our need and ability to empathise with others. But a caveat is in order. The length of this dissertation does not allow room for an analysis of the novel from a moral philosophical consideration. The vast library of philosophical texts that deal with the ethical and moral duties of mankind, ranging from Kant, Rousseau, Hobbes to Foucault, hovers in the background of my writing. I have chosen instead to focus on reading the novel closely in order to think through Perowne’s moral responsibilities as a man of science, as well as McEwan’s own thoughts on his creation of this character.

### **Perowne: The Twenty-first century Scientific Man / Philistine**

On 15 February 2003, Henry Perowne awakes in the early hours of the morning ‘to find himself already in motion’, ‘alert and empty-headed and inexplicably elated’.<sup>82</sup> He is a man in his prime: healthy, energetic, confident, ready to begin a day that he expects to master and control. As if to reinforce his state of active consciousness, Perowne crosses from his bed to his window and assesses the view: ‘He likes the symmetry of black cast-iron posts and their even darker shadows, and the lattice of cobbled gutters’. His rational mind approves of ‘the Perownes’ own corner, a triumph of congruent proportion; the perfect square laid out by Robert Adam enclosing a perfect circle of garden.’ In fact, he thinks ‘the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievement of the centuries’, who for the most part thrive harmoniously in it (5). Perowne’s omniscient survey of London cuts through time and space, establishing the legitimacy of both his voice and vision. Still, it is not an impartial stance, but essentially one that favours ‘symmetry’ and ‘proportion’, tidy geometrical patterns and shapes: in other words, a rational interpretation and ordering of his world. A reminder of Bellow’s

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<sup>82</sup> Ian McEwan (2005) *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape), p. 3. All subsequent references to the novel refer to this edition, and page references will be given in parenthesis in the text hereafter.

description of an urban setting just a few pages earlier in the novel, it is also a Darwinian take on civilisation, with the strata of human achievements piled up through time in the way that geological beds cumulatively contain the remains of prehistoric beings. As mentioned in my discussion on *Oryx and Crake*, Gillian Beer has suggested that to adopt a Darwinian reading of our lives is inevitably to legitimise our achievements and actions, ‘suggesting that we inherit the world at its pinnacle of development’, as Perowne has done in his appraisal of Adam’s design of the square, so that ‘it seems that all past has constantly aspired towards becoming our present.’ (1983:14). The resultant self-satisfaction, then, is not an unexpected phenomenon of advanced societies today, and in Perowne this flows into his pride in his career as a neurosurgeon.

Perowne thrives and revels in the performativity of his work. What he prefers is the operating theatre instead of the relatively more theoretical realm of neuropathology or neurology, the ability to actively bring about tangible results than to diagnose or evaluate patients’ conditions. Indeed, operating ‘never wearies him’ for ‘he experiences a superhuman capacity, more like a craving, for work’; contrastingly, paperwork gets him down (11). But in his pride for being ‘renowned for his speed, his success rate and his list – he takes over three hundred cases a year’ – the protagonist of *Saturday* does not dwell on his patients as individuals. While Gamini in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* shares this inability to individualise his patients as human beings, Perowne is akin to a well-oiled and well-tuned piece of machinery, ‘fast and accurate’ (7), triumphant in its propensity and ability for efficiency, productivity, and material consequences, while Gamini stumbles through his job, numb from the horrors of the war reflected in his patients’ injuries and death. Perowne’s performativity rests on his confidence in the stability of his world and Gamini’s lack thereof on an awareness of the instability of his. Unsurprisingly, Perowne is also self-absorbed and self-important, unable to ‘resist the urgency of his cases, or deny the egotistical joy in his own skills, or the pleasure he still takes in the relief of the relatives when he comes down from the operating room like a god, an angel with the glad tidings – life, not death’ (23). Yet this is not exactly a humane god or angel, for he is ‘too experienced to be touched by the varieties of distress he encounters – his obligation is to be useful’ (11). McEwan thus introduces us to a character who is undoubtedly skilled in an important job, revelling in his power in the operating

theatre and his dramatic authority in waiting rooms, but all the while affirming only in a utilitarian manner his duty to his patients.

In life, Perowne is shown to be a creature of routine. He feels ‘incomplete’ if forced to forgo his ‘morning rite’ of shaving (57). In his experience of unease when as a boy his mother brought him to the pool, we see his discomfort in unfamiliar situations; he ‘could never throw himself in, the way [his mother Lily] did, the way she wanted him to’. His refusal to adapt to or accept what he identifies swimming to be, ‘another element’ into which he must dip himself into, points to his objection towards any proximity to the edges of his comfort zone; ‘It was the division between the elements that hurt most’ (37-38). All these textual instances serve to highlight Perowne’s need for mastery of his surroundings, as well as a pure insistence on a limited, albeit generally advantageous, range of identified vantage points. How would such a man as Perowne – scientific, exact, habituated, and ingrained – view the literary arts, which must surely be ‘another element’ for him?

Courtesy of his daughter Daisy’s attempt to broaden his reading range, Perowne has dutifully ploughed through the canonical classics such as *Anna Karenina*, *Madam Bovary* and *Daisy Miller*. He remains unconvinced of their value, and of the benefits of reading fiction. Functional and operative as his character is, he loathes spending his free time ‘lying, or even sitting down. Nor does he really want to be a spectator of other lives, of imaginary lives’ (66). Begrudging the demands of reading such works as ‘the cost of slowing his mental processes and many hours of his valuable time’, Perowne does not want the world ‘reinvented’ for him, ‘he wants it explained’; thus he would list Einstein’s General Theory as an example of a ‘sublime achievement’, that which ‘displays a ruthless, nearly inhuman element of self-enclosed perfection’. This, to him, is in line with his career as a neurosurgeon, one who is ‘bound to respect the material world, its limits, and what it can sustain’ (67). Not for our protagonist his daughter’s belief ‘that people can’t live without stories’, for he is ‘living proof’ that it can be done (68). Thus, the character of Perowne embodies the legitimacy and supremacy of the scientific discourse in our public lives, and one who would have done C.P. Snow proud in his determined adherence to the practices and spirit of science and technology.

However, despite Perowne's explicit disavowal of stories as being potentially significant in our modern lives, some critics have been quick to pounce on instances where Perowne falls back on narratives in order to interpret events around him meaningfully. Peggy A. Knapp points out that immediately following his insistence that he is 'living proof' of a story-less existence, he collects his mail and newspapers by the door as he is 'hoping that his own story' – his sighting of a plane on fire while at the window that morning – might have made it to the news (69), and is thus 'not as impervious to tales as he claims; he just wants them not to announce their fictionality' (2007:127). Yet this is still in its way a limited view of the value of the literary narrative; after all what Perowne wants are the causal facts of what he has sighted. His demand for the narrative of the troubled plane is what Carroll has pointed out is an 'incomplete' approach to narrative, as a means of conveying useful information (2004:xix-xxi), and thus entirely within Perowne's pragmatic personality. If we also take into account his preference for Darwin's evolution theory – the biography of Charles Darwin is the only reading material from Daisy's list that Perowne approves of – I concur with both critics' view that while Perowne does reveal an unspoken dependence on a narrative mode (as in Darwin's work), his declaration that 'the unprecedented bonus of this story happening to be demonstrably true' (56) shows his failure to embrace the literary imagination; it remains a methodological mind that comes to the experience of reading with an insistence on its functionality.

Perowne's aversion to all things literary inevitably brings to mind Matthew Arnold's delineation of the 'philistines' in his essay *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), those who congratulate themselves not on their 'progress in sweetness and light, but on the number of the railroads he has constructed, or the bigness of the tabernacle he has built' (1970:222). Have Arnold's philistines, then, now triumphed in our times, in the form of men such as Perowne who declares the twenty-first century as 'an age of wondrous machines' (77)? It is not difficult to see in Perowne's distaste for the literary an example of Arnold's idea of the uncultivated. When Perowne wants the world 'explained' to him, as mentioned above, consider Arnold's declaration of the 'grand power of poetry', which lies in its 'interpretative power' that is 'not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe, but the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our

relations to them' (1970:157). It is thus this 'purging effect' of culture that Arnold refers to (1970:211), the ability to rise above the sheer materiality of existence to imaginatively grasp the often inexplicable connections around us, that perhaps marks out Perowne as being Arnold's philistine. Still, there is a need to consider the changes that have taken place since Arnold employed the term in the late nineteenth century. For while Arnold laments the lack of 'light' in this group of people – that is, reason (*ibid*:225) or intelligence (*ibid*:227) – it is a sign of the times that rationality and intellect are now aligned with science and a highly technologised lifestyle; Perowne himself – educated, intelligent and scientific – attributes mankind's progress as being marked by 'supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm clothes that weigh nothing, extended life-spans, wondrous machines' (77), all of which for Arnold would have been absolute philistine developments. Moreover, by our contemporary standards, the protagonist of *Saturday*, apart from his abhorrence of fictional narratives, is cultured; he likes having Bach played in his operating room, and admires Cezanne's paintings. McEwan thus does not allow Perowne to be so easily dismissed as a bourgeois, crass member of the middle-class that would have been familiar to Arnold.

Yet, it is undeniable that McEwan's protagonist falls far short of the Victorian critic's ideal state of culture, that which is perfection itself, 'a harmonious expansion of *all* the powers' instead of 'the over-development of any one power at the expense of the rest' (1970:208). For Arnold, there are two sides to the term 'culture'. The first interpretation in *Culture and Anarchy* is arguably the more familiar one whereby 'the very desire to see things as they are' would imply 'a balance and regulation of mind' that he associates with 'the scientific passion'. This would be a view that Perowne is likely to approve of. On the other hand, Arnold also emphasises the *social* aspect of culture, which involves 'all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it', all of which he stresses as 'the main and pre-eminent part' of culture (1970:205). It is interesting to note that McEwan, in creating his protagonist in the role of a neurosurgeon who loves his job, effectively puts him in line with the Hippocratic oath that can be said to fulfil part of Arnold's argument here; that is,

‘the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence’ and ‘diminishing human misery’. In the course of Perowne’s Saturday, this obligation – both in terms of the Arnoldian and the Hippocratic approaches – is put to the test: he walks away from the car accident he is involved in, even as he detects signs of Huntington’s condition in the other party, Baxter; at the second encounter with Baxter – albeit in order to save his family – Perowne pushes him down a flight of stairs, leading to serious head injuries for him. Clearly, McEwan aims to explore not just ‘the scientific passion’, but more importantly how it interacts and struggles with the antithetical demands of one’s social and familial relations and obligations, even that of one’s survival.<sup>83</sup> Perowne’s resolutely rational mind fails to respond to Bellow’s view of what it means to be a man, that ‘you yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest’. In the protagonist’s disinterested stance, the vantage position from whence he looks out at the world, is he then ‘an ingrate, dilettante, idiot’?

### **Perowne’s (Privileged) Position: Looking at the ‘Other’**

I return again to the opening scene of the novel, where Perowne stands at his second-floor bedroom window shortly after awakening. ‘His vision – always good – seems to have sharpened’ (4) as he gazes out into the night, ‘as immune to the cold as a marble statue’ (5). As two figures cross the square, Perowne watches over them, supervising their progress with the remote possessiveness of a god. In the lifeless cold, they pass through the night, hot little biological engines with bipedal skills suited to any terrain, endowed with innumerable branching neural networks sunk deep in a knob of bone casing, buried fibres, warm

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<sup>83</sup> While this is also a recurring theme in *Enduring Love*, the dynamics of the plot means that there are differences as to how the issue of sympathy and morality is played out in this novel and *Saturday*. Joe is concerned with the moral shadow cast on his letting go of the balloon rope, thereby contributing to John Logan’s death. But it is a more general mental and spiritual struggle for Joe; though he is lashed by guilt, his ruminations are more often than not concerned with the four men – as a group – hanging on to the ropes, constituting in its way a microcosm of societal cooperation and altruism. Perowne, in contrast, faces the threat of Baxter largely alone, thus forcing him to account for his actions ultimately without recourse to a collective responsibility. Moreover, for Joe to face his stalker Jed Parry, who suffers from de Clarembault’s, is not the same as Perowne with Baxter; Parry is locked in his own world, and nothing that Joe says or does affect Parry’s obsession with him in any way. Although Baxter is emotionally volatile due to his Huntington’s syndrome, he responds directly to Perowne’s snub during the car accident, and to the poem that Daisy recites. Because of this, Baxter’s plight can be said to be more poignant compared to Parry’s, and Perowne’s burden of moral responsibility more loaded. In a way, it can be argued that McEwan has pushed his characters in *Enduring Love* further in *Saturday*, paring down Joe’s share of moral responsibility within a group to Perowne’s towards Baxter. Curiously, in the character of John Logan, ‘husband, father, doctor and mountain rescue worker’ (1998:15), we can see shades of Perowne, almost as if McEwan has decided to give Logan a chance to grapple with the issues that Joe struggles with, but with greater personal and professional investment.

filaments with their invisible glow of consciousness – these engines devise their own tracks. (13)

This penetrative gaze, omniscient in its sweep of the lay of the land below, is authoritative, possessive and ‘exulting’ (4), somewhat akin to Crake surveying the Crakers from the top of their enclosure in *Oryx and Crake*. As befitting a medical surgeon, however, the religious overtones of his gaze is substituted with a vision resembling those from X-rays or a medical scan, piercing through bodily flesh to illuminate its internal biological workings, right down to their molecular and neural level. Such a commanding viewpoint is key to understanding Perowne; for him, the truth is inherent in this reductive reading of the world, believing that ‘much in human affairs can be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule’ (91). Furthermore, Perowne’s view ignores the fact that these two figures are walking companionably together. Instead, he insists only on a mechanised and impersonal interpretation, that which privileges the act of self-propelling; ‘these little engines devise their own tracks’. Here, it is more than just a man idly regarding the view outside his window; his elevated position, his transforming gaze and his interpretative processes reinforce one another to legitimise his identity and authority. Also, immediately after this, when he mistakes his initial sighting of the plane on fire as a meteor or a comet, to the extent – but also very much in keeping with his nature – of feeling a ‘leap of gratitude for a glimpse, beyond the earthly frame, of the truly impersonal’ (14), Perowne consciously rejects any religious or supernatural explanations, putting it down to chance, and hopes that the cause of the fire would be that it has ‘suffered simple, secular mechanical failure’, instead of the doings of an ideological fanatic (18). In his willed interpretation of what he sees, Perowne does not realise that his seemingly objective and causal attitude, his insistence on the validity of the mechanical and the factual, constitutes only a particular kind of truth among others, though one that aspires to a metanarrative level seeking to outdo all other viewpoints.

This idea of the disinterested observer has its roots in many Victorian debates and texts, according to Amanda Anderson, in *The Powers of Distance* (2001). Against ‘baseless generalities’ (2001:9), thinkers in that era strove towards a stance of detachment that connoted superior self-restraint. The Victorian ‘ideal of critical distance’, itself a legacy of the Enlightenment, is discernible in literary forms such as omniscient realism, in Arnold’s concept of

culture, as well as in nineteenth-century scientific practices and writings; this ideal is also present in Ondaatje's portrayal of Anil's 'long-distanced gaze' of her country in *Anil's Ghost*. At the same time, however, Anderson suggests that mixed into this effort to attain removal and distance is 'a complex ambivalence', for there was also wariness displayed towards the 'distancing effects of modernity, including the overvaluing and misapplication of scientific method as well as the forms of alienation and rootlessness that accompanied modern disenchantment, industrialisation, and the globalisation of commerce' (*ibid*:4).

We can discern, as evidenced in the earlier discussion on Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, certain continuity of thought between the ideas presented in McEwan's and those in the Victorian era. In *Saturday*, there is a similar preoccupation with the notion of critical distance, in terms of its realist narrative style and its focus on the legitimacy of science and its pronouncements, especially pertinent in the twenty-first century ascendancy of genetic science. Anderson cites 'the doctor, the writer, and the professional' as Victorian representatives of the modern spirit, as seen in a belief in 'progressive knowledge, full comprehension of the social totality, and the possibilities of transformative self-understanding' (*ibid*:4). If so, then surely Perowne warrants close scrutiny as a voice that in some ways embodies and engages with these issues today. Furthermore, Anderson insists on paying attention not just to the commonly-held perception of 'those forms of domination, control or management' associated with a detached stance, but also to 'the considerable gains' from maintaining such a stance (*ibid*:5). In my reading of *Saturday*, Perowne's detached view of others begs the question of who/what is above or below that stance, and what has been ignored or privileged in this way of seeing.

Indeed, Elaine Hadley critically addresses this very issue when she emphasises McEwan's positioning of Perowne at the window and his subsequent ruminations as 'a classic Victorian liberal response to the world without', 'a cognitive formalism that makes beautiful thought about humanity taken as a social whole' (2005:95). In fact, her response to the novel almost echoes Anderson's discussion of Victorian detachment, but in a dialectical mode: 'it precisely registers how a commitment to formalised cognitive practices of disinterestedness and capaciousness of vision are a crafted response to the unpredictable circumstances of human temperament at play in the actual world – the collision of

Baxter and Perowne' (ibid: 96). Indeed, McEwan's positioning of Perowne at his window is not an innocent gesture. By framing Perowne thus, it effectively dehumanises the external view,<sup>84</sup> allowing him to remain within the sanctuary of a comfort zone that mentally and physically barricades him from the flux of human life. Within such a realm, he indulges in abstract, denaturalised conclusions of what he sees: two human figures transformed into 'hot little biological engines with bipedal skills' that mechanically 'devise their own tracks' through the square.

This reductive gaze is again evident the second time he comes to the window. Returning to his bedroom to change for his squash game, Perowne's attention is captured by a young couple in the square. Their total absorption in each other, and because the girl reminds Perowne of his daughter Daisy, prompts him to scrutinise them dispassionately in their heated argument. Perowne diagnoses the girl's compulsive scratching of her back as being a probable adverse reaction to drugs taken recently, and that she needs 'an opioid antagonist like naloxone to reverse the effect' (60). It is here that Perowne's next move is telling. Pausing at the head of the stairs leading down to his front door – a position that comes to have significant meaning when Baxter invades his house – staring at his nineteenth-century French chandelier, he 'wonders about going after her with a prescription'. He reasons with himself that 'she also needs a boyfriend who isn't a pusher. And a new life.' And thus, instead of *descending* the stairs to hurry after them to alleviate if only the girl's physical discomfort – thereby possibly partaking of what Hadley has aptly described as 'the unpredictable circumstances of human temperament at play in the actual world' – Perowne indulges in a lyrical and wistful reflection on the random nature of life itself, 'the powerful currents and fine-tuning that alter fates, the close and distant influences, the accidents of character and circumstance' (65), that is reminiscent of Hadley's note of the Victorian penchant for an aesthetic construction of life in general. With this, Perowne's inaction is somehow excused, for the entire episode fades, and he goes to his car to get to his squash game. The phrase 'accidents of character and circumstance,' though, seems to act as a forewarning of his car accident, so that what has been a reasonable and removed outlook to life strikes at him personally.

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<sup>84</sup> See also Kathleen Wall (2008), "Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty: Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*", p. 775.

Significantly, up till this point, Perowne remains in his house, and within his chosen intellectual and moral realms. And it is this continued location within interior spaces that cocoons him from that which is beyond his control. As the author Zoe Heller notes in her review of the novel, his day revolves around various sanctuaries: ‘his handsome house, bristling with locks and panic buttons, his cream-upholstered Mercedes, his squash court, his surgery’ (2005). It is only when Perowne, for the first time, steps out for a prolonged moment in the aftermath of the accident, that his distanced stance is challenged by the demands and exigencies of external circumstances and the variable ‘other’. Up till this point, I believe McEwan’s narrative, with its limited third-person viewpoint, to a large extent encourage an alignment between protagonist and reader, so that when the reader has Baxter’s presence violently thrust upon him or her, it is likely that he or she flinches just as Perowne does. This has tremendous repercussions on the degree to which we sympathise with the character of Baxter.

#### *Looking at Baxter: the car accident*

The accident involving Perowne’s car and that of Baxter and his two other friends is relatively straightforward; Perowne, with the permission of a policeman, drives across a closed main road, due to the demonstrations against the impending Iraq war, into an opposite smaller side street, and almost immediately Baxter’s previously parked car turns out into his lane. What follows quickly descends into a tense confrontation; Baxter and his friends attempt to obtain £75 from him to cover the damage to their car, which Perowne refuses. Turning back to his car, he indicates that the insurance companies will handle any claims resulting from the collision. There is ‘a shout of rage’ as Baxter throws him a punch, after which he and his friends slam him against a wall for a beating (93). By then Perowne has diagnosed Baxter’s twitches, truncated body movements, and quick mood swings as symptoms of Huntington’s chorea. Using that as leverage, he halts Baxter’s fury, and then makes good his escape when Baxter is distracted by his friends turning to go in disgust at a missed chance of some action.

While this is not an ordinary road accident, neither does it appear at first glance to contain much subtlety; the entire encounter could not have taken more than twenty minutes, and the thuggish aggression that Perowne encounters is unfortunately a common occurrence in many cities. Yet there are issues of power and identity underlining the confrontation that demand our close attention. One of the most crucial considerations is the fact that we access the accident entirely from Perowne’s perspective, which allows us to intimately follow his reactions and emotions, but also curtails any chance of our being privy to Baxter’s, so that

the reader is invariably always looking at Baxter as an antagonist with questionable claims on our sympathy.

At this point, I want to consider the significance of this narrative perspective by turning to Patricia Waugh's response to Richard Dawkins' influential book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Due to the recent interest in the field of genetics and its implications for our sense of identity, there has been an explosion of such publications aimed specifically at the lay reader in the past decades. Waugh argues that such non-fiction authors invariably adopt the tools of the literary writer, 'spinning fascinating stories, creating mysterious characters and manipulating point of view so that readers could feel transplanted into strange new worlds'. Dawkins' style of writing makes full use of 'the readerly experience of inhabiting a single point of view for an entire fiction', and Waugh lays out clearly the two advantages to be gained from such a practice: 'one is to produce sympathy for the character whose perspective is so represented', and 'the other is that unless there is a change of perspective, the reader usually comes to conflate that particular epistemological perspective with the ontological totality of the world of fiction.' (2005:60) Such a method, according to Waugh, inevitably produces a perspective that is 'conveniently both limited and omniscient'; Dawkins' gene is 'both architect and architext of the plot' (*ibid*:61).

As Waugh implies, such a narrative technique, also employed by McEwan in his novel here, lends itself easily to the construction of a particular perspective that can be highly persuasive of the ontological legitimacy of the narrating voice. Just as we inhabit Jimmy/Snowman's experiences and memories vividly in *Oryx and Crake*, it can be said that in *Saturday* the effect is even greater as Perowne, unlike Jimmy/Snowman, identifies with his society and surroundings to a higher degree. So while there are epistemological and ontological gaps between the protagonist of Atwood's novel and his world, they are largely absent for Perowne. Essentially, it is not just Perowne's thinking that is articulated, but also his ideological presuppositions and attitudes that are privileged, so that we as readers tend to be more sympathetic towards Perowne, bound up as we are to his narrative point of view. What is the reader to make of Perowne and Baxter's first, and subsequent, meeting?

In the first few seconds after the accident, Perowne assesses the impact and judges it to be 'trivial'; there will not be any injuries or fatalities for either

sides, and thus ‘he won’t be in the role of doctor at the scene’ (82). The narrative then gives a brief recap of the times when his medical expertise had indeed been called upon while he was travelling; perhaps this is quite an expected thought from any doctors witnessing or personally involved in an actual crisis. Not being required to assume the role of a medical authority at this moment, however, can also mean that his professional identity has to take a backseat in the coming encounter with the occupants of the other car; there will be a lower probability of any deference made to him of which he might be accustomed to. When he does regain this sense of authority a few minutes later, the accompanying surge of power is best described as heady. For now, though, he lacks a central vantage point to control this state of affairs.

Feeling thus momentarily disempowered, Perowne feels a sense of ‘rising irritation’ as he envisions the probable long-drawn out mess of processing the damage to both cars, and also frustration that ‘[s]omething original and pristine has been stole from his car, and can never be restored, however good the repair [...] His car will never be the same again. It’s ruinously altered, and so is his Saturday. He’ll never make his game’. Unsurprisingly, he self-righteously projects his anger at the other driver, cursing him silently for failing to check before pulling out (82). Thus far, Perowne’s thoughts are a display of self-absorption that is almost petulant, though not entirely unexpected for a man who, just a few minutes ago, had felt ‘a spirit of aggressive celebration of the times’ (78) and had blithely admitted to himself to always having enjoyed the streets ‘from inside his car where the air is filtered and hi-fi music confers pathos on the humblest details’ (76). Now that he is forced to emerge from his sanctuary to physically negotiate with the external world, there is a sinking feeling within him that ‘he’s been left behind’ by a happier version of himself that ‘like a vanishing rich uncle’ disappears over the horizon (82), while an unpalatable reality awaits him.

Perowne’s aggrieved position is hardly the best manner for him to meet Baxter’s group. Despite this, he is aware of how his prejudices are contributing to his rising emotions. Trying to rationalise the fact that he had earlier glimpsed the three men exiting a lap-dance club before running to their car, he tells himself that a visit to such places ‘is a lawful pursuit’. Nevertheless, if they had been ‘hurrying, even furtively, from the Wellcome Trust or the British Library he might already have stepped from his car’. Indeed, Perowne’s first description of Baxter

focuses on his ‘distinctive’ gait, consisting of ‘a little jazzy twist and dip of his trunk, as though he’s punting along a gentle stretch of river. The punter from Spearmint Rhino’ (84). In that brief description, and more specifically in the pun of the word ‘punter’ denoting both a boat rower as well as the slang for a prostitute’s client, Perowne reveals not just his curiosity about Baxter’s awkwardness but also his silent distaste for his association with the gentlemen’s dance club. The matter is not made any better by the fact that their BMW is ‘a vehicle he associates for no good reason with criminality, drug-dealing’ (83). Therefore, even before he has spoken to the men, Perowne – the self-professed rationalist – has already made presumptions about them, their social and economic status, their very respectability, thereby contributing directly to the level of sympathy he might feel for them. That Baxter and his companions are patently dissimilar in many ways to him could very well predispose him to give them short shrift when they do actually meet.

Because the narrative is filtered constantly through Perowne’s biased perspective, Baxter, starting with this scene, is represented as primal and animal-like in his appearance, movement and actions. He is shorter than Perowne, but his hand, despite his lack of height, is large, ‘with black hair coiled on the back, and extending to the distal interphalangeal joints’; he is ‘one of those smokers whose pores exude a perfume, an oily essence of his habit’; his features consist of ‘thick eyebrows and dark brown hair razored close to the skull’ (87), while his mouth is ‘set bulbously, with the smooth shaved shadow of a strong beard adding to the effect of a muzzle. The general simian air is compounded by sloping shoulders’ (88). It is almost as if Perowne is facing one of Darwin’s professed human ancestors from time past, a definite non-member of civil society. In fact, in Baxter’s ‘fretful impatience’ Perowne thinks he discerns ‘destructive energy waiting to be released’, and reminds himself that ‘drug dealers and pimps, among others who live beyond the law’, probably do not observe the ‘Leviathan’ rules of the social contract (88). This series of unfolding observations about Baxter can be read as a series of incremental steps rehearsed in Perowne’s mind that establishes Baxter irrevocably as the ‘other’, one who belongs more to the non- or sub-human world than to the height of man’s technological and aesthetic civilisation, represented by the perfect square outside his house, his car, and his expert skills in neurosurgery. Moreover, as Perowne continues to regard him ‘unobserved for a

few seconds' (91) while Baxter's attention is drawn by the demonstrators in the next street, his diagnostic mind picks out the telling details of Baxter's inability to control his body: 'a fidgety restlessness implicating practically every muscle' (90), 'delusions of grandeur', the inability 'to initiate or make saccades – those flickering changes of eye position from one fixation to another. To scan the crowd, he is having to move his head' (91). Baxter is indeed not one of us; it is not just his appearance that marks him out, his very physicality is pathological. Thus, the shady criminal dregs of society versus the 'solemnly tolerant citizen' allowed by the police to cut across a closed four-lane road (79), the animalistic, 'simian'-like Baxter as opposed to a highly-educated and well-trained man, and the mentally-afflicted patient increasingly incapable of controlling his physical and mental processes in contrast to one in prime physical health, authoritatively observant, and whose intelligence is affirmed by his professional achievement – the stark imbalance of power between the two men is palpably obvious to Perowne, possibly dimly to Baxter, and by now probably obvious to the reader.

With Perowne's silent conclusion that Baxter suffers from the early onset of Huntington's chorea comes a resurgence of his equanimity that is largely invested in his medical knowledge. This leads him to 'dismissively' turn away from the group towards his car (91); Perowne thinks he has read all he can from this encounter. His disparaging rejection of the three men enrages Baxter, who then attacks him. As the reality of the vulnerability of his situation hits home – that he is now at the mercy of the three hooligans – the only way out for Perowne is to play his trump card: to articulate aloud Baxter's hidden fears and worries about his physical condition. And this he flourishes in Baxter's face without hesitation, all the while having 'the impression of himself as a witch doctor delivering a curse' (94), so that the two men seems to be bound 'in a world not of the medical, but of the magical'. This very unnatural and inhuman acknowledgement of the superiority of knowledge is also the moment where Perowne admits to a 'shameless blackmail', when he senses 'the power passing to him' from Baxter (95). As the power balance shifts, Perowne 'sees now in Baxter's agitated features a sudden avidity, a hunger for information, or hope. Or simply a need to talk' (96-7); there is a softening of 'the vaguely ape-like features' (98). Even so, Perowne does not respond to this visible need for consolation, despite his medical training and experience. Then again, it is his very 'clinical

experience' that, for him, is 'an abrasive, toughening process' that is 'bound to wear away his sensitivities' (85). The disinterested physician, who had almost automatically played 'the intellectual game of diagnosis' (91) a few short minutes ago, coldly affirms to himself that Baxter is an example of 'biological determinism in its purest form'; 'chromosome four. The misfortune lies within a single gene, in an excessive repeat of a single sequence – CAG' (93). As when he sighted the teenage couple at his window, Perowne's reaction is to assess the *situation*, including that of Baxter's eventual fate, but not of Baxter himself as an individual deserving of humane consideration and treatment; there is thus no need for personal involvement in Baxter's flux of emotions and hopes, only a contemplation of 'how the brilliant machinery of being is undone by the tiniest of faulty cogs' (94). At the same time, since 'the matter is beyond pity', since the breakdown of our brains is just like that of an 'expensive car', he 'never ceases to calculate how soon he can safely end this encounter' (98).

The entire confrontation is complicated by this juxtaposition of the instinct for survival versus the marks of social, cultural and intellectual differences between the opponents. Man, while possessing the same 'intuitions' as animals, according to Darwin in *The Descent of Man*,<sup>85</sup> has 'somewhat fewer instincts than those possessed by the animals which come next to him in the series' (1987:36). Fewer, yes, but he is not entirely devoid of them: therein lies the struggle when basic and considered responses underscore all human encounters, as evidenced in Perowne's predicament here. He sees that basically '[s]omeone is going to have to impose his will and win, and the other is going to have to give way' (86), for 'this ancient genetic patrimony [...] also oils the machinations of bullfrogs and cockerels and stags', as well as 'the *politesse* of the Versailles court that no set of genes can express' (87). Here, Perowne is evidently aware of both an evolutionary and cultural explanation for the standoff, but this insight remains largely theoretical. Even as he recognises that for the three men confronting him, 'self-respect is on the line' (86), he completely fails to respond to it. Aware of the potential severity of brain injuries 'among those unlucky enough to fall to the ground before their attackers', he is conscious of his precarious situation. Both his

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<sup>85</sup> All references to Darwin's *The Descent of Man* will be made in accordance with the 1981 edition of the text *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, and subsequent textual references will use this date with the page numbers.

instinct for self-preservation and his inclination for the antithetical leave little room for nuances or subtleties. In his recognition that a kick is ‘less intimate, less involving, than a punch’, Perowne likens the foot to ‘some roughneck hick town’ in ‘a remote province of the brain, liberated by distance from responsibility’ (93); if so, then the foot is also likened to Baxter, and thus the brain to Perowne himself. Then, what is worth noting is that the protagonist, being located by the narrative to be strategically nearer to the brain than the primal Baxter, is just as ironically incapable of recognising any sense of responsibility towards him. The distance between them is simply too wide for any simple bridging effort to be initiated at this instance; Baxter is unmistakably for Perowne ‘another element’.

It can certainly be argued that Perowne’s actions are justified here. After all, his priority should be on extricating himself in one piece from the louts, and the fact that he is quick-witted and prescient enough to spot Baxter’s condition and utilise it to stave off further blows surely cannot be faulted. Why, then, is there a niggling sense of disquiet in the way that Perowne has handled the entire episode? Is it because McEwan has not just allowed him to escape largely unscathed but also to conclude the entire incident with Baxter losing both his credibility as well as his followers, and Perowne striding back to his car with nary a thought of him, only that ‘the possibility remains that he can still rescue his game’ (99)? The dynamics of power between Perowne and Baxter has been threatened but not overturned in the end. If the reader, carried along the expanding tide of Perowne’s consciousness before this, has found himself or herself sharing in his euphoria of a beautiful Saturday unfolding in front of him, ‘Saturdays he’s accustomed to being thoughtlessly content’ (124), would he or she identify with Perowne’s relief that his Saturday, at this moment, resumes its promise? Or is our Saturday now ruined when we are reminded in Carroll’s words that in times of security and prosperity, ‘it is possible to exercise the most benign sympathy for a vaguely universal humanity. When we are threatened [...] we predictably “revert” to the antagonistic mode for which utopian moral visions can provide no adequate account.’ (2004:13)? Herzog’s epigraph looms darkly at this point with its questioning of our moral position.

## The Moral Balance Sheet

In the years since the publication of *Enduring Love*, it can be said that McEwan has been increasingly preoccupied with the ways in which humankind negotiates the demands of a modern outlook and lifestyle with its instinctual demands and responses. In his review of E.O. Wilson's *Consilience*, McEwan points out that 'the pursuit of knowledge is meaningless without an ethical framework' (1998), while in the year that *Saturday* was published, he states: 'That this span is brief, that consciousness is an accidental gift of blind processes, makes our existence all the more precious and our responsibilities for it all the more profound.' (2005). Undoubtedly, the question of moral sympathy, compassion for fellow mankind, and ethical obligations are especially pertinent for the author when viewed against the backdrop of the randomness of life. This is particularly relevant when in *Saturday* he repeatedly stresses the biological determinism of life that is part of 'the roll of the genetic dice that distinguishes between a Perowne from a Baxter' (Head, 2007:194). Against such powerful forces, how does McEwan envision Perowne's moral duty towards Baxter?

McEwan describes the focus of *Enduring Love*, in an interview, as 'one of those great conflicts in our lives between altruism and that other primary necessity of looking after yourself', that is, 'the extent to which we will give to others and hold back for ourselves.' (Schoeck1998). Perowne in *Saturday* appears to attempt to address the 'extent' to which altruism stretches. When listening his son Theo's band, he identifies music as one of the rare examples of man's creation that helps him to draw nearer to 'this dream of community' (172), giving us 'a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself' (171). While narrator's use of the phrase 'our best selves' is a direct reminder of Arnold's alignment of 'our best self' with culture and perfection (*Culture and Anarchy*, 1970:246), as well as with 'the *humane* instinct' (ibid:258, emphasis as original), it is the second part of this quote that demands closer attention. Its utopian overtone disguises a utilitarian, almost calculative, attitude towards its realisation of a better world, one that pits the act of giving 'everything' against losing 'nothing' in the process – an impossible accomplishment as acknowledged by McEwan, in 'an impossible world', yet portrayed as part of an ideal scenario. And if this is so, how then should we attempt to negotiate this balance sheet of altruism

and personal benefit? What exactly is one's best; how much, to what degree, are we willing to forego our desires, our basic urges, in order to accommodate the other? In the following section, I shall examine in detail McEwan's portrayal of the second meeting between Perowne and Baxter, as well as Perowne's thoughts and actions in its aftermath, in order to critically think through the implications of a power asymmetry and its impact on one's moral duties and obligations towards another.

### *The intruder*

Perowne's brief brush with Baxter at University Street colours his the rest of his Saturday. Removed from the immediacy of the encounter, he slowly shifts his thoughts away from that initial state of hostility and defensiveness towards that which admits of Baxter's 'predicament' as 'terrible and fascinating' – 'the tough-guy street existence must have masked a longing for a better kind of life even before the degenerative disease showed its first signs' (147). In this hypothesis of Baxter's life, Perowne has in fact taken the first steps towards trying to understand him as an individual instead of a case study of a particular medical condition, although this is immediately curtailed and retrieved. Seeing a red car identical to Baxter's driving past his house, Perowne admits that insofar that 'he'd like to see Baxter again, in office hours and hear more and give him some useful contacts', he 'doesn't want him hanging around the square' (147). This conscious desire to put distance between himself and Baxter is of course to be expected of Perowne by now in his negative assessment of the hooligan, but it is particularly significant that he can only envision the possibility of Baxter being at the square, not in his house, as if him even stepping into the square is already in itself unthinkably offensive, an affront to its symmetrical beauty, an unforgivably primeval presence that dares declare its name in the home of the gods.

It is perhaps this very imaginative and moral barrier that accounts for Perowne's shock and stunned reaction when Baxter walks in with Perowne's wife Rosalind to face the entire family. Just as Jimmy/Snowman is an anomaly in the Crakers' eyes, uncomprehending as they are to his diet of meat, his facial hair and his lack of adaptive abilities to the environment, so are Baxter and his friend Nigel – both armed – a rude intrusion into the hallowed sanctuary of the Perownes' home. The difference between these two novels, though, is clear: the Crakers see

Jimmy/Snowman as a shaman or prophet who provides them with details of their origin, while Baxter remains an ape-like thug in Perowne's eyes.

As with the first encounter, tensions from explicit social and cultural differences undergird the entire scene. Nigel marvels aloud at the size of the reception room (208). When Rosalind's father, John Grammaticus, openly bristles at their presence, Baxter's mock-reprimand – “That wasn't very nice, a posh old gent like you” (209) – is followed by a punch on his nose. Even before Baxter has spoken, however, Perowne has already sensed the incongruity of his presence within their comfortable upper-middle class living room: unlike the first meeting, Perowne now assesses the setting from Baxter's perspective, and sees the pre-dinner drinks of champagne and gin, ‘the belittlingly high ceiling and its mouldings, the Bridget Riley prints flanking the Hodgkin, the muted lamps, the cherry wood floor beneath the Persian rugs, the careless piles of serious books, the decades of polish in the thakat table.’ Against this backdrop of privilege, Baxter's presence, in Perowne's eyes, is unmistakably absurd: ‘the sour nicotine tang, the tremulous right hand, the monekyish air, heightened now by a woollen cap’ (207). Indeed, Baxter and his companion are such glaring misfits in this setting that Perowne instinctively knows that no good would come of this confrontation: ‘The scale of retribution would be large’ (207).

Apart from highlighting the Perowne family's affluence, McEwan's description of their lounge serves another narrative purpose. In the choice of prints lining the walls, Perowne's artistic taste can be said to reflect his attitude towards life. Both Bridget Riley and Howard Hodgkin are British abstract visual artists whose works play with and privilege the viewer's sense of perspective and space. Together with his approval of Cezanne's work, we see in Perowne's preference for conceptual art his stance of cultivated distance from any realistic representation of human life. As Hodgkin has indicated in a recent interview, resonating with Perowne's mediated attitude toward life, “I am a representational painter but not a painter of appearances. I paint representational pictures of emotional situations” (Jeffries 2009:23).<sup>86</sup> This, together with Riley's production – described by one critic as ‘self-contained,’ in that her artworks ‘do not refer to other objects and they do not seek to evoke specific earlier phenomena’

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<sup>86</sup> “Remembrance of things past”, Stuart Jeffries, *The Guardian* 21 May 2009, pp. 21-23, 23.

(Moorhouse 2003:11) – emphasises the process of an intellectual and cognitive sieving and abstraction of events and persons, a privileging of the viewer's interpretative position. We are reminded of John Berger's assertion of the significance of the use of the spatial and the temporal in paintings from the Renaissance onwards, in his seminal text *Ways of Seeing*: 'perspective organised the visual field as though that were the ideal. Every drawing or painting that used perspective proposed to the spectator that he was the unique centre of the world' (1972:18). Therefore, the physical positions from which Perowne assesses the world – at his window earlier in the narrative, within and without his car, and now back in his house – can be said to be bound up in his identification with the abstract artwork on the walls of his lounge. His is a worldview that evolves from and revolves around his scientific bent of mind, one that surveys given externalities, and probes the internal or the unseen from a considered and mediated perspective.

Nevertheless, because he can, to some measure, view his home through Baxter's eyes, Perowne's usual recourse to his reductive perspective shifts perceptibly. It is still from a clinical viewpoint that he takes stock of Baxter: isolating him as 'a special case', with 'unique disturbances' that characterises anyone with 'significantly more than forty CAG repeats in the middle of an obscure gene on chromosome four' (211). Yet, admitting that he no longer finds convincing his self-told tale of 'molecules and faulty genes' accounting for the crisis facing his family, Perowne acknowledges his part in exploiting his knowledge of Baxter's affliction. Through an act of imagination, he abandons his vantage point to inhabit Baxter's gradual worsening condition that is at odds with his chosen lifestyle: 'His kind of criminality is for the physically sound'. It is in Perowne's recognition of Baxter's desire to 'assert his dignity, and perhaps even shape the way he'll be remembered', that what he has earlier denied him – recognition of one fellow human being of another – is now taking place. A crucial aspect of this is in the validity of Baxter's effort to right his 'story' of humiliation by Perowne earlier – both to himself and his men (211). This affirmation of the role of the imagined narrative introduces the scene of Daisy Perowne reciting Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach', which provides a pivot on which events undergo unexpected changes and ultimately challenges the reader's moral interpretation of the novel's conclusion.

### *'Dover Beach': Literature and empathy*

In the scene where Baxter, upon hearing Daisy recite Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach', and mistaking it for her own creation, is so impressed that instead of fulfilling his initial objective to get back at Perowne, he excitedly insists on Perowne making good his offer of putting him on a new drug trial for his Huntington's condition. The poem – and by extension, art – is clearly meant to act as a humanising influence that works to tame the bestial Baxter and temper his propensity for violence and bellicosity; for Hadley, Arnold's poem has managed 'to tranquillise the savage pathology of a home intruder' (2005:92). In a novel that has up till this point been saturated with Perowne's logical, rational and dispassionate voice – or rather, his insistence on the very primacy of such traits – this opportunity for the literary voice to gain centre stage and work its magic, coming three-quarters way into the narrative, should be a welcome development. For the many literary critics and reviewers who have responded to McEwan's novel, however, it is this scene that sits most uneasily with them.

Reviewers have mostly questioned McEwan's treatment of this scene in terms of the role of literature or the presentation of its literary value. Christopher Taylor has objected to the 'heavy-handed' manner in which McEwan has depicted this scene whereby 'the redemptive power of literature comes crashing onto the stage in the person of Matthew Arnold' (2005:33), while James Wood suggests there being 'something uneasy' about the way in which Baxter appears to be the beast Caliban responding to the higher calling of poetry (2005:35). Baxter's 'simian'-like quality is also picked up by the critic David Amigoni, who asserts that within a technoscientific culture, this association of a primeval character with 'literature's civilising mission' appears to be 'a curious kind of parody' (2008:192-3). Even as I concur with these views – that the portrayal of the impact of the poem on Baxter is too polemically carried out, and the dialectical tension inherent in the primeval intruder's identification with Arnold's poem is too glaring – I believe the scene contains subtle shifts in Perowne's attitude that permits a gradual lessening of the tight coil of objectivity and detachment that he has wrapped around himself, a start towards an empathic effort to understand and sympathise with one who is utterly unlike himself. Of course, we have to ask whether McEwan ultimately succeeds, through Perowne, to convince the reader of his vision of moral sympathy, but before that, let us critically consider this scene

with regards to the extent that Perowne has embarked on his lesson of compassion.

As in Perowne and Baxter's first meeting discussed earlier, there are conflicting intuitions and cultivated responses here that should be taken into account. Reflecting his factual response to life, Perowne initially thinks that 'Dover Beach' is Daisy's autobiographical effort, placing Arnold's poetic voice as hers, and the lover that he appeals to as Daisy's unborn child's father. As shown in his first confrontation with Baxter, Perowne's tendency towards the literal consists of assessing what is presented to him as it is, anchored firmly as he is within his scientific empirical mindset. It is at her second reading that he manages to place Baxter in the scenario depicted in the poem, him 'standing alone, elbows propped against the sill, listening to the waves "bring the eternal note of sadness in"'. Although his pragmatic self 'balks at the mention of a "sea of faith"', Perowne could still stay with his imagination longer to hear 'through Baxter's ears' the poem's evocation of the roar and sweep of the waves on the beach (221). His focus, however, is on the note of unequivocal sadness running through the poem, so that Arnold's 'plea to be true to one another sounds hopeless' amidst the dearth of human comforts such as 'joy or love or light or peace or "help for pain"' (222). In contrast, Baxter is enraptured by Daisy's reading, almost incoherent in his excitement towards it: "'You wrote that. You *wrote* that.'"; "'It's beautiful. You know that, don't you. It's beautiful. And you wrote it'" (*ibid*). For Perowne, whose empathetic faculties have failed to stretch sufficiently, this transformation in Baxter's mood is merely 'the essence of a degenerating mind' (223), evidenced by a loss of 'any regard for what others think of your lack of continuity'; Perowne has apparently failed to note that both he and Baxter have misunderstood the identity of the poet. To Baxter's almost plaintive declaration that the poem 'makes me think about where I grew up', Perowne, under tremendous pressure for his family's safety, 'doesn't remember or care where that was' (222); he thinks that with Baxter's mood changing it is 'the moment to rush him' (234).

Knapp has rightly noted that for Baxter the effect of listening to such a poem read out to him is that 'it engenders love of life, a wish to go on' (2007:139), prompting him to change his mind about Perowne's offer of an inclusion in a drug trial. There is another detail, however, that strikes me as telling: thinking that Daisy has in fact recited a poem of her own from her freshly-

bound copy of her own work, Baxter pounces on and ‘clutches the book like a greedy child fearing the withdrawal of a treat’ (224). From this point on, Perowne ceases to associate Baxter with the bestial and the animalistic, almost as if his being able to respond to Arnold’s work has elevated him in his eyes. If so, is this then the vision of the novel, that one who is irrational and bullying can yet be tamed by what is apparently one of civilised man’s most distinguishing features, the artistic imagination? Is subduing the supposedly baser instincts of Baxter the ultimate prize for McEwan’s perception of the challenge of addressing the ‘two cultures’ debate? Knapp appears to think so; she suggests that ultimately, ‘the two logics have worked together; the aesthetic to enchant Baxter to allow Perowne to get him upstairs, and the instrumental, to offer the promise of a medical trial that might mitigate his symptoms’. Therefore, this crisis ‘has been resolved by entangling Enlightenment rationality with a version of aesthetic response’ (2007:139). Indeed, Dominic Head, in his comprehensive analysis of McEwan’s fictional narratives up till *Saturday*, proposes that ‘the novel’s simple moral stand’ is in the end ‘the need for rationalism to be tempered with imagination’ (2007:190). But Knapp also goes on to point out that ‘Baxter’s elation is, in a sense, predicated on two untruths’: the actual authorship of the poem and the existence of a drug trial. This, for her, brings the novel to ‘an uncomfortable precipice’, such that in ‘the very symmetry of the novel – its fusion of scientific and aesthetic understanding to avert a crisis, its lesson to Perowne about the efficacy of textual brilliance’ is ‘somehow slick or question-begging’, much like ‘the unease felt at Portia’s clever victory over Shylock’ (2007:139-140).

I agree with Knapp’s view that this scene played out in Perowne’s home makes for troubled reading. Not only, as she has pointed out, is Baxter misled by the Perowne family – which perpetuates and deepens the uneven power balance between the two groups – but also, arguably, there is no true ‘fusion’ of science and art here. What must be stressed is that Perowne is, and will remain, unmoved by Arnold’s poem. He hears its cadences, its appeal for love to one another in the face of the tragedy of our lives, but shares its impact with Baxter only momentarily. Ultimately, for Perowne, Arnold’s poem is an unexpected space in which Baxter can lower his guard towards all those around him; it is a much-awaited opportunity to unarm him in all senses of the word. Science can do nothing for Baxter, while literature allows him only temporary relief from his

doomed future. This is why even as we might heave a sigh of relief with the family when the crisis is resolved, this scene still contains questions as to McEwan's depiction of the role of literature today.

In Baxter's constant rambling on about the medical trial as he follows Perowne upstairs to his study, there is a moment when he says accusingly to Perowne, "I know they're keeping it quiet [...] They look after their own, don't they?" (225) This aptly describes the moment when Baxter is pushed down the stairs by father and son. It is of course the instinctual desire to protect one's family from harm that has prompted Theo and Perowne to do so, right at the spot where Perowne had paused earlier in the day whilst contemplating whether to step out of his house to offer a stranger advice and help. Now that a stranger has unceremoniously invited himself into his house, Perowne's first priority is to ensure his speedy departure with no harm befalling his loved ones. But Perowne is at the same time attacked by guilt, as he thinks he sees in Baxter's eyes, somewhat melodramatically described as he falls down the stairs, 'a sorrowful accusation of betrayal'. The young man has personally witnessed the abundance in Perowne's life – material, familial, professional – 'and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less' (227-8). It is this acknowledgment of the inequality between the two men that resonates throughout the novel since they met out on the street. By bringing Baxter into Perowne's most personal of spaces, McEwan literally brings home to the readers this disproportionate allocation of genetic luck, social positions, and now even physical power. If the literary imagination has prompted Perowne to begin to recognise their disparity, to what extent does his sympathy propel him to address the discrepancy between them in the face of one's natural instinct to protect one's loved ones and after that, the impulse towards revenge?

#### *The limited narrative of sympathy*

Contrary to the many critics who have commented on the novel *Saturday*, it is not the scene discussed above that concerns and troubles my reading of the privileged position of Perowne, but the fifth and last section of the novel that, I propose, contains the most illuminating example of the power imbalance between Perowne and Baxter. Here, I will attempt to work through the narrative of

sympathy that McEwan has depicted which, for me, ultimately leaves questions of morality unresolved.

McEwan realistically portrays Perowne's vacillating levels of guilt in the aftermath of Baxter's fall. Despite his remorse as he watches Baxter fall, he is reminded of the threat that Baxter represents to his family upon seeing the abrasion on Rosalind's neck, when Baxter held his knife to her throat. He berates himself thus: 'What weakness, what delusional folly, to permit yourself sympathy towards a man, sick or not, who invades your house like this', and as his anger mounts, 'he almost begins to regret the care he routinely gave Baxter after his fall.' (230) Yet it is undeniably to Perowne's credit that he tends to, as well as agree to operate on, Baxter's head injuries, for therein lies the act of overcoming our primal instinct for revenge. McEwan describes his interest in this most basic of our emotions: "When people take revenge, the same reward centers of the brain are activated that are associated with satisfying hunger, thirst, sexual appetite. It was rather bleak, the perception." (Zalewski 2009:46) Here, it is almost as if he despairs at discovering yet another element of our evolved selves that has to be curbed and overcome, and in *Saturday* he has actively set out to prove that this can actually be achieved. Thus, Perowne manages to see beyond Baxter's earlier misdemeanours to reach a stage where he reconciles his urge for revenge with some form of compassion for Baxter's doomed future. Or is that really so? McEwan has Perowne conclude that this decision not to press charges, though approaching sympathy – 'they'll all be diminished by whipping a man on his way to hell' – is more of a realist one: 'By saving his life in the operating theatre, Henry also committed Baxter to his torture. Revenge enough.' (278) If Baxter did not suffer from Huntington's, and were not thus 'punished', would Perowne's desire for revenge override his realist stance? Is it not too easy for the author to allow his protagonist's enemy to be struck with a degenerative brain disorder such that the protagonist himself, though struggling against his natural inclination for retribution, will still have the satisfaction of knowing a worse fate awaits Baxter than any that Perowne can devise? What exactly constitutes sympathy in the face of intuitive drives and complex social relations?

Charles Darwin himself stressed the importance of man's ability to sympathise with his fellow beings in *The Descent of Man*, since it is the hallmark of not just 'well-marked social instincts' – for that would be applicable as well to

many insects and animals living in groups – but also of man’s intellectual capacities, and thus that which separates him from the lower animals (1981:70-1). Since it is a trait that is both innate as well as ‘partly acquired’ (*ibid*:92), compassion is perhaps a thornier issue to grapple with than all other instinctual urges. For groups that would ‘flourish best and rear the greatest number of offspring’, Darwin suggests that they would also include ‘the greatest number of the most sympathetic members’, and cites this as a phenomenon of natural selection (*ibid*:82). At the same time, man’s ability to reflect on his past actions means that even if he has satisfied his stronger impulses initially, the memory of the urgency of those demands invariably fade, and ‘the instinct of sympathy and good-will to his fellows’ will surface to result in a sense of ‘dissatisfaction’ that will propel him towards a more considerate course of action in future (*ibid*:90). This entire process of reflection and judgment Darwin identifies as the working of ‘conscience’ (*ibid*:91), a progressive development that begins with one’s kin and then ‘the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him.’ (*ibid*:100) For Darwin, this would culminate, with the advancement of civilisation, in our sympathies extending to ‘the men of all races, to the imbecile, the maimed, and other useless members of society, and finally to the lower animals – so would the standard of his morality rise higher and higher.’ (*ibid*:103)

Darwin’s belief in the simultaneous development of the seemingly contradictory instincts for survival and sympathy is thought-provoking, for it foregrounds man’s intelligence in tempering his primary concern for the wellbeing of his nearest and dearest for the larger good. This is complicated, in recent years, by the question of how to respond sympathetically, with the increasing availability of genetic knowledge, to those outside or on the margins of the social contract. If we, in the twenty-first century, are the beneficiary of the cumulative evolutionary process of moral development, and have thus arrived at a point where the social collective has rationally developed a sense of moral responsibility, what are we to make of the mentally- and physically-ill, and thus the irrational like Baxter, who demands more from the social collective? How do men of status and intelligence such as Perowne respond to Darwin’s seemingly magnanimous inclusion of ‘the imbecile, the maimed, and other useless members

of society'? By extension, the fact that Perowne's day takes place on a particular date – 15 February 2003, which witnesses an anti-war demonstration against Britain joining the United States to attack Iraq – also raises questions about the extent to which First World countries' ethical responsibility to intervene in a supposed rogue state is also tainted with an imperialist drive to control a resource-rich nation. Self-interest and altruism, on both macro and micro levels, translated from Darwin's theoretical argument into reality, drives the narrative tension in McEwan's novel; that Darwin himself fails to convincingly develop his vision of the evolutionary advantage of sympathy is a point to note when we read *Saturday*.

On the one hand, Darwin points out that the demands of natural selection and the struggle for survival would ensure that 'the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated'. Going against this native dialect of evolution, 'we civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick [...] and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment'. While Darwin cites such an act of sympathy as being 'originally acquired as part of the social instincts' (1981:168), and more importantly that any attempt to curtail it, 'urged by hard reason', would result in the 'deterioration in the noblest part of our nature' (*ibid*:169), he is ambivalent as to its outcome. In his somewhat resigned conclusion, 'Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind' (*ibid*:168), we can detect a flinching towards this occurrence, but stoically he goes on to say 'we must bear without complaining the undoubtedly bad effects' of this phenomenon (*ibid*:169). Yet he could not resist issuing a possible curb to this state of affairs: 'namely the weaker and inferior members of society not marrying so freely as the sound' (*ibid* 169). For us today this comes too uncomfortably close to the dangers of eugenics. This display of judgment and authority over the weaker members of society dilutes the discourse of sympathy, and in my view has yet to be satisfactorily resolved. For T.H. Huxley, in *Evolution and Ethics*,<sup>87</sup> the social struggle for existence involves a competition for 'the means of enjoyment', with the winners being 'the rich and the influential' (1989:40); in other words, it is this group which possesses the necessary traits – 'energy, industry, intellectual capacity, tenacity of purpose, and at least as much sympathy as is necessary to

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<sup>87</sup> All references to Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (1894) will be made in accordance with the 1989 edition.

make a man understand the feelings of his fellows' – to secure a successful existence for themselves as well as tending towards the good of society (*ibid*:41-2). Huxley's inclusion of sympathy within this list of attributes is somewhat doubtful, not least in its phrasing that recommends an understanding but not an acting towards alleviating the lesser positions of other men, as well as in associating the thriving of this group irrefutably with that of all mankind.

Both Darwin and Huxley are men of their times, well-learned and socially-privileged Victorian gentlemen; their ideas of power and position in relation to their belief in the veracity of the theory of evolution obviously does not allow for a perfect fit, and to a certain degree this is not unexpected. As Carroll has asserted,

Darwin's sympathy for all living things must itself be constrained by the conditions that enable it to subsist, and these conditions are dependent on the socioeconomic and cultural order to which he belongs – that of a modern European and more specifically English cultivation that is committed to maintaining a leisure class by means of inherited wealth. (2004:13).

Indeed, Darwin himself sees 'inherited wealth' as a sign of civility within a society, and despite this acknowledged unequal distribution of resources that inadvertently shapes the fate of the rich and poor, he sees the development of the creative arts and 'all high intellectual work' as dependent on this state of affairs, ultimately advancing the 'material progress' of society (1981:169). Even as we recognise the limitation of their arguments now, what demands greater attention is how far we can mediate, in our times, the oppositional demands of the social stratification of power and privilege, moral responsibility and sympathy, and humanity's ever-persistent primal instinct for survival.

Not so very far, in fact. Sympathy, Carroll suggests, is 'strongly constrained by group-identification', and which is in turn 'itself strongly constrained by the socioeconomic organisation to which any given individual belongs' (2004:11). In *Saturday* the 'civilised' doctor in his Mercedes going for a healthy game of squash faces off a thug who has chosen to spend his time in a lap-dance club; their differences are so explicit that even a mentally-deteriorating Baxter is conscious of them. It is this very sense of the privileged versus the disadvantaged that Darwin and Huxley's writings, and McEwan's too, have failed to resolve adequately. In Darwin's tight-lipped accommodation of the medical man expending his skills and effort to save all regardless of their intellect or

health, we can discern a straining of his sympathetic faculties. If, as Huxley has insisted, the more influential members of society emerging as the eventual and correct winners in the struggle for survival/enjoyment is for the good of society, demanding in the process only ‘as much sympathy as is necessary to make a man understand the feelings of his fellows’, then sympathy has been relegated to a degree of subjectivity that is dependent on the winner’s definition, and quite often, convenience. In Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, Anil breaches the distance between herself and the Sri Lankans caught up in a long drawn-out civil war to able to arrive at a point that, while not of perfect identification with them, allows her to participate actively in helping them without a sense of righteousness or removal. In *Saturday* hierarchical differences complicates the narrative; Perowne vacillates in the face of the moral obligations facing him as a human being as well as a doctor, yet his sense of authority is so absolute that it is difficult to view the supposed threat to himself, and later to his family, very seriously. The limited narrative perspective very well implies a limited narrative of sympathy.

With Baxter literally disempowered and lying in hospital, the narrative in *Saturday* can be said to permit Perowne’s viewpoint to dominate and triumph right to the end. Although he has decided to operate on Baxter’s head injuries himself, his motives are, as discussed earlier, ambiguous. To face the very man who has wrought such havoc on his orderly Saturday in the operating room is also to locate him, immobilised and prone on the operating table, in a passive state, while alternately, the setting is where ‘he can control outcomes’ (246). In other words, it is Perowne’s attempt to regain his sense of authority. Baxter by now is reduced to the patient who is ‘draped up’ (247), so that ‘the sense of a personality, an individual in the theatre’ is removed, leaving only ‘the little patch of head, the field of operation’ visible. McEwan is very likely to be aware of what he calls in this scene ‘the power of the visual sense’ (248), of the process of depersonalisation inherent in such an act. But the issue of the power relations between physician and patient is neither explicitly referenced nor highlighted, while the tension between the two men resulting from their encounters outside the hospital is treated detachedly, as is evident when the narrative pulls back its focus to take in the general field of neuroscience. Perowne admits that the ‘familiarity’ of the human brain and the operating process itself ‘numbs him daily to the extent of his ignorance, of the general ignorance’ of how the brain actually functions

(254), and that what they can now offer is only ‘brilliant plumbing’ (255). But this confession of the limits of our current neurobiological knowledge is overshadowed by the narrator’s firm pronouncement that with time, ‘the secret will be revealed’ that will allow us to arrive at ‘an irrefutable truth about consciousness’, but only on the condition that ‘the scientists and the institutions remain in place’ (255). Apart from the insistence on the hegemony of science to remain intact, the tone adopted here is unmistakably that of a meta-view of life. McEwan quotes Darwin’s phrase ‘There is grandeur in this view of life’ (255) from the last paragraph in his epic survey of nature, *The Origin of Species*. But this phrase must not be taken out of its context, for Darwin prefaces it with the idea of the interconnectedness of all living things, despite their intrinsic differences:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. (1998:395)<sup>88</sup>

That Darwin encompasses even the lowly worms in his vision grounds his grand sweep of the organic structure of life, so that instead of McEwan’s exclusively scientific perspective, and despite Darwin’s entrenched view of the class differences within his world, he gives us a marvellous sense of shared destiny to conclude his text: ‘from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.’ (1998:396). This is in direct contrast to the persistent denigration of Baxter as the ‘other’; the various insidious references to his animalistic nature imply that the evolutionary/mental/socioeconomic gap between them is almost insurmountable. Furthermore, McEwan himself seems to find it hard to suggest a sustained, convincing and effective development of empathy between them. There is a lack of an inclusive vision that is so obvious in, say, Gillian Beer’s response to Darwin, when she writes that ‘Maladaptation is part of the nature of both mental and physical world’, such that ‘Plenitude includes the crabbed, crooked and marred; it does not mean unerring perfection’ (1983:68). For Perowne, Baxter is

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<sup>88</sup> I have used the 1998 edition of *The Origin of Species* (1859) issued by Oxford University Press.

‘that unpickable knot of affliction’ (272), who ‘must unravel’ (279) after all is said and done; his centre does not hold, and that is that.

It is also telling that McEwan allows Perowne’s admission to being so desensitised by his work that he at times forgets that there is still much to discover in his field, but neglects to consider an essential aspect of the job of those who are in the medical profession. Perowne is an experienced medical professional, but nothing is said about that very desensitisation towards his patients and their plight that he has readily admitted to at the start of the novel, and especially in that run-in with Baxter. Thinking back to the description, earlier in the novel, of the one patient that he could not get along with, we can see the limitations of the range of his sympathy, which McEwan has justly shown us from the start. Andrea Chapman, according to McEwan, ‘was a problem patient, a problem niece’, a teenage Nigerian girl living in Brixton with her aunt and uncle (9). Upon arriving in London, she embraced all the typical teenage misdemeanours such as drug-taking, playing truant and shoplifting, and rebelled against all forms of authority, including Perowne. He has failed to reach out to her – although he is not the only staff who could not – while his colleague Jay, ‘an American with the warmth and directness that no one else in this English hospital could muster’ (10), eventually brought her round. When he finds her calmer and more prepared to hold a civil conversation with him after his operation on Baxter, he soon realises that it is because Rodney Browne, his registrar, has taken the trouble to sit with and talk to her about herself, which presumably Perowne has not done till now. Although the outcome of Rodney’s talk is a teenage crush, it is also in its way life-transforming, as Andrea declares that she is going to be a neurosurgeon in future. Thereupon, Perowne goes off to Baxter’s ward to do his own bit of reaching out, but that scene fails miserably, simply because McEwan again neglects to account for all the differences that consistently put them at odds with each other, one of the most important of which is not just the socioeconomic distance, but that between a physician and his patient.

Rebecca Garden, in her insightful essay “The Problem of Empathy: Medicine and the Humanities” (2007), proposes that any difficulty with the idea of empathy, in terms of medical professionals, ‘begins with the preoccupation with self that obscures the other’, which is in turn dependent on ‘the experiences and imagination of the person who is empathising’. Together with the related

notion of ‘affinity, the way empathy is more likely to occur when the object of empathy resembles the practitioner’, she warns that physicians failing to be aware of these two factors risks ignoring or diminishing ‘the patient’s suffering and the meaning the patient makes of suffering.’ Knowledge of those who are unfamiliar, she goes on to caution

does not mean knowing a particular person’s experience of illness. In fact, this kind of knowing should supplement the awareness that it is impossible to fully know another’s experience. Physicians who learn about the cultural and social factors that condition their patients’ health and compliance with treatment regimens will provide better health care, as long as they work with the patients themselves to learn about the accuracy of their assumptions. In other words, *physicians should suspend, even if briefly, their role as experts in order to encourage patients to speak for themselves about their experience of illness and its meanings.* (2007:555, emphasis mine)

In Perowne’s perpetual self-absorption is his inability to read Baxter as an individual, as Garden has stressed here. McEwan has created a character in Perowne who is clearly dialectical to Baxter, but it seems that he might have identified more with his protagonist, so much so that his antagonist is obscured. As Carroll and now Garden have both indicated, one’s empathy, among other factors, is based on the sense of identification with whoever is the intended receiver of that emotion. The presumption to be able to ‘fully know another’s experience’ is not just restricted to the doctor; for authors this is a constant preoccupation and endeavour in their work. In fiction, we judge the level of an author’s skill and empathetic vision in his portrayal of convincing characters and scenarios. In the scene of Perowne’s last contact with Baxter there are many questions raised, least of which is that Baxter cannot speak for himself, as Garden has proposed, about his experience and meaning of his illness, for McEwan has not shifted Perowne from the role of the authoritative interpreter of their encounters.

Perowne visits the unconscious Baxter in intensive care after the operation. Sitting at his bedside, he ‘slips his hand around Baxter’s wrist and feels for his pulse’ (262-3), not that he has to, but ‘because he wants to’. McEwan has Perowne literally reaching out for Baxter as if the very physical act itself would trigger a sympathetic response as well; ‘he’s holding Baxter’s hand while he attempts to sift and order his thoughts and decide precisely what should be done’. Yet, the source of this action, from that of his student days, is described as ‘a matter of primal contact, reassuring to the patient – so long it’s done with

unfaltering authority' (263). Baxter prone on his bed, unconscious, can receive no comfort from this. What can be discerned, instead, is the reinforcement of Perowne's 'unfaltering authority', symbolised by his hand encircling Baxter's wrist.

Both Darwin and Keats, according to Beer, abandoned their medical studies as they could not endure 'the sights and sounds connected with surgery' in the days when anaesthesia or disinfectant were nonexistent. More crucially, the practising doctor's experience involves that of touch as well, as he must 'implicate himself, must use his hands to cause suffering, however much the outcome of that suffering was planned as recovery.' (1996:14) It is Beer's attention to the significance of the hand for medical practitioners that has led me to examine this scene of Perowne by Baxter's bedside. As he feels his patient's pulse, we are reminded that Baxter's hands are now still instead of trembling, as they were wont to when he was conscious, due to his illness. But both states – trembling or inert – are evidence of his inability to control his body or his position in life. Even his punch reveals his inability to temper his rage or mood swings. Perowne's hands are big and 'knobbly', 'bulging with bones and sinew at the knuckles', his fingertips 'flat and broad, like the suckers on a salamander', while his thumbs are an 'immodest length' and 'curve back' to resemble those belonging to 'clowns and trapezists' (19). Yet despite their abnormal appearance, Perowne's hands wield real power in the operating theatre, bringing both healing and suffering, as Beer has pointed out. It is this sense of conscious power that Beer emphasises:

The hand is the most conscious, and at the same time the most intimate, point of contact between the individual and the surrounding world. Bodies may be jostled in a crowd, helplessly, but the hand's activities are always in some measure knowing. To reach out; to strike; to stroke; to incise; to inscribe; such are typical activities. (1996:14)

Perowne possesses this element of knowing throughout the narrative; Baxter does not. From Beer's view quoted above, when Perowne holds Baxter's wrist, the scene should have been one of intimacy and resolution between the two contending men, as seen in Gamini's similar act at his brother's deathbed in *Anil's Ghost*. But we cannot locate Baxter's hand in the state of agency denoted by Beer's list of verbs, while we certainly can for Perowne. The power asymmetry between them remains as intact as ever.

In her discussion, Beer also references the painting of Thomas Eakins, “The Gross Clinic” (1875). The central figure in the artwork is that of Dr. Samuel Gross, who at that time was Professor of Surgery at Jefferson Medical College, and according to Michael Fried, ‘one of the leading surgeons and teachers of surgery of his day’ (1987:6). He is shown to be in the middle of lecturing an audience while performing a surgery. Fried’s analysis of the painting, according to Beer, reveals the ‘effects of perspective, of violence to the body, and of prone and upright positions as implicit commentary on the activity of production’ (1996:15), and both critics’ reading of the painting offers much that is relevant to the discussion here of *Saturday*. In Eakins’ decision to show only the patient’s leg while obscuring the rest of his body we are reminded of Baxter’s draped body prone on the operating table, with only his head visible. This is contrasted by ‘the commanding figure of Gross “the surgeon, ‘a dominant, authoritative older man’” (Fried, 1987:41) whose masterful presence is reminiscent of Perowne’s in the narrative. Fried points out that the various figures engaged in recording the proceedings of the surgery – including the artist himself – are reflective of the way in which Gross holds his scalpel, pen-like, so that both surgery and writing are conjoined in the similar demands of ‘coordinating eye and hand, of articulating a portion of the world, of representing oneself to others’ (1987:21-22). This emphasis of perspective in the creation of artistic works contains important implications, for as Fried argues, the subject of the painting is, controversially, a shocking graphic presentation of a bloody and invasive process, and for Eakins, the objective is to present the entire medical process as ‘an art of necessary violence’, which, in the days when amputation was the preferred method, ‘functions as an implicit moral justification of the experience’ (1987:62). Can we then not see that in Perowne McEwan has a voice that while exploring the ‘two cultures’ debate, also – knowingly or unknowingly – sets out to reaffirm a certain perspective of the world against the backdrop of our contemporary society’s anxiety at the seeming biological determinism that genetic research has thus far implied? Is *Saturday*, for its author, ‘an art of necessary violence’ employed to counter ‘the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy’, as evidenced in Perowne’s glimpses of the ‘other’ from his car – the China Embassy with its ubiquitous Falun Gong protestors (123), and the burkha-clad figures (124) – and his identification with the ‘contentment’ and

‘prosperity’ in white, upper-middle class Marylebone while shopping for his dinner party (126)?

When Perowne, home and again at his window as the day draws to a close, thinks about the discrepancy between the office crowds enjoying the sun and the broken figures loitering in the square at night, he fiercely denies that this can be accounted for by differences in ‘class or opportunities’; ‘Some of the worst wrecks have been privately educated’. Instead, he insists (again) that ‘it’s down to the invisible folds and kinks of character, written in code, at the level of molecules’ that has produced the likes of people like Baxter. Although there is undoubtedly some truth in this viewpoint, McEwan neglects to account for equally relevant factors such as inadequate material resources or life chances that shape the course of one’s life. To tilt the balance so far in favour of a genetic explanation of one’s misfortunes is to center its causality, with the appropriated authority of scientific discourse, on the individual. This leads easily to the conclusion, as Perowne does, that ‘No amount of social justice will cure or disperse this enfeebled army haunting the public places of every town’ (272). From here, it is a step away to the view that if one ends up having to sweep the streets for a living, then ‘Let the unlucky enlist’ (74). The moral range that Perowne has apparently traversed is that ‘You have to recognise bad luck when you see it, you have to look out for these people. Some you can prise from their addictions, others – all you can do is make them comfortable somehow, minimise their miseries’ (272). Would he now approach the teenage addict to help ‘prise’ her from her drug habit? It appears unlikely; his sense of compassionate agency seems easier to come by within a realm where he is familiar with – the medical and health services. Beyond that, the novel does not elaborate.

The narration ends just as it begins, in Perowne’s bedroom, though he might have been shaken by the day’s events, by the end he has lost nothing of his possessions, his identity, his career, or his family. What he has and will give to Baxter affects none of these factors at all. This limited narrative of sympathy, both from a medical professional and a privileged man’s point of view, is for me profoundly depressing. It is what Garden calls ‘an elite society of sympathy’ (2007:561) that McEwan has envisioned, one that largely ignores power differentials even as they confirm and repeat the metanarratives of the very society that support their positions.

### **McEwan's gaze of the 'other'**

*Saturday* is a novel that attempts to explore the apparently weakening authority of the literary discipline in our modern lives. McEwan himself is probably an ideal author for such a task, sufficiently at home with both the fictional and the scientific domains to be able to offer a nuanced view of the 'two cultures' debate. Unfortunately, the presentation of the mediating presence of the arts in the novel is somewhat unconvincing. Baxter's succumbing to Arnold's poem mainly fails to ring true, while Perowne's newfound sympathy for the 'other', supposedly nudged into being by the same work, exact minimal demands on him, and even contains the possibility of a retributive consequence for his opponent. Thus, I cannot agree with Head who argues that 'Perowne's moral stature is confirmed' as he makes 'atonement' to Baxter in the end (2007:194); the best that can be said for Perowne's moral stature, I have argued, is that it has evolved a little, but has yet to offer a satisfactory response to the questions raised by the runaway development of genetic knowledge in the last fifty years, especially in terms of the power differences between social groups.

It could be that the crux of the questions raised in my analysis of the novel lies in McEwan's recent thoughts about the state of the world after 9/11, and the role of the literary in its aftermath. In early 2001, he asserted his belief that there is 'some common emotional ground, some deep reservoir of assumptions' capable of bridging disparities in experience when we read a fictional work. Works of literary imagination thus encourage a sympathetic approach to the various manifestations of human nature, an 'anthropology' of the myriad facets of our lives (2001a). A week after 9/11, McEwan again wrote in a news article about how the 'the nature of empathy' is the ability to 'think oneself into the mind of others'. But in this instance, 'the mechanics of compassion' is perceived to belong to people such as McEwan himself;

If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed. It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity [...] Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination. (2005)

James Wood sees McEwan's sentiments here as 'precisely the themes and dynamics of *Saturday*' and critiques it as a 'liberal wish-fulfilment' in that terrorism could be countered by our imagination. I concur with the first part of his

view, but would wish to further the second: the belief that the terrorists utterly lack any capability to empathise with others dehumanises them, sanctifies and white-brushes the west's misdeeds in the terrorists' homeland, and thus halts any further attempts for both sides to arrive at an understanding of each other, which is a truer vision of sympathetic imagination. Wood concludes that 'Ian McEwan's imagination is worth cherishing; Mohammed Atta's is not', and it is this 'tension' in *Saturday* that for him is 'never quite resolved' (2005:31). It is true that what is expressed by McEwan in the article as well as in the novel displays an inclination towards a binary that reserves the moral upper-hand for the more 'civilised' members of humanity. It is especially disappointing to witness this in a novel such as *Saturday* that would have offered an opportunity for a more thoughtful and humble examination of the many oft-silent thoughts from both sides. As Susan Sontag states, 'why we need fiction: to stretch our world' (2007:228); how far has our world indeed been stretched by this novel is a point for consideration.

The character of Henry Perowne, McEwan admits, has not been the most well-received of his fictional heroes. In Perowne, he had intended to juxtapose the uneasy post-9/11 world with 'a very happy man', 'to braid together private happiness and public anxiety' (Miller 2005), but claims to be amused by readers' who were 'infuriated by his happiness'; 'People felt very uncomfortable because I painted this exaggerated version of themselves, really. Henry is really the fat contented western man, they themselves are fat contented western people. And it was a mirror, in a sense, like Caliban's mirror, and it made people feel enraged.' (Edermariam 2007) If Perowne is indeed a difficult but truthful reflection of the comfortable self-satisfied western world – and which to an extent I do agree with – that leaves the question of whether McEwan himself acknowledges his complicity in this image, and what he makes of the various critics' identification of Baxter as Caliban himself. These two points are significant because they address the author's problematic perspective on the power of the gaze.

Philip Tew calls *Saturday* 'a narrative full of introspective self-absorption' in which 'reconciliations are absent' (2007:199). Sophie Harrison goes a step further to assert that 'every negative is dipped in the warm bath of Perowne's thoughts and comes out somehow neutralised' so that 'his anxiety never really convinces';

McEwan surely wants us to find him sympathetic, but it is hard to see what there is to sympathise with [...] The author portrays Perowne's knowingness as a professional habit, the surgeon occasionally bound to see the skull beneath the skin. But what might dazzle in the clinic feels condescending in the outside world [...] His pity is inescapably patronising. (2005:48)

For Harrison, there is clearly a gap between the efficacy of Perowne's knowing gaze in his work and how he assesses the people around him. That the protagonist strikes her as 'patronising' in his gaze of others would mean that McEwan's bid to have him atone to Baxter is thoroughly undermined – which is additional proof that the inherent power relations in the text, as Tew has noted, are ultimately unresolved. Indeed, Tew insists on there being a certain privileging of dominant identities here: the novel is 'a reassertion of certain masculine principles; at the least, an unembarrassed and confident investment in middle-class identity' (2007:199). This scientific, rational and authoritative male doctor ensconced in his comfortable house and car should have been dethroned or at the very least permanently shifted – even if ever so slightly – from his vantage position by the end of the novel, and the fact that he has not revealed McEwan's own ambivalent attitude towards the 'other'.

In the five years since *Saturday*, McEwan appears to have swung towards the type of thinking that Perowne himself embodies. The protagonist believes that the religious represents a kind of 'primitive thinking' that from the perspective of the medical field, would be termed 'a problem, or an idea, of reference' (17); this is of course challenged when Perowne's own referential attitude to the world is questioned when he meets Baxter, though the extent of this, as discussed, is mainly limited. The author has recently, however, spoken explicitly against what in his novel was still an exploratory approach towards religion: "Faith is at best morally neutral, and at worst a vile mental distortion. Our habits are to respect people of faith, but I think we've been forced to question those habits. The powers of sweet reason look a lot more attractive post 9/11 than the beckonings of faith, and I no longer put them on equal scales" (Zalewski, 2009:56-57). That McEwan himself over-invests in 'sweet reason' here, and his inexorable march towards a belief that links scientific objectivity, western supremacy and capitalist liberality, are problematic positions to adopt is well expressed by Terry Eagleton, who identifies the moral ambiguity in such a stance: 'A community of the broad-minded is a pleasant place, but requires no great moral effort. The key issue is

how the liberal state copes with those who reject its ideological framework', and 'some of the liberal intelligentsia seem to have fallen at this first hurdle.' Citing writers such as Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens as guilty of touting 'a brand of western cultural supremacism' that has 'gravitated from the Bible to atheism', Eagleton suggests that 'Ian McEwan is a freshly recruited champion of this militant rationalism' (2009:34).

Perhaps, as with Darwin, McEwan has striven to but has yet to succeed in 'think[ing] himself free of his social, historical and cultural assumptions' (Beer, 2008:8). *Saturday* raises important questions about the interplay of scientific thinking, literary imagination and moral sympathy that complicates their relations with, and impact on, one another. The hollow at the spiritual centre of the novel, however, indicates that the writer's scales could have been more balanced and his visionary focus more encompassing and sympathetic.

## **CONCLUSION to Section III**

In Section III, I have critically examined the ways in which two contemporary fictional authors – Atwood and McEwan – have imaginatively interrogated the master narrative of scientific authority and legitimacy in the twenty-first century. Both writers have reached back in time to earlier predecessors – Charles Darwin, T.H. Huxley, C.P. Snow, and Matthew Arnold – to reference and extend their ideas and arguments in their own works, especially in their attempt to think through the role of the arts in the face of the inexorably progressive front of technoscience today. In this process, ideas such as the cultivation and maintenance of a detached, rational outlook in scientific discourse – their very constructedness – are invariably revealed to be particularly problematic. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood extrapolates the implications of the relationship among the dominating players in our culture: science, technology, consumerism, and profit-oriented enterprises. Drawing upon both caricatured and more nuanced characters, the novel problematises our understanding of the role of the humanities and science disciplines in our lives, at a time when the latter is seemingly experiencing a dominance buoyed by the powers of entrepreneurial investment. McEwan's *Saturday* addresses the contemporary world of medical and biological science as a reflection of our current fascination with the still largely mysterious world of genetics. Through his novel, issues such as the role of the modern man in the face of technological advancement, the space for recognition and acceptance of differences, as well as the gesture of sympathy, are examined. While the protagonist in *Oryx and Crake* identifies with his love for the literary, that of *Saturday* prefers the rational, tangible, and objective – or, rather, what *he* deems to possess these attributes. Between these two fictional narratives, I have attempted to reflect on the extent to which we can elicit meaning in our situation today a decade into the new millennia, by concentrating on one the most powerful metanarratives (still) at work today: the legitimacy of the scientific discourse. With existing asymmetrical distribution of influence and resources accorded to technoscience and the humanities, both Atwood and McEwan's works are stones cast into the apparently placid and immutable surface of the former, a reminder of the necessity to go beyond its domineering presence in order to allow for alternative perspectives of our existence.

## CONCLUSION

In thinking about the topic of identity in our time, how we know ourselves as well as others is just as – if not more – relevant. This is especially so after the heady postmodern promise of privileging multiplicity and heterogeneity, of empowering previously disenfranchised voices and selves, while the grand narratives – such as those of colonization, patriarchy and scientific progress – are supposedly debunked and for some, discarded outright. This dissertation has attempted to interrogate this process whereby emergent identities begin to come into their own only to be challenged by still powerful totalizing forces and influences. In addition, such hitherto marginal identities are now themselves challenged by their own localised conflicts and pressures. As such, the role of literature in examining the ways in which we come into our identities – through the process of construction, destruction, selection, denial, chiseling – is a much needed one, not least because it brings to the forefront of our consciousness a society that insists stubbornly on deriving its influence through particular metanarratives that many have thought are already long dead and disproved, and through universal categories such as “woman”, “nation”, “nature” or “progress” that elide individual differences. That one’s identity is today dissected by a multitude of loyalties, allegiances, and life experiences implies a greater need for the artistic imagination to articulate and envision what it means to be human in our present time.

Identity and power – the five novels I have discussed here reflect, explore, and interrogate the complex interplay of these two subject matters in recent times, from a variety of approaches and angles that illuminate individual struggles arising from asymmetrical relationships of influence and authority. Read together, these authors’ works show the impossibility of constructing a singular identity or selfhood, especially when past historical accounts contain as yet unresolved problems and issues, and current developments demand greater dexterity when thinking about who we are.

Past and present debates are important in my reading of all five narratives; not only are immediate social issues foregrounded, but historical binary relationships are shown to be both inadequately addressed and urgent presences today. Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army* and Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*

explore the female identity that has come through the era of civil rights struggle to arrive at its current ambivalent position that threatens to overturn all that has been fought for in the past. Both writers postulate the possible repercussions against, or implications for, women when society embraces masculinist technology and science wholeheartedly, such that tensions arising from gender-biased viewpoints and practices result in unequal distribution of power and influence across society. At the same time, dissention in the feminist ranks – as portrayed by the characters of Jackie, and the Compound women as opposed to those outside – over its traditional collective impulse suggests that the feminine experience and identity should be reconsidered today so as to take into account other intersecting discourses such as class, education, and race. Similarly, de Kretser's *The Hamilton Case* and Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (re)present characters grappling with the impact of colonization and decolonization in the twentieth century, offering a rethink on the familiar partnership of the colonizer/colonized that takes into account neocolonial acts of political and economic dominance in contemporary times. In addition, the postcolonial identity, as presented by these two authors, reveals itself to be problematically and deeply entrenched in narratives of origin. The relationship between science and literature is another topic that has engaged past philosophers and intellectuals, which McEwan has updated in his novel *Saturday* with its reference to how our lives are influenced by the way in which our genetics are structured and interpreted, as against how the artistic imagination allows for what the scientific impulse cannot achieve: sympathy for those on the lower ranks of the hierarchy of life. Through the medium of fictional narrative, these authors reminds us of persistent power struggles that directly and indirectly impinge upon individual as well as collective identities, with the additional complication of contemporary demands such as environmental degradation, the discourse of human rights, and the ways in which our lives are transformed with the advent of biotechnology. By referring to past discourses and debates, these literary texts identify the roots of our current preoccupations, and shape our dreams of the future.

In any discussion of the issue of identity, the physical body is of utmost importance as a signifier of particular discourses, interests and beliefs. My dissertation has also engaged with the imagery of specific body parts in each chapter so as to structure an in-depth critique of how power and identity shape,

and in turn are shaped by, each other. The significance of Perowne at the unconscious Baxter's bedside, the former's hand encircling the latter's wrist, reflects his power over his weaker opponent physically, intellectually, and socially. But it also reveals the protagonist's limited capacity for any meaningful engagement with such an other, and thus the gulf between these two men remain largely intact at the conclusion of the novel. The characters of Perowne and Anil invest in the power of the eye, or rather the gaze, through their identification with the authority of scientific discourse; both initially assume the possibility and desirability of maintaining a distance from their surroundings – Perowne from his bedroom window analysing passers-by and architectural details, Anil with her forensic 'long-distanced gaze' at her homeland's civil war. Both characters are forced to confront their world as it is when their privileged positions are breached and they are swept up in the flux of life. For Crake in Atwood's novel, his laboratory Paradice gazes out at the world like a blind eyeball, for its master is turned inwards to focus on both creating and annihilating mankind as we know it. It is Jimmy/Snowman, who likens himself to a sliding but *seeing* eyeball on the plate of viscous language that is mainly obsolete, and left to make sense of the human condition after the apocalypse. Together with the shattered Buddha's face in *Anil's Ghost*, the significance of skin colour in *The Hamilton Case*, and the close connection of the women's physicality with nature in *The Carhullan Army* – all these narrative focuses align the characters' identity closely with the materiality of our bodies, such that the different forms in which power work through its subjects are clearly presented and interrogated. In the process, there is no recourse to a clearly demarcated or delineated identity, since all characters are given over to both major and minor narratives in their construction and interpretation of their identities.

There are certainly a number of interesting aspects which I have had to reluctantly leave out in this dissertation. An analysis of gender in *Saturday* could have considered how Perowne's worldview, lifestyle and pride in his job reflect his investment in a masculine identity in a First World metropolitan city. Religion in *Anil's Ghost* might have deserved an additional chapter to think through its importance in the novel. The references to the role of pornography and the Internet could have been pursued further in *Oryx and Crake*. But there would not have been adequate space, since the scope of the dissertation was already broad

enough; my objective was not to pursue all possible lines of analysis but to attempt to trace and draw out the interconnections and linkages among my chosen literary texts – how power, invested in particular ontological narratives, complicates our attempts to arrive at a coherent image of ourselves. I hope that the ideas presented here will contribute a small part to the ongoing discussions and debates centering on identity and power in the twenty-first century.

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