

Subverting the Mother of South Asia A Description by Way of Prescription

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ABSTRACT: This article sets out to accomplish two tasks. First, it makes clear the distinction as to what constitutes South Asian literature in the first place. Secondly to establish that the Mother is an important ideological construct in Third World literatures, one which is used to counter the onslaught of Western neo-colonialism, it highlights the way the ideology of the Mother has been disrupted in those books of fiction which have come to be known as South Asian literature. It traces the reason for this disruption to the fact that many of these writers are producing literature for the consumption of the Western English-reading public. The focus of the article is on fiction written about Pakistan and Pakistanis, so I have selected texts by two male writers, namely, Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, and I briefly contrast them with those written by two women writers, namely, Sara Suleri and Bapsi Sidhwa. All four live outside South Asia.

Aijaz Ahmad, in his criticism of Jameson's idea of third world literature, made an important distinction between third-world literature and third world literature.¹ A distinction of the same kind is now being made between post-colonial and post colonial literature. I need to ask a question to further Ahmad's thesis: What is a South Asian text? There are many sub-questions to this one.

- What is a *canonical text* of South Asian literature?
- What is the *authentic* text of South Asian literature?
- Is it a text that comes out of South Asia, written and printed here?
- Is it a text that is about South Asia, written and printed abroad?
- Is it a text written by a South Asian living in South Asia?
- Can a text written by a South Asian living abroad qualify as an authentic South Asian text?

In the light of the above, I also ask:

- Is *Kim* a South Asian text, and Kipling a South Asian writer?

Every one of these questions would be easy to answer if they were not ideologically charged. Suppose I also add the question: 'Is a South Asian text a piece of writing in a South Asian language or does it have to be in English to be called so?'

These questions make it clear that there is a distinction between what goes for South Asian literature and South Asian literature in English. Writing in English gives a cultural distinction which often goes unannounced and unperceived in literary discussions.² In this regard Katrak, in *Decolonizing Culture*, warns us that "A new hegemony is being established in contemporary theory that can with impunity ignore or exclude postcolonial writers' essays, interviews and other cultural productions while endlessly discussing concepts of the 'Other', of difference" (239).

South Asia is 'in'; Pakistan more so because it is the site of so many *conflicts*. Gargi Bhattacharyya in *Tales of Dark-Skinned Women: Race,*

*Gender and Global culture*³, had laid down that "The South Asian diaspora looks to the sub-continent as an anchor for identity formation, however mythical and uncomfortable." (237) She thinks that "the appeal to my lost nation lets me speak with authority" and thus her idea of Mother India is one the diasporic community attempts to save and preserve for the next generations (238). Angelita Rhyes then asserts for what is true for all women:

Our awls—our personal and communal artifacts—have dynamic meanings that may shift as we migrate culturally, psychologically, or geographically. And certainly our awls are taken with us and represent change as well as continuity and diversity. Even though we migrate, we shouldn't lose the awls that could be our artifacts of empowerment. We can't afford to forget context, association, and meaning.

(Reyes 7)

Then what about writers who have not lived in South Asia, or who have seen it only through the glass windows of an air-conditioned room? Similarly, writers on poverty who have seen the poor only from the inside of an air-conditioned Land Rover can hardly be credited to have painted the poor, no matter how imaginative they are or how impressive their narrative techniques. There is a material reality to which art has to bend; not a reality which has to adapt to imaginative reveries of an artist. Imaginary homelands have no "copy-right/on history".⁴

Yes, the artists are free to create their versions of human reality; but if it is difficult for a man to understand a woman's experience, why is it not so when someone who has never been with a people in their own world, writes about them and comes to be called their voice?⁵

It is obvious that writers who write about South Asia while living in the West and writing for western readers cannot truly be called painters of reality for South Asia and its people. The best that can be said for such writers is that they create their own versions of a reality that they witness from a distance only. And when writers create their own versions for foreign consumers many a slip occurs between the imagined reality and the printed word. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o describes that culture emerges by doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over again under

similar circumstances, similar even in their mutability [...] ⁶

Kethu H. Katrak, discussing the concept of social responsibility in *Decolonizing Culture*, had taken his start by saying: "social responsibility must be the basis of any theorizing on postcolonial literature as well as the root of the creative work of writers themselves." ⁷ I appeal with Camus that writers by the very definition of their role do not serve those who make history, but those who are subjected to it. ⁸ Thus Toril Moi lays down that "literary works can and should be criticized for having selected and shaped their fictional universe according to oppressive and objectionable ideological assumptions [...]" ⁹ It is with this prescriptive preamble that I begin my discussion.

I develop my argument by asking another simple but perplexing question: Why has no male singer attempted the singing of the universally acclaimed *Mujh Say Pehili Si Mohabbat Mairay Mehboob Na Maang*, a poem by Faiz? Surely it is not the magical voice of Noor Jahan that has deterred them. The poem has an unmistakable masculine voice but that does not seem to have been encouraging enough.

My answer is a simple one: The poem underscores the Eastern idea of the soul as a feminine entity – a fact which is born out by Eastern poets expressing their love as a female self in search of a male lover. Eastern literature, as opposed to the Western uses the maternal as an idea that shapes discourses. And, of course, I am taking it to include the Asian, the African, South American and Caribbean literature. Angelita Reyes rightly says: "There should be a term better than 'postcolonial' that can describe the dynamics of this collective heritage stretching across many time frames, cultures, and geographical boundaries. (2-3) The idea of the Mother yields metaphors and images, offers diction as well as distinctions, foregrounds people's perennial problems and offers wide-ranging existential solutions. In short it acts as a shaping principle for both the elements of discourse and the essentials of ideology. While not being fundamentally feminist, Third world literature is essentially *maternalist* and highlights the feminine as the redeeming principle. To quote Reyes again: "Feminist mothering reclaims the roles of women even as it is also a human attribute." (8)

But this is not all. Third World literature does not simply use phrases like

"motherland," and "mother tongue"; it uses motherhood as informing the world with its fertility, care, maternity, and all the sentiments and passions that can be evoked with the word maternal. No use invoking the land if it is barren, describing the women if they are physically and emotionally infertile. This is what distinguishes Rushdie's scenes of barren landscape in *Shame* from Suleri's water images in *Meatless Days*. If water is a comforting element in the lives of Suleri's people, the three mothers in *Shame* confine Omar Khayyam in their home, they are not building a 'fortress of motherhood' but a Jungian dungeon of the evil mother from whose clutches the hero must escape to be his real self. This is what distinguishes *Shame* from *Meatless Days*.

If this sounds prescriptive, it shares much with Cheri Register who, in giving voice to a feminist demand, wrote: "A literary work should provide role models, instil a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men [...]"¹⁰ I make a similar demand about South Asian people. Not the imaginary reality in the mind of a First-world-dwelling writer, not just the ground realities of poverty, crime, and capitalist oppression, but also the ideals which are spurs for a better future need to be discussed in fiction dealing with the people of South Asia. In short, I demand an end to attempts at making love to an English-reading public which is hungry for more unfamiliar (exotic) themes, or an intellectual demand for defamiliarised narrative techniques, and a valorising of what really constitutes South Asia and ought to make it a better place to live in.

It seems that in fiction being written about South Asia by outsiders, any close relationship between women, especially between older women (like mothers and grandmothers) and younger women (like daughters) is seen as a threat to patriarchy. My premises for the literature of South Asia are:

- 1) it is a literature of one world only¹¹
- 2) it has a common characteristic of valorising the idea of the Mother.

While people brought up on fruits of capitalist economy enjoy a more

masculinist literature of trials and conquests, the Third World consciousness has been permeated with a more than ordinary sense of motherhood and its concomitant virtues. Rich's commitment that "Women are made taboo to women not just sexually, but as comrades, cocreators, conspirators. In breaking this taboo, we are reuniting with our mothers; in reuniting with our mothers, we are breaking this taboo" (255) is most pertinent to South Asian literature.

A queasy question to ask would be: Why are the mothers in *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Mill on the Floss* presented as comic figures? In both the novels the authors posit the points of view of the daughters to ridicule the mothers.¹² Of course there are fears of the Mother inherent in human consciousness as Jung informs us. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born* talks of the fear of "becoming one's mother" (57). Subversion of the maternal figures through expressive realism in these novels shows the social change that was actually taking place. Expressive realism gave way to magic realism when attempts were made at historicising South Asian experiences. I shall now look more closely at fiction that has been written about Pakistan and the Muslims of South Asia on both sides of the India Divide. The names that immediately come to mind are Rushdie, Kureishi, Suleri, and Sidwa.

I shall take off with *chutnification* of history as it occurs in Rushdie. *Midnight's Children* emphasises the supremacy of the narrator's historical truth in that "It happened that way because that's how it happened" (530). My point is that, given all the privileges and rights of artistic creation, when history is re-created in meta-fiction it is not just re-visionary burlesque, it is revisionary (re-visionary, for both Prufrock and Rushdie; in fact, reversionary, and in some sense provisional); you write your vision of the past, and the fictionalised epiphany is your apocalypse of the future. In short, your magic realism, your burlesque, and your *chutnification* is a serious ideological comment. No use saying that you are telling "a sort of modern fairytale" so "nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously" (Rushdie 72). Presentation of the Pakistan of the 70s without making a reference to Pakistan's Islamic Bomb seems an ideological elision. Hiding the link of Pakistan's Islamisation to disapproval of Pakistan's nuclear project by US, the country most comfortable to Rushdie, seems an ideological *de-chutnification* of

political history¹³.

In Suleri and Rushdie, Pakistan is described as the palimpsest-country on whose soil history is written and erased perpetually. When Suleri describes the country as having grown absentminded, and "patches of amnesia hung over the hollows of the land like a fog." (18), she refers to the long history of invasions which forced the natives to align their loyalties of the past to variable realities of the present. The image of the plague thus reveals an image of the land forever being raped and thus described as absentminded and amnesiac like a rape victim, like Rushdie's Bilquis. The palimpsest-country is also evidenced in Rushdie calling Pakistan "Peccavistan" an ideological derivation from Napier's pun, Peccavi, "I have Sinned" when he had conquered Sind. That Jinnah, the father of the Pakistani nation was born in Sind is only an additional fact.

When Soyinka described the African in his *"Twice Bitten: The Fate of Africa's Culture Producers"*¹⁴, he meant a person who was a product of the society and yet could be an outsider. In the Preface to *Myth, Literature and the African World*, he warned against a second epoch of colonialism energized by "individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of their world and their history, their social neuroses and their value systems." (Preface, x. emphasis in the original)¹⁵ A similar idea was expressed by Mohanty¹⁶: "Western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of global hegemony of Western scholarship [...]" (243) Rushdie, as narrator in *Shame*, presents himself as one who exists both inside and outside the Pakistani society – a fact that he has always tried to hide behind an Indian nationality. Being inside and outside is an important metaphor for a writer who sees the land as mother and the individual as an oedipal son justifying his passions in nationalism.

In *Shame*, Rushdie narrator asks questions to answer accusations: "Is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?" (23) In asking questions Rushdie claims to take leave of the East, but the fact is that he packs a rucksack full of ideologically-charged memories which he has never put off his back. As he says in *Shame* "I,

too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change." (86) The image of coming loose of the East that Rushdie evoked, paradoxically looked back at the image of the umbilical cord - which he resembles to plastic bands - which he has ever since tried to sever with the sharpness of his pen.¹⁷ This perhaps explains the dominantly Indian-Pakistani and Islamic background to his narratives. It is no surprise that the same umbilical cord is later figured as the hangman's noose (244) and recurs in many shapes and references.

His image of Pakistan, in *Shame*, as "two Wings without a body", separated by a thousand miles calls to the imagination the vision of India as the body with the two-part Pakistan as its wings (194). This vision of a bird's body, complete only with its wings, subverts the geographical reality and asserts the theological Hindu fantasy of *Akhend Bharat* (the United Hindu Motherland). The image of flight that it invokes may be, in the context of others of Rushdie's images of India, also seen as the sprawling motherland of India with its two breasts.

Similarly when he describes Pakistan, as coming into existence as two parts joined by God but later separated by worship of Him, he makes a serious historical comment for the un-informed reader who does not know that East Pakistan became Bangladesh for politico-economic reasons and not because of a religious divide between its people. That this is caused by an *imagined* state of reality which has nothing to do with ground realities is evident from his surmising that after the loss of East Pakistan, Pakistanis strived to effect a unity by their common faith but ended up making it a too big affair –a fact which is not born out by the first seven years of the 70's decade.

But my concern is the Mother and the subversion of the idea of the Mother. Rushdie claims in *Shame* that the women of his story moved in from the margins and forced him to refract his '*male*' plot "through the prisms of its reverse and '*female*' side", but then goes on to say that "my '*male*' and '*female*' plots are the same story, after all." (189) On the same page he mixes up the words 'oppressive' for systems and 'impressive' for Pakistani women, emphasizing the fact that "not all women are crushed

by any system". This elision of the fact of suppression of women and the foregrounding of the fact that they are 'impressive' is vital to understanding Rushdie's relations with his women characters and the lands that he tragedises. As Moi, rewording Irigaray, says: "The blindspot of the master thinker's discourse is always woman: exiled from representation, she constitutes the ground on which the theorist erects his specular constructs, but she is therefore also always the point on which his erections subside." (136)¹⁸

Rushdie erects his metafiction on magic realistic techniques, making the private story a satirical representation of historical incidents. In this presentation of interweaving of the public and the private, the individual and the politico-historical, Rushdie's vision sees history as being effected by a perverse ideal of the mother which he gives shape and form. Often this becomes the image of a mother-like figure which turns out to be that Jungian monster that the hero must conquer before he can get his final reward. P. Balswamy rightly diagnoses that "Salman Rushdie, the expatriate enfant terrible of Indian Writing in English in its post-modern, post colonial phase, had always been obsessed with a femme fatale in each one of his Indian subcontinent trilogies." (53) Women are always monsterised in Rushdie; there are no redemptive features in them. Unfortunately, the iconic figure has so far mastered the minds of critics that even his ideological constructs seem visions of unknown reality. Pradip Kumar Dey in *Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children* writes: "The metamorphosis of mothers into monsters refers to the typical cult of mother construction in the Indian psyche" (94) as if the goddess Kali were the only female deity worshipped in India. Similar misconceptions (from my point of view are spread all over the Rushdie pages on the Postcolonial Web. Ayelet Nen-Yishi, however, in her *The Dialectic of Shame: Representation in the MetaNarrative of Salman Rushdie's Shame*, gives a detailed feminist analysis of the novel. As she puts it: "[...] I urge that the novel formulates a critique of the domination of women not through the women represented. but through the representation of these women." (248)

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie describes one of the main characters, Vina Apsara, as a "skittish, disintegrated creature", "a piece of jetsam", "a rag-bag of selves, torn fragments she might have become."

(121-22) Uma Sarasvati, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, is imagined by the Moor as "a chameleon-like creature, a cold-blooded frozen lizard from across the cosmos, who could take human form, male or female, as required, for the express purpose of making as much trouble as possible[...]" (320) The portrayal of Indira Gandhi reminds one of Dianne Reyes' title to her Introduction to *Mothering Across Cultures* for which she chose '*I'm Not Mad, I'm Postcolonial, a Woman*'. This was inspired by a line in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*. Rushdie calls Indira Gandhi 'widow' thus equating her to the deadly black widow and describes her as aspiring to be Devi, "the Mother Goddess in her most terrible aspect, a possessor of the shakti of the Gods". Her description is reminiscent of evil, devouring female monsters: "a multi-limbed divinity, with a centre parting, and schizophrenic hair (522). She is a masculine vision of the feminine "with the parting in the centre threatening to devour and possess the shakti of the Gods." If she is the incarnation of the Kali, Uma is a personification of "turbulence, disruption, misery, catastrophe, grief..." (320). Both, therefore, are embodiments of chaos in the well-ordered world of man.¹⁹ The murder of this woman-mother is necessary so that the patriarchal order is restored. It makes us say with Irigaray 'mythology has not changed'.²⁰ Rushdie gives many episodes of violent deaths of men, particularly after they have been bad with women. These phallic women threaten men's manhood.

Irigaray sees Clytemnestra as deserving to be eliminated since she had become passionate and sexual, politically active and aware. This image is created in Saleem's mind when he sees Amina masturbating. Sudhir Kakar also identifies this as one of the two most dreaded figures in Indian male psychology: the sexual mother.²¹

Rushdie presents a whole series of women threatening Saleem's manhood. Evie Burns pushes his bicycle down the hill into a crowd of language marchers; Jamila Singer reduces him to the role of a tracking dog in Pak army; Houris in the Sundurban threaten to sap him of life; Saleem tells Padma that "Women have made me, and also unmade me." (391) Then we have the Widow – Indira Gandhi – whose sterilising operations on Muslims are discussed but never politicized. Powerful, phallic women threaten men, and threaten to move into the

public sphere, even from the confines of the zanana, to threaten or question male sexuality. Masha Miovic asks Saleem (228) what Naseem Ghani also asked her fiancée (29): if he is a man or a mouse. Man-mouse analogy extends into the sphere of sexuality where women take the lead and assert the right to choose their marriage partners. Reverend Mother proclaims that women must marry men and not mice or worms. (62) This overt sexuality is threatening to Rushdie who then presents Karachi as the great whore-city (Rushdie 1983, 157, qtd in Neil Ten Kortenaar, Kam Louie, (112)). It suffers from prostitution and incest.

When Rushdie was asked about the dominance of the themes of matriarchy, he replied: "I think in this novel the women are the dynamic force of all sorts, not just of creation but in destruction. So the women in this story make everything happen. They make the love in the story happen and they make the hatred in the story happen. I simply found myself writing about this family of super-powerful women and much less powerful or less apparently powerful men."²²

Empowering women is an important issue in all postcolonial discourses. Distortion of the reality of their social roles in Third world societies is another battle the postcolonial writers have to fight against Western imperialism. Kirsten Hoist Peterson, in *'First Things First'*²³, points out the major difference between the Western and African feminist stances on mothers. At a conference on 'The Role of Women in Africa', African women writers objected to the way their Western sisters "debated their relationship to their mothers"²⁴ and told "how inexplicably close they felt to their mothers/daughters, and how neither group would dream of making a decision of importance without first consulting the other group." (Peterson 235) The points on the agenda for the Third World women include what Peterson lays down for Africa: showing to "both the outside world and African youth that the African past was orderly, dignified and complex and altogether a worthy heritage." It is this aspect of the Mother that I see subverted in Rushdie.

Elderly mother-figures haunt Rushdie as the sharp weight of the umbilical cord is felt again and again. Bariamma, the custodian of family history has no redeeming heroic tales of family fathers. Her tales are "catalogue of family horrors", full of "lurid affairs, featuring divorces,

bankruptcies, droughts, cheating friends, child mortality, diseases of the breast, men cut down in their prime, failed hopes, lost beauty, women who grew obscenely fat, smuggling deals, opium-taking poets, pining virgins, curses, typhoid, bandits, homosexuality, sterility, frigidity, rape, the high price of food, gamblers, drunks, murderers, suicides, and God. (79) No messages of hope flow between her and Bilquis; in Rushdie's verdict: "[t]he deeds of men had severed that link between the women" (200).

Bariamamma's castigation of Bilquis symbolises the hating of the mohajirs, who came from India, by the native Pakistanis (in this case Punjabis). "See what you're doing to your husband's people, how you repay the ones who took you in when you came penniless and a fugitive from that godless country over there. . . . Come on, mohajir! Immigrant! Pack up double quick and be off to what gutter you choose." (83-4) The passage attempts to show the divide between the mohajirs and the people already residing in West Pakistan. In a novel of national allegory which sees language and religion as obstacles to nationalist unity, this dialogue shows family values being undermined by the traditional mother-in-law - in this instance the grandmother. This is not imaginative allegory or magic realism; this is political inscription of prejudices which should hardly be associated with the older women in Pakistan. Contrast the role women play in Bapsi Sidwa's *Crack India* (1991, U.S.; originally published as *Ice Candy Man*, 1988, England), helping non-religionists and aiding them to form a community. Diagnosis of problems and crimes: yes; but leaving matters in the lurch is a political gesture.

Asian motherhood is envisioned in either the tripartite mothers of Omar Khayyam or as Begum Naveed Hyder - Rushdie's vision of a fertile woman "utterly incapable of coping with the endless stream of humanity flowing out between her thighs". Her husband's annual attacks on her made her feel "like a vegetable patch whose naturally fertile soil was being worn out by an overzealous gardener." (228) Being a mother as *Shameful* act has been presented in no less terms of disgust.

Madam in *Midnight's Children* is Indira Gandhi 'the femme fatale of the Indian politics' (Balswamy 53); politically active women are either a sort of Chand Bibi and Jhansi-ki-Rani kind of 'noble, valiant, and

idealized/idolized' figures in the public mind or ego-maniacal demonesses who devoured their own folks. This is also the case with Aurora in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, who outlives her daughters. This may not have seemed so obvious if Rushdie had he not given her a comment in the beginning making her say "We all eat children [...]. If not other people's, then our own" (125). Rushdie presents this demoness as the South Asian people's ideal of a Mother. Thus for the Moor she becomes 'the living mother goddess of us all' (137, discussed in Balswamy 53) The *shame* of the subcontinent is personified in Sufia Zenobia of *Shame* who is the future bride of Omar Khayyam, an amalgam of the goddess of alchemy, variously called Sophia or Sapientia, and the headstrong and powerful queen Zinobia, an equivalent of the queen of Sheba, who is known as Bilqees in some Muslim legends, quite a nuisance for Solomon the Wise. She too is the phallic goddess, a devouring monster, a beast who rapes young men and severs their heads.

Rushdie's Aurora is a kind of phallic mother who ousts the traditional ideas of the Mother, completely replacing the idea of Mother India with what he describes as "his own sort of Mother India [...] metropolitan, sophisticated, noisy, angry, and different" (Nair xiii) It is with her that Moreas (Morea, the ancient king?), the Moor has an Oedipal affliction. She is described in the novel as 'an aggressive, treacherous, annihilating mother who haunts the fantasy of Indian males' (139) - a verdict which Indian males are hardly expected to own, but which, in all probability, is Rushdie's own vision of the mother. Her surname name Da Gama refers to the Western influence brought by Vasco Da Gama, embodying the exploitation and cruel objectivity of commercial ideals, and thus makes her a wholly un-Indian figure. This is further emphasised by the name of her mother, Isabella, the Spanish queen who sent Columbus to discover and convert the American continent. Instead of having a feminine tenderness for the women of the family, Rushdie's women are constituted of evil hatred, expressed in Aurora's reactions to her grandmother Epifania, so very obviously meant to be an embodiment of epiphany.

The multi-religious symbolism of Indian community and its problematic is inscribed in Aurora's character who, at fifteen, marries a 35-year old Jew and forces him to leave his Jewish identity and become a Christian - an act which symbolises her engulfing, devouring nature. That his self is

consumed in an oedipal relation with this powerful, rich woman is evidenced in the way his love grows for her the more sluttish and unfaithful she becomes.²⁵ Rushdie contrasts Aurora with Nargis, the Muslim actress, married to a Hindu, who played Mother India in a movie made by a Muslim, Mehboob Khan. This movie-myth of Mother India is then contrasted with the more mundane political reality of Indira-Mata. That she is the slut India is expressed in the Moor's doubt that she bore him as a result of having sex with Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister and father of Indira Gandhi. Her sluttish affairs with Indian national heroes making her "the great beauty at the heart of the nationalist movement", and her rivalry with Edwina Mountbatten for Nehru's love make her a vision of Mother India whose oedipal image disturbs even the heroes of Indian history in the novel. Thus the vision of India's independence is sublimated into a lustful figure of a phallic heroine.

While Aurora is the goddess of dawn, associated with the colourful light show at the poles, she is not capable of being Mother India. What Rushdie seems to be looking for is "an alternative vision of India-as-mother... a mother of cities, as heartless and lovable, brilliant and dark, multiple and lonely, mesmeric and repugnant, pregnant and empty, truthful and deceitful [...]" (204). She is a mother-monster archetypal figure, composed of the opposites. However Rushdie makes clear about Mother India that she was a tart: "From the beginning, what the world wanted from bloody mother India was daylight clear... They came for the hot stuff, just like any man calling on a tart" (5)

Rushdie's political allegory goes through many magical realist turns. Aurora is described as: "the confidante and, according to persistent rumours, mistress of Pandit Nehru, his 'friend of friends', who would later vie with Edwina Mountbatten for his heart." (116) But we have no trace of Edwina Mountbatten who was described as a 'chicken-breast eating' imperial icon in Rushdie's fiction. "The politically conscious Ice-candy man calls him 'a sly one (...)' He's got Mountbatten eating out of his one hand and the English's wife out of his other what-not (...). He's the one to watch!" (p. 131)

The slaughter that ensued as the consequence of the partitioning of India

and creation of Pakistan made credible the claims of the empire that it alone had brought peace to a chaotic mass of peoples and it alone could, if allowed to continue. Is it enough for Rushdie to say that the Empire disintegrated in a tide of blood because of the failure of the Cabinet Mission scheme? When he talks of 'parents of midnight, he carefully sees "the determination of M.A. Jinnah, who was dying and wanted to see Pakistan formed in his lifetime" but cautiously forgets Edwina in "Mountbatten and his extraordinary haste" and many other Congress names among "monkeys and vultures dropping hands, and white transvestites, and bone-setters and mongoose-trainers..." (121) Would it not be the truth that the violence that resulted originated in the British policy of divide and rule, as well as Edwina Mountbatten's illicit love affair with Nehru? Where is Edwina among all the women sketches in all of Rushdie's stories about Indian partition? Elision is a rhetorical device meant to hide facts. In criminal courts suppression of evidence is an unpardonable crime.¹

How the Mother figure is undermined or subverted is also visible in another novel that closely deals with Islamic fundamentalism in times of upheavals similar to the partition of India. It is the *The Kite Runner* by Hosseini, Khaled (2003). A bird's eye view suffices to reveal that mothers don't figure in the lives of its protagonists who are both related by the same father. Sofia Akrami, Amir's mother, being dead in childbirth is never seen. She epitomises the 'feminine' influence on Amir, since she read poetry and was conscious of political ethnicity of Hazara. Amir is shown conscious of her absence: "I had been raised by men; I hadn't grown up around women (13.97) He grows up to admire his father, not a rare act in patriarchal cultures; but one that is intensified in the absence of the softening and wizing influence of the motherly affection. Mothers, however, are important, so Assef's mother is reported to be German, a slighting reference invoking the propagandised Nazism and German manliness amounting to cruelty. On the other hand, Hassan's mother, Sanaubar, runs off soon after his birth. She is thus a prostitute, a whore unworthy of being a mother. Women live on the periphery of the

¹ How far the shadow of the giant shakes a critic's views is obvious in the way Rituparna Roy fails (65) to see how Sidwa succeeds in bringing in this point while Rushdie cleverly succeeds in avoiding it.

plot. Khanum Taheri is a typical motherly in-law whose knitting a sweater for Sohrab all the more typifies her. But she is most unlike Rushdie's Bariamma, since both have been created with different intents.

But there is an opposite side to such discursive subversions of what is so important in the culture of South Asia – Mother. Rituparna Roy in *South Asian Partition Fiction in English from Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh* notes a significant difference between the novels written by Anita Desai and Bapsi Sidwa and those written by Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh. She sees Desai and Sidwa as using “a more intensely personal and intimate [...] technique of rendition” whereas the “male visualization of the Partition” has clear signs of “being totally preoccupied with the immediate political and social ramifications of the ‘event’ of the Partition.” (63)²

Bapsi Sidwa's *Cracking India* is a novel that concerns us with its descriptions of life before and after the partition. The novel foregrounds problems which are common in South Asian societies: religious and racial conflicts, tensions of class system, oppressed women, forced marriages, prostitution, sexuality, and political violence related to the division of India. When Lenny says, "Now I know surely. One man's religion is another man's poison" (125) she, in fact, gives voice to the belief and fears of more than a billion and half people of the subcontinent who have seen this and whose majority does not want it to be this way. What she says, and means, is their voice – an obvious choice of the writer, of course.

The feminist discourse is visible in the narrative undermining the male figures of power, like the father and the colonel. Lenny is "schooled to read between the lines of my father's face". (78) However, the serenity of

² Although her concern is different from mine, it seems relevant to point out here how Rituparna Roy tries hard to emphasize that Sidwa's is a Pakistani version and tries to undermine Sidwa's version by commenting that “succeeds in ‘providing an alternate version of history’ but not an objective one” and finds her Parsee origins as not an asset but a disadvantage as she did not belong to “any of the contending communities” (65); and yet she admires Rushdie in that “The positioning of the novelist in a vantage point in history now afforded him perspectives that were not possible before” (109)

feminine presences permeates the discourse, as in the very beginning (11), Lenny says of Godmother's home: "This is my haven. My refuge from the perplexing realities . . ." and goes on to describe her Godmother: "The intensity of her tenderness and the concentration of her attention are narcotic. I require no one else." (17)

Lenny's relation with her biological mother is laddened with troubles. (50-1) Women betray women: Papoo is drugged by her mother, Muccho, who had always hated her, and married off to an ugly and elderly man. Previously she had been brutally beaten by her mother. But Lenny's alternatives are near at hand: the Godmother and the Ayah, maternal figures, who imply comfort and love, and thus trust.

The cooperation of women during partition riots blooms into a metaphor for that maternal love and caring that feminists claim can create a new world. The creation of this new world, Mother India, is not a rejection of the familial mother and embracing of the nation as Rushdie seems to imply. It is an act of mothering the nation, being mother to the fruits of the partition, and creating a nation from the ashes of that phoenix of the idea of nationhood which was improperly named Mother India by that masculinist fallacy which had caused the partition itself. Godmother's comments sound like a verdict, "Life goes on and the business of living buries the debris of our pasts. Hurt, happiness ... all fade impartially ... to make way for fresh joy and new sorrow. That's the way of life." (273) No women eat babies here, neither their own nor others'.

The novel impresses the idea of nation-building as a feminine prerogative. It concerns itself with the metaphorical possibilities of the word 'mother' as a verb, as an adjective and as an adverb all of which we witness in the work of the women during the riots. The difference between Sidwa's descriptions and those of Rushdie's is too obvious to go un-noted.

The question whether Rushdie is South Asian, or if he is qualified to write about the sub-continent becomes more inevitable if we take the case of Hanif Kureishi about whom Kenneth C. Kaleta, in *Hanif Kureishi: postcolonial storyteller*²⁶ has a resolute first paragraph introduction, built up in a very syllogistic manner: "Specific elements in

narrative are recognized as 'English': an English mystery, an English thriller, an English comedy. Englishness' is an identifiable storytelling sensibility. Hanif Kureishi has inherited this rich literary tradition. And Kureishi is a 'proper Englishman, almost'" (1). He goes on to enumerate the traits which make Kureishi an English writer:" [...] his writing evidences the English sensibility, the English eccentricity, and the English regard for his words. It displays the English sense of humour..." (2)

So Kureishi is not a South Asian writer and should not concern us. But then he writes about what has been termed the South Asian diaspora and particularly of the Pakistani and Muslim community in England.

B. J. Moore-Gilbert in *Hanif Kureishi* discusses Kureishi's English vs Pakistani writership²⁷. He sums up his discussion saying:"[...] a shared ethnicity or roots in a particular marginalised community grants no a priori privileges to the intellectual or artist in the context of the question of the right to represent that community's oppressions." (50). He calls Kureishi's to be of a 'fringe' background (145) and holds this responsible for Kureishi's cultural/political choices²⁸. Kureishi writes about immigrants' experiences of the English, which read much like the colonisers' comments in pre-independence British literature, yet he never shows or refers to a colonial character, not because it happened before his birth - many immigrants refer to their ancestors and parents and grandparents left in the East - but because that is not his purpose.

Kureishi's *Borderline* (1981) presents a significant stance on the writ of the author and his personal experience vis-à-vis the fictionalised subject of the author. Haroon wants to write about the Asians he knows and wants to foreground his observation of their pain. In a most revealing scene, Yasmin's asking Haroon as to whose feelings he actually presents amounts to asking all South Asian writers if they are really writing about Asians or if they are writing down what they think they know of Asians. As she says, "It's full of feelings [...] It's subtle with suffering. Whose suffering [...]?" (148) As Moore-Gilbert rightly interprets, Kureishi is quite conscious of the parasitic existence of the South Asian writers' on the problems of immigrants into the West and the natives left behind.

One way of looking at his works is suggested and elided by Vincent Canby who, reviewing the movie *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1996) in New York Times, wrote: "Had 'My Beautiful Laundrette' been written by anybody but the London-born Mr. Kureishi, whose father was Pakistani and mother was English, the film would possibly seem racist. He's merciless to his Pakistani characters, especially to Omar. However, he's merciless in the way of someone who creates characters so complex they can't be easily categorized as good or bad. The film's most sympathetic as well as most stubbornly faithful characters are English."³⁰

Though Kureishi has been autobiographical²⁹, he is too shy about his own familial details. As Kenneth C. Kaleta records him saying: "My mother was important in my life too. But she is important to me privately. I don't feel that I particularly want to write about her, for others to read about her." (189)

Kureishi writes about youth, mainly Pakistani immigrants, and also the British of the sub-culture, both marginalised, both out of place in 'English' society. He calls into question all British traditions and institutions of social decency, but finds his characters' salvation in a personal ceasefire with the British, creating an individual milieu where no socio-political exists. When it comes to racial integration and overcoming the diasporic feeling, he writes from the point of view of a British writer whose solutions direct his characters, and thus his readers, to the assimilation of the South Asian in the British till all are British, at least in the eyes of the British. His is the solution of the drop falling into the ocean; the ocean which is England, the British society which acts as a mother to many of his major characters. In fact, Kureishi's solutions to Asian's (rather Pakistanis', because he writes about them and not about Indians') problems are akin to those of Afro-American writers of 50's and 60's, i.e., before the Blacks finally came into their own. Thus in *'We're not Jews'* the Asian Azhar has never been to India and his white wife is a marginalised throw back of the English society. They have thus nowhere to go when confronted with racist rejection. They don't belong anywhere.

In-betweenness is the keyword for Kureishi. All the diasporic people are in-between till they decide to fall into the ocean. Cherry in *My Beautiful Laundrette* is Salim's immigrant wife, lover of Pakistan and its cultural

values. Omar's rejected mother, she is the only character conscious of in-betweenness. "Could anyone in their right mind call this silly little island off Europe their home?" And then goes on "Oh, God, I'm so sick of hearing about these in-betweens. People should make up their minds where they are." She foregrounds the most important aspect of South Asian diasporic life, and is rejected by her own son.

Kureishi's works dramatise the traumas of mother-son relation only in the British context as if only the British, or the Asians born of British mothers had the genes to experience such a relation. In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Omar's mother is already dead; *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* does not bring Sammy's white mother on the scene, though her influence and her memory plays a determining role for father-son relation; in the film *London Kills* no mothers make to the screen, though Clint's search for his mother takes up enough screen time and determines his fantasies about his girlfriend Sylvie. The movie foregrounds the mother-child relation and its emotional importance in determining a son's personal choices.³¹

In *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Karim searches for a motherly relation in a vacuum. Karim's motherlessness expresses the dilemma of the Asian youth who must now accept the British matriarchal engulfment - an immersion into the culture, an acceptance of a British mother figure. His search is acted out between his real mother Margaret and Eva, the woman who stands in for Eve, the eternal mother. However, Eva's romancing with a younger Anglo-Asian lover turns her into a Jocastesque figure. Her coming into her own, a vindication of an English Jocasta, is shown to have been made possible by her separation from her Asian husband, Haroon.

In *My Son the Fanatic* (1997), Pervez's extramarital affair with a prostitute is depicted as partially the cause of Farid's head-on drive into fundamentalist Islam. Like Nasser's British mistress in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, she acts as the successful mother, where the Asian wife fails. The plot is much akin to that of *The Death of a Salesman* in that it is the failing of the British Dream that has been highlighted here and in both the text and the script versions, the English prostitute replaces the Asian mother as a substitute, all with feminine wisdom, advice and *maternal*

understanding.

These are not isolated instances since British mothers everywhere substitute the Asian in Kureishi. In *Birds of Passage* (1983), Audrey tells Asif, "You're my new son" (182). In *Borderline*, Susan develops a sympathetic identification with the minority groups she had been researching and develops a caring stance for the lonely and abandoned Ravi. Not only that, the Muslim youth, Banoo and Amina develop a more than condescending attitude toward her till they depend on her for what is symbolic of their social and emotional identities. Similarly father figures with promises of the motherly abound in Kureishi as Joe in *Mother Country* (1980) acts as a father figure for Imran and his concern for Imran's protection has been especially foregrounded. That this then actually develops into a superego/ Id relation is but obvious. The same idea of the benevolent British is also embodied in the liberal-minded, enlightening teacher, Del, in *Outskirts*, whose moral development is presented as an ideal to be followed.

Thus we see that in all these texts the idea of the Mother which is so important to the Third World is subverted in favour of ideals not really pertinent to its cultures and thus a kind of hegemonic inscription is inserted in the fictive narratives which tilt the balance in favour of the West. My description of this tilt is by way of prescription; a diagnosis, so that a cure may be indicated.

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Notes

- 1 Ahmad, Aijaz. *Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"*. *Social Text*, No. 17 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 3-25. Duke University Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466475>. Accessed: 30/09/2009 16:32
- 2 The hegemonic bias may even be traced in Ashcroft et al (Ashcroft 1989, 8) when they name all literature in English written by non-English as english, i.e., written with a non capital 'e'. If my objection sounds odd, try reversing it. How would the distinction mean if British literature were named 'english' literature since the British are fewer in number than, for example, the subcontinental readers and writers of English.
- 3 Bhattacharyya, Gargi, *Tales of Dark-Skinned Women: Race, gender and global culture*. London: 1998. UCL Press.
- 4 Lines from Felix Mnthali's poem *Letter to a Feminist Friend*, qtd in Kirsten Hoist Peterson, *First things First*, in *The Post-Colonial reader*, Ashcroft, 236.
- 5 Especially Aijaz Ahmad, 5
- 6 Ngugi Wa Thiong'O. *The Language of African Literature*, in Ashcroft et al (2006), 266
- 7 Katrak, Kethu H. *Decolonizing Culture. Toward a theory for postcolonial women's texts*. Ashcroft, et al 2006 (239)
- 8 Albur Camus, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech.
- 9 Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual politics feminist literary Theory*. 46-7
- 10 Quoted in Toril Moi, 47
- 11 Aijaz Ahmad, 9
- 12 See Toril Moi's account of Mary Ellman's discussion of Jane Austen, p 35
- 13 The "Islamic Bomb" was the title of a 1979 BBC television documentary which established that Bhutto was removed by Zia and hanged because the US disapproved of Pakistan going 'nuclear'. "Addressing posterity from his death cell in a Rawalpindi jail,

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the architect of Pakistan's nuclear program, wrote: "We know that Israel and South Africa have full nuclear capability. The Christian, Jewish, and Hindu civilizations have this capability. The communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change." Pervez Hoodbhoy. 'Myth-Building: The "Islamic" Bomb'. http://www.hraicjk.org/the_islamic_bomb.html

14 Wole Soyinka 'Twice Bitten: The Fate of Africa's Culture Producers'. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/462347>

15 Qtd in Katrak. *Decolonizing Culture*, in Ashcroft et al 2006.

16 Chandra Talpade Mohante. 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourse' *Boundary 2* 12 (3), 13 (1), 1984. reprinted in Ashcroft et al 2006, (242-45)

17 The relevant text goes like this "I reply with more questions: Is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories? Can only the dead speak? I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is a part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands". [22-23] Images of birth, body, sex, and violation are common in Rushdie when it comes to historicizing the land. He uses a similar image to refer to the coming of a character into the narrative as in Omar Khayyam's future bride, Sufiya Zinobia, enters the narrative "head-first down the birth canal"

18 for further discussions of this and similar points see Philosophy and the *Maternal Body*. *Reading Silence*. Michele Bouldous Walker. London and New York: Routledge. 1998

19 See Pradip Kumar Dey

20 Quoted in Hirsch, 24

21 Kakar 1999, 149 qtd in *Self, Nation, Text* in *Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children"* By Neil Ten Kortenaar, Kam Louie, Ch 8, Women, 122.

22 Chauhan, Pradyumna S. *Salman Rushdie interviews: a sourcebook of his ideas*. Greenwood Press, 2001. 207

23 Kirsten Hoist Peterson. *First Things First. Problems of a feminist approach to African literature*. In Ashcroft et al 2006 (235-38)

- ²⁴ Fear of the mother or matrophobia is best explained in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* when she writes that it is: "the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become individuated and free." (*Of Woman Born* 236) However I see much hope of identification in her continuing explanation "The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mother's; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery, (ibid) A contrast is, of course, Alice Walker's essay, "*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*".
- ²⁵ That Aurora was rich and only 15 and Abraham poor and 35 may also make a sliding comment on Jinnah's marriage with Rutti Bai after her elopement with him when still under-aged.
- ²⁶ *Hanif Kureishi: postcolonial storyteller* By Kenneth C. Kaleta. University of Texas Press, 1998
- ²⁷ Contexts and Intertexts, subtitled Introduction: Kureishi and the thematics of World Writing, (1-)
- ²⁸ See also his note 46, p 223-4
- ²⁹ He accepted that if not in facts then in emotions many of the stories were virtual autobiographies.(Moore-Gilbert, 16) That he 'fictionalises' his biographical details has been confirmed by his own family (ibid 15). Thus the 'in-betweenness' he writes about may be a personal experience but it is essentially a fictional reality.
- ³⁰ <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review>
- ³¹ Kenneth C. Kaleta rightly points out that the bathing scene in the movie with Clint's lying in warm tub water and Sylvie washing him has all the ethos of a motherly comfort and childhood innocence (186)