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Reviews

THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF MEMOIR WRITING

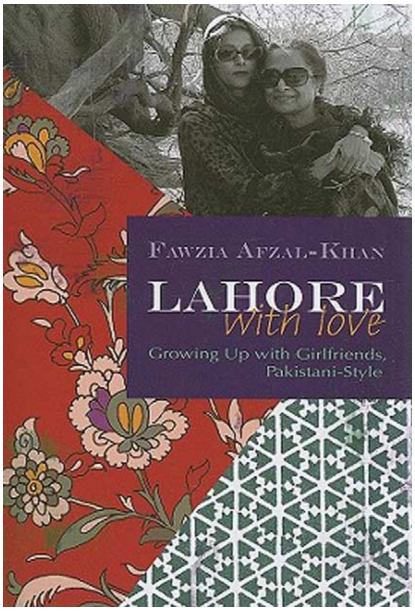
Amina Yaqin

Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style

Fawzia Afzal-Khan

Insanity Ink Publications/CreateSpace Trade Paperbacks, 2011
228pp ISBN 1 4564 6219 9/1 4564 6219 2 $16.00
www.createspace.com
Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2010, pb
176pp ISBN 0 8156 0924 8

Everyone who lived through the 1980s in Pakistan will have experienced censorship in one form or another. It was part of the culture of an authoritarian state. Freedom of expression was discouraged and punishment meted out to those who stepped outside the line. There were of course those, including writers, intellectuals and activists, who were determined to think critically and learnt to read between the lines and others who made their subjectivities subservient to the state. Amongst those who did not there were many who were incarcerated and others who chose exile in foreign countries. These voluntary and involuntary exiles continued to maintain ties with the mother country despite its rejection of their ideals and in doing so, like others before them, conspired to create a virtual Pakistan living in diasporic spaces translating their country to new audiences through personal communications or public writing. In this way the more visible amongst them seem to have escaped the immediate burden of censorship and state oppression. The overall legacy of the 1980s mobilised activisms of various kinds in Pakistan and prominent amongst these was women's activism. This body of activism has dedicated itself to the redress of women's status at all levels in society changing it from that of victim to agent. In the field of Pakistani literary studies, women have also fought a battle to make themselves heard and while their presence is not uniform across the different languages of Pakistan they have carved a niche for themselves as active speaking and thinking subjects rather than passive carriers of tradition.



A common ground for activists, politicians, historians, creative writers and journalists has been the desire to narrate the story of the nation in making. There are many genres in which the contemporary history of Pakistan has been retold including television drama, novels, short stories, various forms of poetry, biography and autobiography. And whenever there is a new creative output that revisits the not so distant past it is something of a landmark moment contributing toward a collective memory of that period. One of the most compelling genres in this regard is that of the public autobiography and the extended area of life writing which includes autobiographies, biographies, memoirs and so on. Individuals have delved into the personal to make sense of

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the political. A memorable example of self-conscious (re)presentation in the disparate field of life writing is Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days: A Memoir*. Published to international acclaim in 1989 by Chicago University Press, its writing style has been recently described by Bart Moore-Gilbert, in *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-Representation* (Routledge, 2009), as similar to that of an exquisitely crafted miniature which is informed by its 'non-western narrative resources' (101-108). Suleri both narrates the tale of a family and the 'seemingly inexorable degeneration of the new nation' (103) and makes the startled observation to a student when asked why she does not have an equal ratio of male and female writers on her course that 'there are no women in the third world' (20, from *Meatless Days*, Flamingo Press edition, 1991). This non-literalist reading technique unfolds as a methodological practice in her memoir. As a text which deploys 'inter-genre' techniques *Meatless Days* offers an alternative history of Pakistan which is memorialised through its domestic contexts of mothers, sisters and friends alongside its political contexts of the 'Ayub era', 'the second martial law' or 'the Bhutto regime'. More generally, Suleri's story deals with some uncomfortable moments in a family's past but as far as is known its publication was not accompanied by outcries of injustice and broken trust by family or friends.

As such, memoirs, diaries, personal letters, are all subject to both a moral and an ethical code of self-censorship, yet rarely does one hear of a memoir being censored by the Press who have agreed to publish it. Such is the curious case of Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style*. Originally published by Syracuse University Press in 2010, it was withdrawn by the academic publisher in the same year and the author was allowed to self-publish it the following year, which she did distributing it through internet shopping sites such as Amazon.

The year 2010 was itself a rich period for cultural representations in the English language from Pakistan making it to the newsstands instead of the usual gritty newsworthiness of a terror-stricken nation. It seemed that Pakistani writers in English had at long last been allowed to share the same platform alongside their Indian counterparts as far as writing in English was concerned. A confidence reflected in the publications of a special issue on new Pakistani writing from *Granta* magazine. Other notable publications that received international acclaim included Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *The Geometry of God*, and Fatima Bhutto's autobiography, *Songs of Blood and Sword*. Each of these writers offers a fresh perspective on Pakistani culture and, while national concerns are paramount as they have been for the Indian novel in English, there is an edginess to the writing which gives it an added urgency. There is also the emergence of a distinctively new style of writing which borrows more from the American canon than the English in its intertexts and influences. In amongst these publications is the notable academically creative contribution from Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Professor of English and Director of Women's and Gender Studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

Afzal-Khan's memoir *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style* is rich with anecdotes, layered with lyricism and coated with a feminist politics which reflects the self-consciousness of a select generation of elite middle-class women in Pakistan. As an exercise in the art of personal narratives it has both aesthetic and political qualities narrating an activist's concerns for civil society and the position of women in Pakistan. It sits alongside public autobiographies such as Benazir Bhutto's *Daughter of the East* (1989) and Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* (1996), and the more ambivalent creative memoir penned by Sara Suleri recalling those stories because they too tell the tale of the women of Pakistan. Afzal-Khan's memoir has in common with them the fetishisation of a stereotype of Pakistani women as victims of a uniform system of patriarchy. In her revised self-published version of the book, she includes a new section on Benazir which is noticeably absent from the original edition published by Syracuse University Press, and in doing so introduces an intertext with the former Prime Minister's projection of herself as the universal daughter of the east: the leader of a Muslim nation. She refers to an encounter with the 'young and glamorous' Benazir before she had been elected to office and her subsequent disenchantment with this iconic female Head of State who she feels gave in to societal class and gender pressures of conformity through an arranged marriage to Asif Zardari.

Mythologising herself as Cassandra-like and drawing a comparison with the Irish poet Eavan Boland with whom she shares a common interest in writing about women's experiences, Afzal-Khan constructs a cosmopolitan narrative which begins with the 'strangeness of place' and the unreliability of the art of memoir. There are many identities here that the author wishes to appropriate as she unravels her past and they emerge as the myriad voices of her chapterised girlfriends, Sam, Hajira, Saira, Mad/Medea. Manipulating their voices is the narrator who locates herself very firmly in her professional identity as a Professor of English in an American university. Mocking a persona that is constructed around her American academic career and the self-conscious representation of the plight of Pakistani women, she refers to the exploitation of her 'Muslim womanhood' as necessary in helping her to carve out an academic career path. It is this self-consciousness of her narrative voice which strikes a false note with the reader: 'I have become exotic to myself, a stranger to my (s)kin' (ix, xx, Insanity Ink edition). Donning the role of a temporary anthropologist she claims that the memoir is an attempt to share a 'friendly exposure' of her past girlfriends in order to make sense of the 'no-place' or 'abroad' where she lives as it is these relationships which have helped her to understand the place she now inhabits. Her implied reader seems to be the split diasporic subject who is being presented with the context of Pakistani culture and society through spicy snippets from her girlfriends embellished with exaggeration and a bit of creative interpretation from the author.

But, as Ambreen Hai notes in her critique of Afzal-Khan's memoir, what is significantly absent from this narrative is a sense of ethics when it comes to representing those whom she refers to as friends, an unselfconscious normalisation of middle-class values as civilised and an equally unreflective depiction of the lower classes ('(Re)Reading Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Lahore with Love*: Class and Ethics of Memoir', *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies*, 3(2), 2011). This question has particular resonance because of the known legal challenge presented by one of the projected friends depicted in the narrative. The other thoughtful question Hai asks is about the contexts of Afzal-Khan's writing. These are directly referred to in some of the statements in support of her book which were published on the internet and are reproduced in the same issue of the online journal *Pakistaniaat* as Hai's article. To quote one such supporter, Margaux Fragoso, is particularly telling because for her the book is a testament to close bonds between girlfriends contrasted against 'horrors such as honor killing and suicide' (i). Here the memoir is quite simply being read as a straightforward cultural translation of Pakistan in a post 9/11 context which may also help to explain the publisher's commitment to such a project in the first instance. In many ways it reconfirms the stereotype of a society where women are victims and patriarchy is a dominant force. Yet the girlfriends represented are middle-class women who self-consciously perform their gender from youth to middle age. They do not necessarily need saving from state oppression but Afzal-Khan's memoir wishes to rescue them from their respective destinies by presenting them as victims who have internalised the normalised psyche of a segregated Pakistani society. In a telling moment in the memoir, her representation of Saira's story is prefaced by the revelation that the real person of Saira has been 'somewhat offended' by it:

> 'Well, Madame Sin [Fawzia Afzal-Khan], what's with all those shameless references to my legs and bosom hunh? I do have grown girls now, you know, marriageable age ... and what if my twenty-four-year-old son were to catch hold of that description?' (65-66)

The narrator is disappointed with this reaction as she did not expect it because Saira had in her youth regaled their clique of friends with explicit details of her initiation into sexual pleasure as a newly married woman:

> Begum Saira expanded our knowledge of sexual matters beyond our wildest imaginations ... She told us, quite unabashedly, that she realized she was madly in love with her husband when he made her hold on to the side of the bed and stick her tush into the air, while he proceeded to do unnamable things from behind. (76)

This openly shared memory of Saira's sexual awakening allows the narrator to express suitable outrage at the conservatism of her friend's reaction now that she is married with children. She extends this incredulity to the larger discovery that her Lahore-based friends are now identifying with a back to basics Islam crystallised in their devoted following of the teachings of Dr Israr Ahmed (1932–2010), who posits a conservative theological position far removed from the points of view they all shared when they were classmates. As with her last friend Hajira who committed suicide, Saira too heads toward a sad conclusion to her life, slowly descending into lunacy discovering her husband's infidelity after devoting herself over the years to preserve the sancitity of their marriage and three children. Tragedy it seems is the fate of all women in this book except for the storyteller who is the survivor of a life threatening illness that is breast cancer.

Born in 1958 in Lahore, Afzal-Khan's early years and primary and secondary education followed the pattern of a Lahori female elite at that time for whom the Convent of Jesus and Mary School and Kinnaird College for Women were milestones in the path to marriage and recognition in society. Continuing her higher education from Kinnaird College, Afzal-Khan also went on to attend the coeducational Government College. Now settled in America with her family, she looks back with hindsight recording those past memories and weaves a complexity of voices through the mixture of prose and poetry. 'In a way, we have come of age together, my country of origin and I, though like every younger sibling, I see my older sister's mistakes more clearly than she can' (x). One wonders even if she could have foreseen that her publisher Syracuse University Press would terminate sales of her book by declaring it out of print barely six months after publication. Either, the sales for the book skyrocketed beyond the publisher's expectations and, unable to cope with print runs, they decided to abandon the project altogether, or as is more widely known and documented at the end of the self-published edition, they succumbed to the pressure of a possible libel suit from a prominent theatre director in Pakistan. This opens up an interesting set of questions with regards to legal intervention, global relations and transnational networks of power when it comes to what is written, read and brought to accountability in an international market. So what was the rationale behind the publisher's decision to withdraw their support from the author? Was it that an unspoken trust had been broken by Afzal-Khan in her memoir which promises not to depict real people? In the Legal Notice served by the Pakistani lawyer to the author and the publisher, one of the seven appendices published in the Insanity Ink edition of *Lahore with Love*, Shazil Ibrahim, Advocate, Corporal Counsel making his case for libel action states that

> Although the book does not name our client (referring to her as 'Madina', 'Maddy, Mad/Medea'), however it is obvious to anyone reading the book, including all those who even remotely know of her, that the entire chapter titled 'Mad/Medea' is a depiction (however false and fabricated) of [...] and her family (a-2).

In addition, Pakistan's Penal Code 1860 is also quoted to remind both publisher and author that the representation of 'Mad' is akin to criminal conduct and punishable with imprisonment. At the end of the notice three demands are made: an apology from the author, the book to be recalled and damages to be paid of one million US dollars and in the eventuality that the first two conditions are not met the damages to be claimed will amount to two million dollars. The outcome of this letter is that Syracuse University Press write to Afzal-Khan to inform her that they are terminating her contract because the libel litigation expenses in a foreign country are not something that they are prepared to take on as they present an 'unacceptable risk of liability and/or financial loss' (a-7). In the letter the Press concede that though they do not consider the claim of reputational loss by the undisclosed persona 'has any merit' however the unknown expense of the potential lawsuit is something they are unwilling to risk. The author's response, also included as an appendix, picks up the legalities of the contract, the indemnification clause which she feels has not been honoured by the Press in allowing her to appoint her own legal counsel to tackle the case and finally the all important question of global lawsuits. 'Does a legal notice from Pakistan constitute "substantial risk" to the publisher of "financial loss"?' Based on her legal consultations she makes the point that a letter from within Pakistan has no jurisdiction over a US based publisher and author (a-10).

Thus *Lahore with Love* throws up questions of genre, readability, audience response and the legal framework of the publication agreement between the press and the author. Afzal-Khan does not paint a rosy picture of life in Pakistan as she unveils the trials and triumphs of her story and those of her friends. The vignette of Sam's story contains a lesson in the politics of Pakistan from the civil war of 1971 to the year 1991, gloomy realities interspersed with the silver lining of the 1965 Constitution which gave women voting and inheritance rights alongside the right to divorce. It is a dark chapter which attempts to uncover the lies on which relationships are built and leads up to the theme of honour based crime with the hinted probability of a girlfriend's fate in 1971, and reference to the shocking and well-known murder of Samia in 1991 in the office of a prominent human rights lawyer in Lahore.

There is a rather Freudian interlude in the book in the shape of chapter four which pre-empts the 'offending chapter' on Mad/Medea. Entitled 'Blood and Girls', it was originally published in 2005 in *And the World Changed* an anthology of contemporary stories by Pakistani women edited by Muneeza Shamsie and it seems quite different to the rest of the book. It has competing genres of prose and poetry juxtaposed with references to bull fighting, Muharram (the month of mourning commemorating Hussain's martyrdom for Shia Muslims), the memoirist's mother and sexual desire in Spain. It is probably the most imaginative chapter in the book in terms of how it is constructed and represented. Geographically it traverses Spain, Lahore, Dakar and Washington DC mapping the mood of unrequited love, the cruel beloved, sexual desire and a mother-daughter relationship. It draws on the unconscious and does not follow a logical pattern. The energy of this chapter is focused around the ritual enactments of self-flagellation in the Muharram procession on Ashura and the machismo of the bullfight. Pathos is introduced by the use of the refrain, 'Na ro Zainab, na ro' (Don't cry Zainab) at key sections echoing the poetic genre of the Urdu marsiya (elegy) recalling Hussain's tragedy through his sister's outpouring of grief. The two lovers who emerge in the battleground of love toward the end of the chapter are the narrator and a man called Bakri: 'what shall we both do/having written our ghazals/always ready/so hopeless, so silly/Imagining Forever/Being Mad about Me' (100). Here she brings in the love lyric which symbolically frames the story of unrequited love, the hopelessness of the lover and the unattainable beloved. This Urdu genre is used at both the literal and metaphoric levels; the memoir at this juncture is not telling a simple story of jilted love.

This richly intertexual interlude brings us to the last stage of the memoir, that awkward 'offending' piece which has led the memoirist into trouble with her so-called friend and her publisher. The fictionalised friend Mad/Medea/Madhu/Madina is introduced to the reader as someone who 'always did look like she had blood on her mind' (105). She is the aggressive man-eating playwright who devours men and seems to be a woman led by violence, the madwoman whore of Lahore. Afzal-Khan is the foil to this persona; she performs in her plays, has an affair with her husband and writes a book on 'the importance of Madina's brand of theatre on women's rights in contemporary Pakistan'. The author remains outside Pakistani society looking in while Madina is the insider looking out.

So you see
we still need these seminars
and street theatre
on Women and Development
on my trips back home/to the
developing world
I can count
on reprising the mad dervish of my
youth. (137)

From this rather heated chapter recalling an aging actress and an old rivalry, the book moves into the epilogue which is interspersed with flashbacks into the past and future, the author's departure from Lahore as a student to join her parents in Africa and the return of the diasporic academic to the mother country to research Islamic radicalism. As she sits through a nostalgic journey on the Grand Trunk road she focuses her postcolonial gaze on 'Old Kipling and Rushdie/Repeat the neo/In the post/A game designed/To obliterate/the present unlivable' (150).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that although the book emphasises fictionality of characters she has chosen to base those representations on a few of her friends who are still living and the character called Mad/Medea has taken issue with this. What is fascinating to consider in the legal notice issued from the Pakistani resident's legal team to the Non-Resident Pakistani based in the

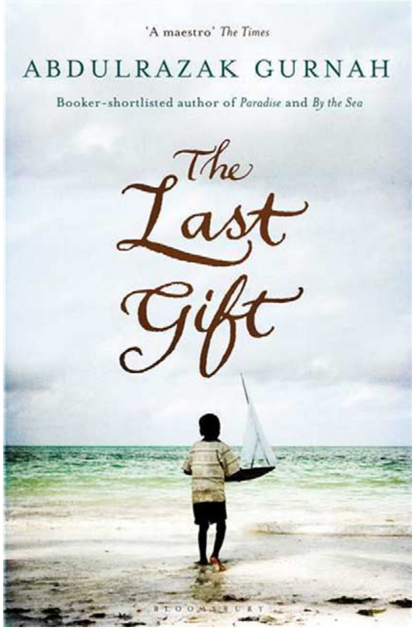
United States is the question of power. Who has the power to represent whom and on what grounds? Fawzia Afzal-Khan has chosen to defend her book with reference to the Speech Act which, according to the National Writers Union in the United States, demands equivalence with regards to freedom of expression in a foreign court to discourage international libel lawsuits that seek to interfere with critical media reporting, academic research and reporting by journalists and are generally not in the public interest of the country. Yet the shadowy genre of a memoir despite its blurring of fact and fiction remains tied to the stories it tells about real people who have recourse to legal structures of power enabling them to gag a story if it appears in their lifetime. Fawzia Afzal-Khan's withdrawn memoir throws up key issues in the examination of metropolitan postcolonial life writing such as the power of narrative, legal discourse and ethical concerns.

Petr Barta

The Last Gift

Abdulrazak Gurnah

Bloomsbury, London, 2011, hb
288pp ISBN 0 7475 9994 4 £18.99
www.bloomsbury.com



Although blessed with a pantomimic flare for storytelling, especially for tales set 'in the old days of antiquity' ('*Hapo zamani za kale*' (36)), Abbas has retained an immoveable silence about his past, unwilling to share even the most basic of details – such as his country of origin – with his family. His silence has not only made his daughter Hanna and son Jamal suspicious about the ugly, shameful secret he might be hiding ('*a torturer*', '*a crusher of souls*' (48)), but exacerbated their personal sense of rootlessness, 'a sense of difference and oddness' (45). When, in the wake of a diabetic crisis, he suffers a series of strokes that leave him bed-bound and unable to speak, the need to reveal his secret becomes overwhelming.

Abbas, however, is not the only one keeping a secret. His wife Maryam, a foundling adopted by several foster parents, has also opted for silence about details of her past, about 'things she did not know how to talk about, not to her children, not yet' (27). When Abbas begins communicating his story, not only does she make the decision to confess her own, but she sets out to learn the identity of her parents, perhaps in the hope of finally assuaging her sense of otherness, of being a stranger in her own country.

Stories and storytelling, immigration and dislocation, a concealed or fabricated past, are all familiar tropes in the work of Abdulrazak Gurnah. The author's new novel, *The Last Gift*, takes up these and related concerns of race and religion and fashions them into a finely crafted study (one is tempted to call it an anatomy) of family, exploring how such issues come to influence and shape, even dominate, filial relationships and individual pursuits of identity. Read as a search or negotiation of origins, the narrative explores the relationship between a personal sense of rootlessness and the enigma of home and the sense of belonging conferred by familial history. The novel also shares the formal complexity of previous works, patiently reconstructing its family portrait through personal reflection of shared experience. Indeed, Gurnah's mastery in fusing thematic richness and formal ingenuity and inventiveness is exemplified by the ease with which the narrative tackles its themes and builds up its portrait of each family member as it interweaves their respective points of view and moves back and forth in time.

The Last Gift also echoes its author's interest in the architecture of stories and the art of storytelling. *Desertion* (2005), for example, is underpinned by the limits of imagination (the inability for fiction to fill in the gaps of knowledge), which results in the abandonment or 'desertion' of a story by its author when he comes to see no truthful way for it to be told — an act of integrity on the part of the narrator Rashid (see Jones, 'Abdulrazak Gurnah in Conversation', *Wasafiri*, Winter 2005). *By the Sea* (2001), meanwhile, illustrates the problems of recollection, of how to give form to the past: 'It is difficult to know with precision how things became as they have, to be able to say with assurance that first it was this and it then led to that and the other, and now here we are' (2).

More pointed is a comparison with the literary virtuosity of *Admiring Silence* (1996), not merely in its shared themes of desertion, migration, silences, and the forging of personal and familial history, but as a novel to which *The Last Gift* makes more than a few teasing intertextual overtures. Indeed, Gurnah's new novel, as it elaborates the deep personal ambivalence that defines acts of desertion, reveals how the stories that shape family ties are far from immutable, unequivocal or free of embellishment: 'that they change with new recollections and rearrange themselves subtly with every addition, and what seem like contradictions may be unavoidable revisions of what might have happened' (40).

But the novel also demonstrates the collaborative nature of narrative construction and communication: that while we may choose what we relate, refine a story in retelling it, our stories are just as likely to be steered by the promptings of our listener or be hijacked, albeit temporarily, by their desire to fill in gaps or have details elaborated. Our listener may even supplement what we say with the aid of the internet or library, gathering images and narratives to mould with our own, or, as in the case of Jamal, place them alongside data such as research into migration patterns to Europe. In the novel this collaborative act is most poignantly captured as Abbas begins to divulge his past to Maryam, moving incrementally at first, more fluidly when speech begins to return, and finally preserving his story on a portable recording machine. That this relationship is at one point perceived by Abbas as parasitic only underlies its emotive volatility: 'she gives me medicine to keep me alive so she can go on sucking my blood' (249).

Inevitably there is no single or simple reason for Abbas's silence and as readers we should be wary of treating it as a novel of revelation. What is at stake here is the power that stories have, or the power we grant them, what they mean to us and the connection that exists between the storyteller and his audience; not merely the expectations and hopes of the listener but what the teller relinquishes in the act of telling. As such stories can do violence just as easily as bring understanding and empathy: they shape experience by providing form, language and vocabulary; they make personal lives complicit with the history of a nation and help bridge the gap between home and place of origin. There is a personal poignancy and cultural potency in such concerns and the eloquence and perspicacity with which Gurnah dramatises them makes *The Last Gift* a compelling, emotive and provocative read.

Bernardine Evaristo

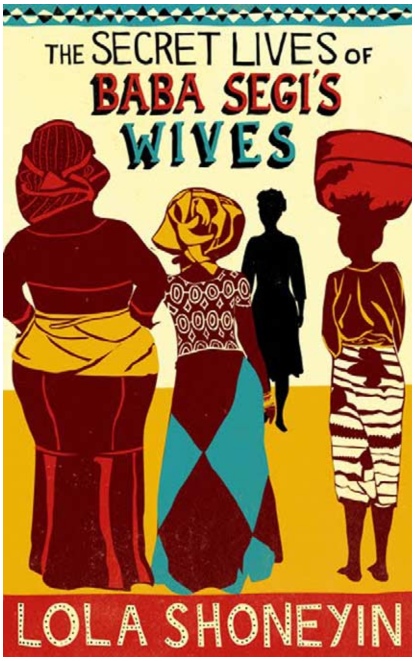
The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives

Lola Shoneyin

Serpent's Tail, London, 2010, pb
244pp ISBN 1 8466 8748 9
www.serpentstail.com

It is such a pity that this bodacious first novel went under the media's radar when it was published in 2010. It did not get a single review in Britain yet it is a terrific work.

The novel is about a polygamous household in contemporary Nigeria and while its message is very serious – polygamy is shit for women, basically – its delivery is endlessly amusing.



Baba Segi, the master of the household, has four wives, and God help them all. He is an ignorant, uneducated, bombastic, brutal, solipsistic, violent, morbidly obese, middle-aged businessman with the table manners of a starving, slathering warthog and an anal sphincter so uncontrollable, any poor souls in his vicinity have to suffer the wet and noisy explosions of his flatulent gases and, on occasion, an excremental stench that leaves people gasping for air.

Lest anyone think Shoneyin is piling it on a bit too thick with this grotesque character, she does manage to give him a beating heart. This is her great skill: to create characters who might be unappealing on the surface, but whom she reveals to be products of their upbringing and environment. No matter how appalling his behaviour, it is hard to condemn Baba Segi outright; he is not evil, although it is quite impossible to actually like him. The problem is that as omnipotent patriarch in the home, with no one to keep his excesses in check, he has become the embodiment of the Seven Deadly Sins: of wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony.

In Baba Segi's dominion, he is 'my Lord' and his wives are subservient to his desires. They scurry after him like slaves and pander to his every need. His first wife, a formidable bully, Iya Segi, is afforded the highest status. The weak and childlike Iya Tope's status as second wife is superseded by the stronger, more malevolent third wife Iya Femi, who is Iya Segi's partner in crime. Bolanle, a university graduate, is the most recent, youngest addition to this sultan's seraglio. Unable to recover from a teenage trauma, she has naively married him because she wants to be left in peace, 'I knew Baba Segi wouldn't be like younger men who demanded explanations for that faraway look in my eyes. Baba Segi was content when I said nothing' (16). She ignores her sophisticated friends who call him 'a polygamist orgre', and her outraged mother who likens her future son-in-law to 'an overfed orang-utan'. Instead, Bolanle sees 'a large but kindly generous soul', and expects to be welcomed into his family, to blend in quietly. Hardly. As soon as she steps over the threshold of her husband's home, she encounters such animosity, a less naive woman would have turned on her heels and hightailed it out of there.

All the other wives are illiterate and Iya Segi and Iya Femi are so jealous of Bolanle, there is nothing she can do to appease them. Her every attempt at friendship is thwarted and she soon discovers, 'So deep-seated is their disdain for my university degree they smear my books with palm oil and hide them under the kitchen cupboards' (22). Bolanle's offer to teach them to read and write is spurned and their children are instructed to scorn her like a leper ('When I walk past them in the corridor they turn to the wall and flatten themselves against it' (23)).

Bolanle's role is to produce children for Baba, earning herself the title 'Iya', meaning mother. Until she does this, unlike the other wives, she is denied an armchair in the living room and is forced to sit in humiliation on a stool. Still, Bolanle hopes one day to be fully accepted into her new family. But she is out of her depth in this cesspit. Iya Femi moans, 'Why would Baba Segi marry another wife? Has he condemned our breasts because they are losing their fists?' Iya Segi replies,

> Let her employ every sparkle of her youth! Let her use her fist-full breasts. Listen to me, *this* is not a world she knows. When she doesn't find what she came looking for, she will go back to wherever she came from. (49)

After two years of atrocious treatment by the wives including incidents with a dead rat and poison, Bolanle begins to wake up:

> I was foolish to think I would just be an insignificant addition when, in reality, I was coming to take away from them. With my arrival, 2.33 nights with Baba Segi became 1.75. His affections, already thinly divided, now had to be spread against four instead of three.

Quite why any of them would be desperate to get into the sack with this repulsive creature is as much to do with the politics of currying favour and survival in a despotic regime as anything else.

Yet, as with all tyrannies, there is insurrection and subterfuge afoot. True to the novel's namesake, Baba's three older wives all have secret lives and one of the strengths of this novel is the way in which their stories unravel in a second half that piles on the most shocking discoveries. Iya Segi and Iya Femi might be scary, hard-ass bitches, but we get to understand why, and to eventually empathise with them.

Shoneyin is a brilliant writer. This novel is massively entertaining, wickedly observed and well-plotted and she uses language carefully, imaginatively, with many fabulous descriptions sewn into the narrative. When Baba Segi gets out of his car, he 'flung open the passenger door and re-inflated his large frame'. He visits Teacher, a wise man, for advice on Bolanle's seeming barrenness. Teacher lives in Ayikara, a district that is

> more than four of five parallel streets laced by lasciviousness: it was a spirit. The dark buildings were full of women whose faces glowed under ultraviolet lights. These women lived for other women's men. They cooked for them. Drank with them. Fought over them. Fucked them. Nursed them. Slapped them and loved them. And when the longing love caused made them ill, they surrendered their lives and died for them. (2)

In this novel women exist to service men, and it is not always through choice. Shoneyin illustrates how the polygamous set-up – one man, multiple wives – can create a pecking order that pits women against each other, wreaks havoc on their well-being and turns the marital home into a hellhole.

Jade Munslow Ong

A Woman of Africa

Nick Roddy

Troubadour, Leicester, 2011, pb
266pp ISBN 1 8487 6565 8 £12.99
www.troubadour.co.uk

The Raw Man

George Makana Clark

Jonathan Cape, London, 2011, hb
224pp ISBN 0 2240 9046 1 £16.99
www.randomhouse.co.uk

Nick Roddy's novel *A Woman of Africa* is underpinned by a West African parable in which a crab is crushed to death by an elephant. When a fly becomes trapped in an elephant's ear, the elephant believes that the noise created is that of an oncoming battle. He flees, leaving the savannah and racing to the coast, where he accidentally tramples a crab to death. When the crustaceans go to the king of the beasts to accuse the elephant of murder, the lion, who 'was no fool and knew a bit about geography', asks: 'What has an elephant to do with a crab?' (39)

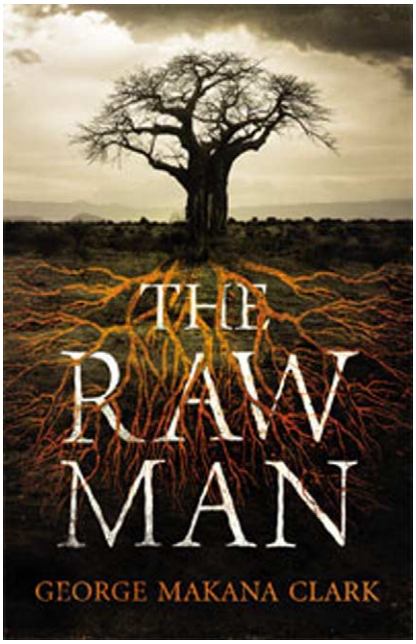
The metaphorical significance of this parable pervades the action of the novel, as the paradoxes of life for women in Africa are emphasised:

> Remember, this is the continent where the Good Lord blesses us with children so that we can watch them starve. It is in Africa that whole villages are so enfeebled with AIDS that the only way the villages can feed themselves is by sending their women to work as prostitutes. (ibid)

As Roddy's protagonist remains nameless, her anonymity is synecdochal, reflecting the suffering and tenacity of other displaced women in Africa. Like these women, Roddy's protagonist knows that 'there would certainly be a stampeding elephant waiting somewhere in my future' (161). In fact there are numerous elephants, taking the form of violent attacks, deaths and disease, and are described by the narrator as an African alphabet: 'A for AIDS, atrocity, agony' (25).

A Woman of Africa takes the form of the autobiography of an uneducated Anglophone Biafran refugee living in Douala, in Cameroon. The story is told chronologically, beginning with the protagonist's childhood as she grows up in a compound, and ending with an epilogue in which she hands over a set of typed sheets to the author. As she matures, she aspires to move beyond the limitations of life in the compound, and with the help of her friend Hassna, manages to escape the ghetto by earning money through prostitution. Working under the alias 'Vivian' (a name she shares with Julia Robert's character in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman*) the protagonist blends fatalism with fighting spirit as she reconciles herself to a dangerous occupation for the sake of a future for her daughter.

Despite its serious themes, Roddy's novel is by no means solipsistic or depressing. By placing her tongue firmly in her cheek, the heroine charms the reader through her use of ghetto humour to tackle the issues surrounding rape, domestic violence, prostitution, poverty and racial tension. Within the first few pages we are told that 'after a good day's genocide, your woman can fix you a well-earned meal before obliging your manly needs — after she has washed her sister's blood off your blade' (4); and descriptions of the protagonist's traumatic ordeals are varied with more mundane concerns (such as worry over the size of her breasts and jealousy over her best friend's red dress). Indeed the real success of the novel lies here, in Roddy's ability to create a charismatic and charming protagonist who uses humour to combat the horrors she encounters. *A Woman of Africa* thus displays Roddy's aptitude for creating a candid and credible character, one who is able to outline the effects of the recent political history of western Africa on the lives of individuals.



Unlike *A Woman of Africa*, there is little humour in George Makana Clark's *The Raw Man*. Instead, the novel is a highly imaginative and deeply painful account of the life of a sergeant who served in the Rhodesian Security Forces during the Bush War of 1964-1979. Intricately written and broad in conception, *The Raw Man* encompasses stories which stretch from the Xhosa cattle-killings of 1856 through to the memories of the narrator in October 2011. The legacy of colonialism, the differences between European and African religions, and Zimbabwe's war of independence all provide the backdrop against which the life of the protagonist unfolds.

At the start of the book, Sergeant Gordon is imprisoned in a hellish copper mine by guerrilla forces. Here, the captive men rely on the corpses of their comrades for sustenance, and Gordon diverts his fellow prisoners with stories of his life, the tales emerging 'from the darkness as a mosaic of disjointed details and images' (29). The reader receives these accounts second-hand, from another soldier, 'The Owner of the Story', who tells the tales in reverse.

Beginning thirty years after Gordon's death, the narrator speaks briefly about his life with Gordon's 'story-ghost' before moving backwards through time, ending at Gordon's birth. As is to be expected from a reverse-chronological narrative, the novel is disorientating at times, as a multitude of characters appear and disappear, and often the importance of the events described elude the reader until the end. The perseverance required is justly rewarded however, as the novel is carefully crafted to open up a story of astonishing power and resonance. Indeed the novel's slippery form both reflects and informs its major theme: the search for identity through storytelling and memory.

Blood flows throughout the novel; literally, via Gordon's circumcision which ends his time as a 'raw man', and metaphorically, via the family narratives which span five generations. As the history of the family unfolds, it is revealed that Gordon's grandfather, Alexander Gordon, was born to a Xhosa mother and English father, though his mother straightened his ginger hair so that he could pass for white. Likewise, Gordon's father disappears 'into town to have the kink removed from his brownish-red hair' every other Wednesday, in a similar attempt to 'slough off all traces of his ancestry' (316).

While Gordon too inherits the ginger hair and pale skin of his male relatives, his spirit is entirely African, causing Gordon's father alarm when he sees 'his Xhosa grandmother staring back at him through slit eyes' (ibid). Like her, Gordon is a bloodreader. He is heir to his great-grandmother's mystical powers and spiritual connection with the land, and so comes to embrace his African heritage, willingly taking part in the Xhosa initiation ceremony in which he becomes a man. Unlike his family, who wants to produce offspring with white skin, Gordon falls in love with a Shona woman, Madota, and together they have a daughter. It is this 'girl child that looked like her mother, but with blue eyes and a ginger cast to her hair' (93) for whom the narrator is waiting at the start of the novel, as he muses 'she would be well into her thirties by now, a blood reader like her father perhaps' (3).

Clark's novel is compelling and beautiful, as it weaves together folklore and fantasy, history and myth into a complex tale of family, racial identification and storytelling. Indeed, both Clark and Roddy have made exciting debuts, creating fictionalised personal histories as a way of exploring the issues surrounding displaced peoples, the horrors of war and strategies for survival in modern-day Africa. Thus, although it is Clark's narrator who states 'I built my house from borrowed memory' (3), this holds true for Roddy too, as both authors use the device of 'borrowed memories' to construct their narratives.

Moira Richards

Speaking for the Generations: An Anthology of Contemporary African Short Stories

Diké Okoro, ed

Africa World Press, Trenton, 2010, pb

218pp ISBN 1 5922 1719 2
www.africaworldpressbooks.com

Letter to South Africa: Poets Calling the State to Order

31 authors

Umuzi, Cape Town, 2011
174pp ISBN 1 4152 0125 1
www.umuzi-randomhouse.co.za

Man of the House and Other New Short Stories from Kenya

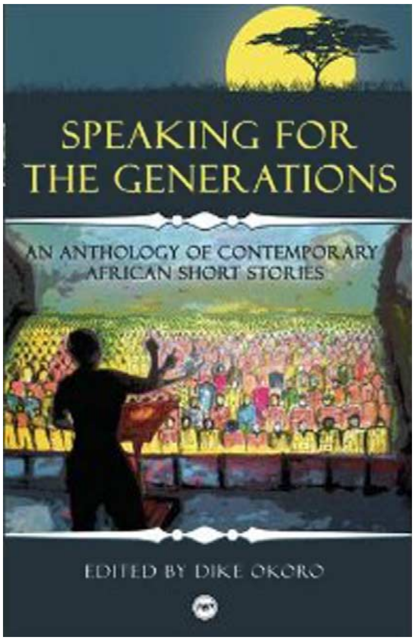
Emma Dawson, ed and introduction

CCC Press, Nottingham, 2011, pb

253pp ISBN 1 9055 1032 0
www.cccpress.co.uk

Africa is not only triple the land mass of Europe but it also has more sovereign states which means we Africans are likely as disparate as the Europeans of Iceland

and Greece. *Speaking for the Generations: An Anthology of Contemporary African Short Stories* could never then be any ‘representation of the continent’ and is, rather, an introduction to a variety of our contemporary writers and, in particular, to some who write in Arabic.


SPEAKING FOR THE GENERATIONS
AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SHORT STORIES
EDITED BY DIKE OKORO

The collection includes work from fifteen of the continent’s fifty-four countries and one third of the stories are from Nigeria, homeland of Diké Okoro who edited and made the anthology selections. The remaining twenty-three pieces run a swathe from north, via west and east, to the southernmost tip of the continent. The stories are all very short, sometimes an excerpt from a longer work.

In the light of the recent and ongoing ‘Arab Spring’ I was particularly interested to read the ten pieces from Tunisia, Libya and Morocco that all touched in some way on police, military or gender oppression; on themes of escape to freedom and hopes for change. To some degree, the storytellers all look to these last words from Moroccan writer Said Ahoubate in ‘The Voice and the Hammer’: ‘we found ourselves shouting enthusiastically, snatching our heavy hammers and pacing to the walls to pull them down’.

Writers from Ghana, Togo and Cameroon explore myth while those in Malawi, Gambia and Zimbabwe address HIV/AIDS and poverty. Africa’s colonial past is never very far away so it is not surprising to find racism the theme of the Tanzanian contribution.

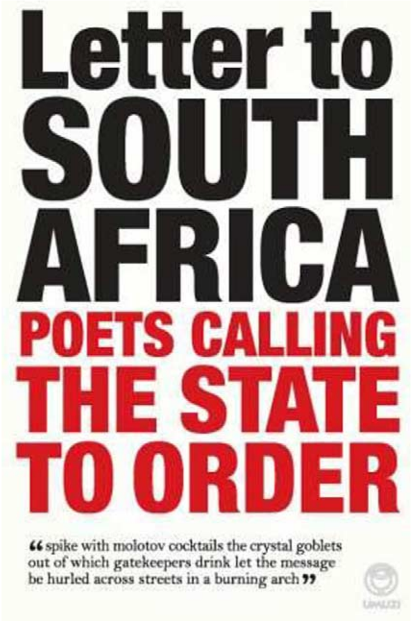
Uganda’s Beatrice Lamwaka, whose distressing ‘Butterfly Dreams’ was short-listed for the 2011 Caine Prize, writes here too of the abduction of young children from home and school to be pressed into service as soldiers and sex slaves — an issue the country is still dealing with. The other Ugandans also write of the oppression of girls such as rape leading to unwanted pregnancy. Many Nigerian stories explore aspects of women’s rights to freedom of sexuality through narratives of child abuse, forced marriage, unfaithful husbands and homosexuality.

The stories from Kenya and Sierra Leone explore the uneasiness of multiculturalism. As it seems, from this conclusion to Sitawa Namwalie’s ‘Weddings and Witchdoctors’, a half-century of self-rule has allowed for the beginning of the reconciliation of difference in these two countries: ‘There would be a wedding in two days. I finally accepted there was nothing more I could do to stop it’.

There is a markedly less relaxed vibe in the South African contributions. Here our awkwardness with each other after a mere seventeen years of democracy is evident in the writers’ stories of change in the social fabric and encounters with compatriots who still appear ‘other’. This brings me to the thirty-one authors of the thirty-one poems in *Letter to South Africa: Poets Calling the State to Order*. The publisher’s note explains that local poets were invited to rework Allen Ginsberg’s poem ‘America’ but to speak instead to South Africa.

The overall tone of Ginsberg’s love-hate love song to American society and culture centres on these two ironic and self-deprecatory lines in the middle of the poem: ‘It occurs to me that I am America./I am talking to myself again’. Later, the poem’s last line affirms the narrator’s conjoinment with his country and also his commitment to work with ‘America’ towards change for the better: ‘America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel’.

How do South African poets interpret Ginsberg’s poem? Willem Anker’s narrator dissociates from his country, laments the xenophobia of some of his compatriots and expresses alienation by a constant use of ‘I’ and ‘You’: ‘South Africa I hear nothing./I am talking to myself again’. And: ‘South Africa I’m trying to shrug my shoulders’. Erns Grundling portrays the poet as outcast: ‘Mzansi I’m merely a tourist in the country of my birth./A thought arrives: I am Mzansi/And I mumble like a madman’. Leon de Kock is jaded: ‘Kill a few people/We’ve being doing it since the year dot’.


Letter to SOUTH AFRICA
POETS CALLING THE STATE TO ORDER

“spike with molotov cocktails the crystal goblets out of which gatekeepers drink let the message be hurled across streets in a burning arch”

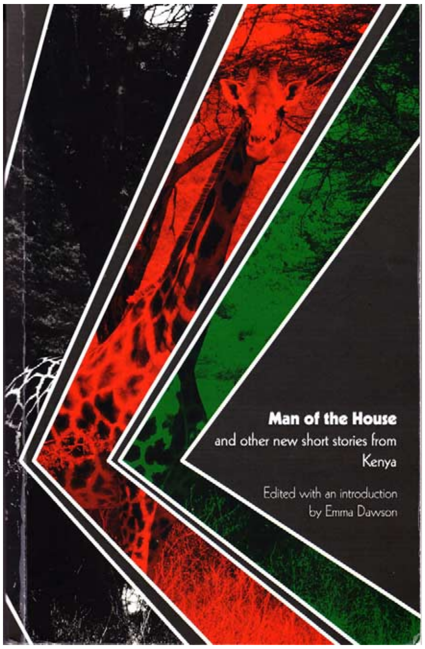
A good two thirds of these poems set up a narrative ‘I’ which rants, as Ginsberg does, at the country’s current social problems. Rage and blame is directed at politicians and the country’s new, post-1994 elite, but rarely with Ginsberg’s understanding that ‘our culture is what we make it’. Perhaps these lines from Napo Masheane’s reworking are uncomfortably apposite: ‘South Africa you are a teenager/Who refuses to embrace her freedom name’.

Allen Ginsberg would surely have appreciated Nosipho Kota’s sly humour:

It occurs to me that I am South Africa.
...
South Africa this is quite serious.
I’d better get a job.

And stop loafing around
Pretending to be a poet.
South Africa, I'm putting my shoulder
to the wheel of service
delivery, and blah, blah.

And poet Zandra Bezuidenhout does eventually ask: 'How do we share this schizoid land?/Who will teach us to live the spirit of peace'. The answer comes from Sindiwe Magona, grand old gogo (grandmother) of South African literature: 'It occurs to me that I am South Africa./I am talking to myself again'. And like Ginsberg: 'South Africa I'm putting my withered shoulder to the wheel'.


Man of the House
and other new short stories from Kenya
Edited with an introduction by Emma Dawson

On reading *Man of the House and Other New Short Stories from Kenya* it appears that the challenges of life in Kenya are very similar to those in South Africa although there are subtle differences in the way these Kenyans view and write about poverty, HIV/AIDS, self-serving politicians and crime. Have the three decades or more of self-rule rendered them more circumspect, less petulant, more able to get down to the business of living?

The fifteen stories by 'emerging writers' cut right across Kenya's multicultural population and the first page takes you straight into the grit of slum life. Further on in the book, we can see people rebuilding their lives after post-election rampages and women knuckle down to do the work of living despite various disappointments; while big game animals, marshalled in to satirise political leaders and foreign 'UN and NGO types' who are 'supposedly here to develop the country but who were interested only in their own career development', are not spared scathing comments from a character in Rasna Warah's 'The Last Supper'.

The stories are all great reads in different ways and Shalini Gidoomal's very funny 'Reality Cheque' is a real treat. Its premise is 'KaSlum-o Kashillionare', a 'Big Brother' type reality TV programme in which a handful of young Kenyans and Britons are installed in a high security shack-dwelling in a slum so the world can see how they get along together; a postcolonial spoof of practically every aspect of daily life in Kenya, including its international relations, that the author spins expertly into farce.

Matthew J Whittle

Building Britannia: Life Experience with Britain

Roxy Harris and Sarah White, eds

New Beacon Books, London, 2009, pb
293pp ISBN 1 8732 0116 9
www.newbeaconbooks.co.uk

Afro-Europe: Texts and Contexts

Sabrina Brancato

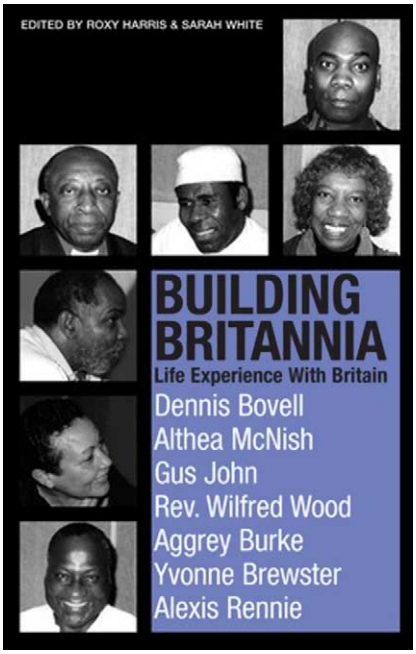
Trafo, Berlin, 2009, pb
117pp ISBN 3 8962 6724 5
www.trafoberlin.de

Emerging out of a series of talks at the George Padmore Institute, *Building Britannia: Life Experience with Britain* is a collection of enlightening, provocative and often humorous interviews and testimonies which look at the experiences of influential members of the Caribbean diaspora living in Britain. The wide range of speakers, including the Barbadian musician Dennis Bovell, the Trinidadian artist Althea McNish and the Jamaican psychiatrist Aggrey Burke, allows for an appreciation of the diverse professional, artistic and philosophical standpoints whilst highlighting the commonality of such issues as experience of institutional racism and the desire for a shared national identity.

The use of the term '*with* Britain', as opposed to '*in* Britain', in the book's title is a subtle but significant choice by the institute's late chairman, John La Rose, who maintained that the main aim of the series is to emphasise that the Caribbean diaspora 'did not come alive in Britain' (v); their experiences were influenced by childhoods spent in the Caribbean and their arrival in Britain has had a huge cultural, political and social impact on British society. The book, then, is not about assimilation but contribution. As such, *Building Britannia* offers a platform for personal accounts from artists, political and social campaigners and religious figures who have not only been witnesses to but have been influential in the changing of attitudes towards Caribbean migrants since the 1950s.

Over its seven chapters, the volume shifts between discussions of a wide range of issues, including the boom of the 'sound system' scene, educational reform and the emergence of a global Black Power movement in the 1960s. Despite the speakers' diverse backgrounds, however, a number of issues arise with depressing regularity. Experiences of racism are a common theme (through encounters with the police and the educational system, as well as religious and political groups), as are feelings of dislocation and disappointment, particularly with regards to the idealised notion of Britain prior to arrival and the British government's unsuccessful attempts to properly assist in the process of integration.

Yet, despite the prevalence of experiences of injustice and prejudice, the book is not weighed down by a sense of pessimism or despair. Instead, such issues are often dealt with in an accessible, conversational manner which mixes personal anecdotes with social comment to create an enjoyable and fascinating read. For example, while Dennis Bovell's talk includes a discussion of racial conflict in school and his wrongful imprisonment at the hands of the British justice system, it is interspersed with amusing tales of working in the music industry, such as his account of producing an album for the eccentric Nigerian musician and Afro-beat creator Fela Kuti while Kuti's wives made a fire in the middle of his kitchen in order to cook some food.



Finally, the central thread which runs through each of the talks, and ultimately provides the book's main thrust, is the importance of establishing a shared sense of identity throughout the splintered Caribbean nations, particularly through artistic expression. The Grenadian former priest and activist Gus John, for instance, talks of the importance of poetry and theatre in legitimising the so-called 'broken English' of Caribbean migrants (praising the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Louise Bennett), while Aggrey Burke argues that one of the most forceful and successful ways of promoting a Caribbean 'shared consciousness' is through music and art.

Thus, while many of the problems facing Caribbean migrants in Britain have not been fully overcome, *Building Britannia* documents a positive move away from the struggle for respect and towards the need for a concerted celebration of Caribbean identity.

In an attempt to widen the scope of postcolonial discourse beyond debates which focus on the legacies of British and French colonialism, Sabrina Brancato's *Afro-Europe: Texts and Contexts* offers a comparative discussion of works produced by writers and directors of predominantly African descent living throughout Europe. It is a project which aims not only to draw academic attention to marginalised texts but calls for a broader formulation of a 'transcultural' Afro-European identity which takes into account the influence of migrants and diasporic movements upon contemporary European society and culture.

The main focus of *Afro-Europe* is on the 'invisible' status of non-white migrants and political refugees living in Spain and Italy. Central to the book's aim is a discussion of literature and film which offers a view of European society 'from within and from without', concentrating on the position of migrants as 'outsiders who penetrate the most recondite spots of the country's underbelly' and expose the unrecognised prejudices still at work throughout an increasingly multicultural Europe (53).

Where the canons of British and French literature have in many ways institutionalised works by both first and second generation migrants (within the categories of Black British/British Asian writing and Beur literature), Brancato contends that similar texts are largely ignored in Spain and have gained acknowledgement in Italy only recently. Moreover, she argues, despite a burgeoning multiculturalism and growing interest in Postcolonial Studies, there exists a lack of awareness surrounding the experiences of non-white citizens and an absence of debate regarding the culpability of Spanish and Italian imperialism in producing the economic conditions which influences mass migration.

Yet, what this exhaustive survey shows is that there are a wealth of texts which offer an illuminating insight into the experience of non-white migrants living throughout Europe. Indeed, one of the most thought provoking themes of the book is the way in which literature is used as both a form of agency by those who hold a subcultural, marginalised status and as a means of cultural regeneration following oppression. Brancato discusses, for example, the Italian author Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo's re-writing of *Romeo and Juliet*, in his novel *Rometta e Guilieo*, as an act of 'counter-cultural translation' that responds to 'the elitism of Western grand narratives which exclude the underprivileged or keep them at the margins as an invisible presence without a voice of their own' (99).

It is this predominantly white, Western canon to which Brancato returns in her final comments. While Britain and France may be ahead of Spain and Italy in recognising the cultural importance of so-called 'migrant' or 'diasporic literature', the categories in which it is placed within the canon often upholds its 'otherness' and has the effect of flattening the divergent themes and preoccupations which abound within. Echoing Salman Rushdie's appeal in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands' for writers to avoid a 'ghetto mentality', Brancato warns against the creation of 'literary ghettos' within the academy which, at the same time as promoting wider inclusion, have the effect of reinforcing 'exclusionary discourses', an issue which she also recognises in relation to the limitations of the term 'Afro-European'.

Throughout the book, Brancato exhibits a breadth of research which draws attention to an archive of largely unacknowledged texts whilst attempting to do justice to the disparate forms and preoccupations in evidence. Although on occasion the book can read more like a catalogue than an analysis of such texts (particularly with regards to Chapter Two's discussion of African writing in Spanish), it offers a valuable spotlight on a rich vein of literature and film which demands to be examined further.

Charles Beckett

Kalagora

Siddhartha Bose

Penned in the Margins, London, 2010, pb
96pp ISBN 0 9565 4674 9 £8.99
www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk

Data Trace

Ronnie McGrath

Salt, London, 2010, pb
96pp ISBN 1 8447 1469 8 £8.99
www.saltpublishing.com

Kalagora
Siddhartha Bose
"Traversing and bridging continents" - Sudeep Sen
Penned in the Margins

Siddhartha Bose's *Kalagora* describes the poet's travels from city to city: New York, Bombay, London, Calcutta, Chicago, Bangalore, and his existence in and in-between them. The collection is full of juxtaposed images from each place, giving a sense of simultaneity across continents and borders. The reader is drawn from a scene in Manhattan, the chaotic, raucous metropolis, to the still and calm of the Indian landscape, to the backstreets of Brick Lane and Shoreditch. Time stands still. There is the sense of an Odyssean voyage, a continuous exile, full of temptation and danger, but whose Ithaca is too distant, in memory and space, to re-capture:

In immaculate gestation
I bounced round the oceans
O' the Earth (16)

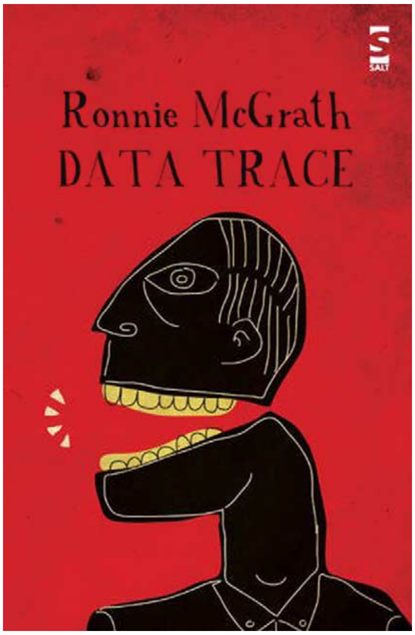
The author is in a permanent state of being home away from home. There is, as other reviewers have noted, a confidence, an assertiveness, in the form of these poems, both in their individual shapes and in the structure of the sequences. This is a collection that has formed over some time, and its dimensions have been deeply considered. It is not, as is the case too often with debuts, simply a showcasing, or showing-off, of talent, but a genuine and ambitious attempt to create a coherent whole. There is a sense of irony and self-deprecation that can only be displayed by a writer who is prepared to take the risk of undercutting himself:

I tell you my life is a Lou Reed song.

I carve it out for you, a turkey.
I make an offering, in pollen. (68)

These asides strike a comic note, but also a highly sympathetic one, drawing the reader deeper into the journey, making him a travelling companion. There is a vertiginous piling-up of images, sounds and smells, as if the poet is re-creating the fabric of the city, bringing the urban texture to life with a studious attention to detail. A grandeur is given to the most humble of bodily functions, and there is a delight in the base, the dirty, the seamy side of life, as though in these most ordinary moments the most universal conditions can be discovered: 'I see a man taking the piss by a bin, and the smell, not the trickle – a branch of veins – reminds me of where I'm from, and I glow like a lantern, holy' (37).

This is a collection that is always dramatic, always in tune with the sensational possibilities of language and the spectacular turn of phrase. Siddhartha Bose is a writer who never shies away from the panoptic vision or the powerful statement.



Whereas *Kalagora* has its sights set firmly on the epic, with its Homeric overtones, *Data Trace* is a collection of the intimate, the minute and the discreetly personal. Ronnie McGrath makes use of an even wider range of formal experimentation than Siddhartha Bose, using the page as a canvas, employing visual metaphors to add new dimensions to the text. This is a poet in search of the disruptive, the radical. Many influences come through clearly, such as those of Jayne Cortez and The Last Poets. And although there are occasional nods to Afrofuturism, the specific references to technology and science fiction are few. It is more accurate to call this a surrealist collection, firmly in the tradition of André Breton, Burroughs and Apollinaire. McGrath is a poet striving, almost straining, for the new: 'my poetry wild as innovation/lights ablaze with language/reservoirs of some radical speech act' (2). But this quest is fully informed by, and conscious of, what has gone before. It is keen to acknowledge its predecessors and pay heed to its peers. And there is also a qualifying lyricism here, a tendency towards the confessional, the microscopic:

I slice this vein and pour meaning
into things immeasurable
footprints more abstract than flower

stems
set their homes on dusty
bookshelves. (19)

And there is an underlying political edge to some of the poems in which questions of race most clearly appear. That a single collection should contain such a range of material and such a wide variety of styles is a testament to the poet's versatility and his resistance to the deadening satisfaction of cliché.

There is no denying the intellectual ambition of the poems in *Data Trace*, but the directness of their address to the reader and their conceptual clarity at times seems to close off the possibility of a less resolved emotional attention and obscure some of the features of the psychological landscape that is being ingeniously mapped. With a less clearly directed idea behind them, they might create even more intriguing, and nuanced, impressions.

This collection traces the evolution of the poet's creative imagination and explores the development of his voice. It often disdains the obscure and inaccessible language of critics and their analytical theories of poetry –

they have witchdoctor cloaks that can
turn ideas into a PhD language
academician talk of freemasonry
their voodoo is a priest
his dog-collar truths opening doors
that lead to other doors
windows of a blind opportunity
sucking on the eyeballs of my past
where memories of me did not know
books until late
and poetry was afar. (66)

– in favour of the direct experience, the expression of physical sensations, the throwing of the body onto the page and into the dance: 'Growing up on music/ We grew wings on our feet and flew/ Made a pact with movement and discovered geometry' (46).

In both of these collections the subjects of race and nationality are primary concerns, though they emerge in very different patterns. In *Data Trace*, the quotidian, the local, and the intimate, are where these tensions break through, in jarring meetings, in strangers' reactions, in a cultural dissonance that occurs at every turn. The poet's formative experiences in an England still riven by prejudice and brutality lie behind some of the most explosive encounters and utterances in the collection:

Got punched in
My chest by the deputy head teacher
Crashed into his desk and fell to the
ground
My head bleeding
Got up and cursed him
His mother
His sister
His entire nation
Years would pass before I discovered
Richard Wright
And James Baldwin. (50)

Kalagora takes a more intercontinental view, fusing cities together and describing a planet, and an identity, that is globally interconnected and globally aware. The price for this awareness is a confusion about the self's location and its prehistory. There is a sense of the dawning of an era in which nobody belongs anywhere any more than anyone else – a ready metaphor for postmodernism's disposal of ideological traditions – but there is also the growing knowledge of the shiftlessness, the uprootedness, that this gift brings with it:

Russian at the crystal counter,
studying film, winks through a
funnel.
Athenian blathers on opera.
I shade my way to the plastic of the
street, where I miss the
Punjabibouncer who
spoke in cricket. (67)

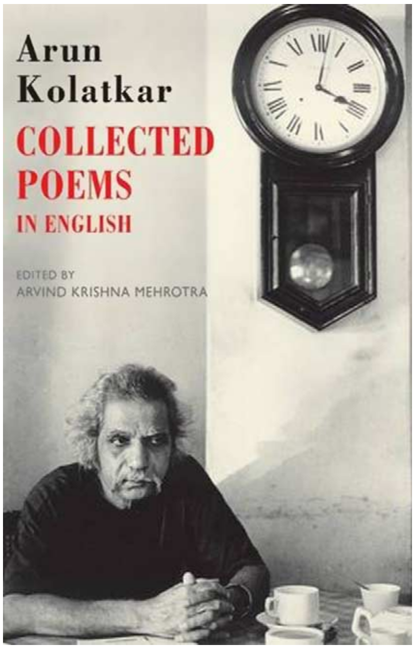
John Mateer

Collected Poems in English

Arun Kolatkar

Edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra
Bloodaxe, Tarset, 2010, pb
384pp ISBN 1 8522 4853 6 £12.00
www.bloodaxebooks.com

If only for the reason that an Indian English-language poet has eventually been published in a substantial volume by an important press, Arun Kolatkar's *Collected Poems in English* would be a milestone in the tradition of the broader English-language literature. Yet that is far from the only reason. Kolatkar, more than many other poets in a similar circumstance, has developed a poetic mode that is at once easily understood across the boundaries of the various national and regional Englishes and is strongly evocative of his world. His tone, its irony, melancholy, humour and its emotional engagement well embody the reality of being in India.



Where a poet like Derek Walcott had recourse to the larger Western tradition, and his mirror-image, Kamau Brathwaite, turned to the depths of African orality, Kolatkar is – perhaps in a typically Indian way – open to the potential of the manifestations and proliferations around him. His reading itself, as Arvind Krishna Mehrotra describes in his personal introduction to the book, quoting an interview conducted by Eunice de Souza, illustrates this. Kolatkar states:

> I want to reclaim everything I consider my tradition. I am particularly interested in history of all kinds, the beginning of man, archaeology, histories of everything

> from religion to objects ... The history of man's trying to make sense of the world and his place in it ... It's a browser's approach. (33)

Instead of choosing one position from which he might orientate his poetics, Kolatkar retains the possibilities of simultaneous streams of influence. There is the range and depth of his reading, as well as the three traditions he has emerged from: English-language poetry, Indian popular song, and Marathi, translations both of his own work and that of Balwantbua, an elderly bhajau singer and storyteller. These three streams contribute to the uniqueness of his work. While not all of them are equally fruitful — his best work is clearly that contained in the three books *Jejuri*, *Kala Ghoda Poems* and *Sarpa Sarpa*. They were written in English, though the latter existed in a Marathi version too. Incorporating these books, as well as other uncollected work, into this volume does readers new to Kolatkar the service of allowing them to witness this interesting confluence. For the sake of Kolatkar's reputation, though, it might have been preferable for the book to only contain the first three English books as then it would have been a collection of unquestionably brilliant work.

When Kolatkar is at his best, as he is in 'Lice' or 'To a Crow', he is observant, empathic, idiomatic, cheeky:

She hasn't been a woman for very long,
that girl who looks
like a stick of cinnamon.

Yes, the one in the mustard coloured sari
and red glass bangles,
sitting upright on that concrete block
as if it were a throne ... ('Lice', 108-109)

Or he can be political, in a curious, micro-economic way, as in 'David Sassoon', a poem spoken in the voice of the colonial figure himself, with Kolatkar presenting him as a 'pilloried head/out of a medallion/in the pediment above the archway//of the Mechanics Institute' (169).

Kolatkar's most profound characteristic, contrary to Mehrotra's suggestion that he is very much the observer, is his ability to identify with the lives of others. Sometimes his empathy, and its rapid shifts in perception, is reminiscent of Bollywood film, where it is sometimes difficult to remember the viewpoint from which the scene began. In 'Irani Restaurant, Bombay', a poem of lesser importance in his body of work: 'the cockeyed shah of iran watches the cake/decompose carefully in a cracked showcase/ distracted only by a fly on the make/as it finds in a loafer's wrist an operational base' (224). Anyone who has been in such a restaurant not only recognises the objects of the scene, but also the irritation of a returning fly.

It is in his masterwork – not *Jejuri*, the book for which he is justifiably well known (and which was reprinted, with a blurb by Salman Rushdie, in the book series of the *New York Review of Books*), but the much later *Kala Ghoda Poems*, published shortly before his passing – that all his skills coalesce with depth and grace to result in some of the most naturally empathic and humorous poems I have known. These include 'The Ogress', which tells of an old, disfigured woman who cares for orphans, or, again, 'Lice', a beautiful observation of love between a couple who in the West would be considered of the underclass, street kids and petty thieves. Kolatkar sees his 'characters' not only for who they are, but also for who they are in their own eyes. In 'An Old Bicycle Wheel' he can even identify with a discarded object.

In the current climate of English-language poetry in Britain and the United States, where so much is caught up in the institutionalisation of writing programmes, their conflicts and their publishing prospects, Kolatkar's work is a welcome surprise, coming as if from another, more caring world.

Among his best work is the wonderful 'Pi-Dog', a long poem in several sections, written from the viewpoint of a scruffy Bombay street dog. To me it seems emblematic of Kolatkar. Perhaps because his voice is as worldly and self-aware as the wonderful picture of the poet himself on this book's cover. The dog's musings on its genealogy, historical circumstance and the nature of its city are narrated in a tone characteristic of Kolatkar. In the words of Jeet Thayil, the anthologist of the *Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets,* Kolatkar's voice is 'unhurried, lit up with whimsy, unpretentious even when making learned or mythological allusions' (*Collected Poems*, backcover)

'Pi-dog' begins: 'This is the time of day I like best,/and this the hour when I can call this city my own' (75). And, after various meandering insights, it concludes with the dog noting that 'the time has come for me/to surrender the city/to its so-called masters' (81). Like much of Kolatkar's work, 'Pi-Dog' is circular, local, down-at-heel, and, in a special, enjoyable sense postcolonial.

He – Kolatkar, in his avatar as the dog – does not enter others' imaginations as much as slip between them unnoticed, seemingly wordlessly, the way an unowned, free-living, loveable and wise dog would as it passes through a crowd on any Indian street corner.

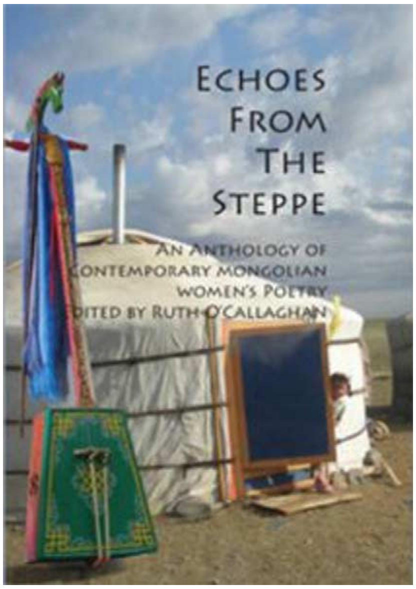
Rashi Rohatgi

Echoes from the Steppe: An Anthology of Contemporary Mongolian Women's Poetry

Ruth O'Callaghan, ed

Soaring Penguin, London, 2011, pb
168pp ISBN 1 9080 3000 9 $23.99
www.soaringpenguin.co.uk

This bilingual anthology of works by women is welcome not only for its presence – there are hardly any writings on contemporary Mongolian poetry available in English – but also for an introduction which takes a nuanced look at women's space within Mongolian poetry. Editor Ruth O'Callaghan, herself the author of three collections of poetry – most recently *Goater's Alley* (2010 published by Shoestring) – travelled around Mongolia for one month in order to learn about the country's poetry. Her work resulted in a website featuring the work of five poets: Oyundari Tsagaan, Suglegmaa Khurgaa, Dulmaa Shagdar, Munkhtsetseg Gompildoo and Ulziitgs Lavsandorj (www.poetrymongolia.co.uk). The poems were accompanied by translations by Simon Wickham-Smith, who has translated and written on contemporary and historical Mongolian poets both male and female, and Soyobold Sergelen. *Echoes from the Steppe* offers an expanded set of poems and translations, further explicated by O'Callaghan's introduction.



The Introduction gives us a sense of the poets both as individuals, as well as a collective group engaged with the traditional values of Mongolian poetry, for example the preoccupation with nature, country and Chinggis Khan. Quotations from the poets themselves depict the category of 'female poets' as something both invisible and important in Mongolia. Their works, like the poetry of their male counterparts, is read and esteemed, and, perhaps as a result, there is not a unified feminist perspective. Instead, Khurgaa describes a different sort of unity, saying 'women bear all the pain of this world, but they also sing lullabies. So, it is amazing that in addition to all of this, they write poetry' (13). Their work deserves its own anthology because, no matter how equally they are esteemed, women's writing confronts a different set of expectations than that of male poets in contemporary Mongolian society.

Beyond commonalities of love of nature and spirituality, we read here five distinct poetic voices. Tsagaan's voice is that of a spiritual wanderer attentive to detail. In her poem 'Loss', the opening stanza establishes a setting in which we can easily imagine the poet throughout the rest of her writing life: 'A fine yellow tea, seeking tears/Of unbearable grief, is poured from a brass jug./A candle glimmers before the framed Buddha/But grandfather's place is empty, he's carefree, far away' (20). The poem is very much weighted by how much Tsagaan cares about joy and about pain. In 'A Poem Written When My Faith Was Weak', she writes of her own inability to take refuge in the Buddha even as his image pervades her cultural atmosphere. Instead, she writes astutely about what it can mean to understand faith conceptually but not in one's heart: 'I have not been taught to love, I have learnt to be malicious,/my faith in dark thoughts has made me dissipated and vague' (24). She is struggling to connect to a past she feels has value. Khurgaa, in contrast, finds clear refuge in the connection with the land that has historically been important in Mongolian culture. She clearly feels affinity with the land in a more uncomplicated way than she relates to the people with whom her nationality and nationalism is shared. Khurgaa's poem 'My Son', in which she defends her son's strengths against the values of the modern age exemplified by his peers at school, is the standout piece in the anthology, not just as an example of a Mongolian woman's understanding of motherhood and nation, but also simply as a thing of beauty. One must recommend the book if only to read this poem in its entirety.

Shagdar's poetry has the most delicate imagery, approaching her feelings head-on but with care. In 'The Flowers had not Tasted the Wine of Sadness', she writes of a love affair, 'I collected the evening starlight into my gown;/our two hearts played love's melody until daybreak', yet in 'Heartstrings', she confesses that she feels inadequate in the face of the love of a good man: 'I fear that I cannot fully tune an honest heart's/most pliant strings — that they will break' (90-92). Her inclusion in this anthology is something of a triumph, for she has previously refused translation of her poems into English. Gompildoo leans towards a blend of intense imagery and connection of these to wider considerations of nation and place. Earth she refers to as 'an old Lover', 'the world I'm used to', one that she loves fiercely and 'unthinkably' (118).

Luvsandorj, whose poetry was tackled previously by Wickham-Smith, is agile with plot in her poetry, using narrative to get at unasked questions. Her 'Mongolian Vodka in Hünün Pottery', is a joy to read, an assertion of a flawed but compelling self. In its most accomplished section, she describes a potter flirting with her who, while seeming a bit buffoonish himself, gets at the heart of her flaws when he notes that she will never be a good potter unless she loves the process. Luvsandorj ends the stanza with the deadpan line which notes that this did not move her to love pottery: 'So I went and became someone else's student' (136). In another, untitled poem, she writes of loving a man she knows other women will flirt with. In describing how their relationship began, she writes 'I was loved/by one other than my parents, so I placed/my heart, wrapped in tissue, in his pocket' (162). We see a woman growing as she learns the difference and connection of her parental home to her home-at-large in the country and in the world.

Although the book is aesthetically unpleasing, with flimsy binding and multiple typographical errors, its bilingual facing pages make up for its other presentational flaws. Students of Mongolian should of course be very pleased, but even readers of the Cyrillic alphabet without knowledge of Mongolian can understand in general terms what the poems might sound like. The book would benefit from a further contextualisation of the chosen poets and the reasons for their particular inclusion, but the poems themselves comprise a wide-ranging yet focused selection that should attract readers interested in women and poetry from around the world.

Noreen Mae Ritsema

Martyrdom Street

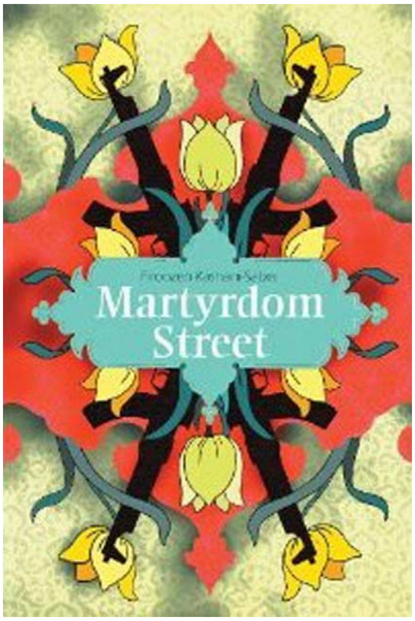
Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet

Syracuse University Press, New York, 2010, pb
120pp ISBN 0 8156 0975 9 £16.50
www.syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu

Echoes from the Other Land

Ava Homa

TSAR Publications, Toronto, 2010, pb
112pp ISBN 1 8947 7064 4 CAN$19.95
www.tsarbooks.com



Through the eyes of its exiles, Iran is a place that can be distinctly captured. Those who have left their homeland for the United States are in a unique position to juxtapose their lives back home with their experiences in a new land. This is precisely what happens in *Martyrdom Street* by Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet as the poetically infused story intimately weaves between Fatemeh's life in war-torn Iran to her visit to her daughter Nasrin in New York. Ava Homa's *Echoes from the Other Land* is a collection of deftly crafted short stories that offer snapshots of diverse women living ubiquitous lives in various areas of Iran. Taken together, both works paint rich pictures of Iranian culture and particularly how women negotiate their ways through it.

In both of these books, the relationship between Iran and America is portrayed through distinct events in Iran's recent history. *Martyrdom Street* is set during the 1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. Violence on the streets and in military and political control, as well as daily bombings make life unpredictable and horror filled. Fatemeh is disfigured in a bombing, while young boys roam the streets in packs with guns and newspapers relish stories of executions. Yet even in America, where Nasrin has fled in the hope of finding safety, complete escape from the violence is not possible, for New York has its own troubled streets. And for many, a sense of disconnect manifests itself, as cultural differences become glaringly obvious and loneliness runs deep. In the America that so many had dreamed of, realities are commonly disappointing and an intricate Iranian exile network is formed, keeping many traditions intact and transforming others. Taking place after the revolutionary dust has settled, Ava Homa's stories in *Echoes from the Other Land* portray characters beyond dreams of America. They have come to terms with the reality of their lives and know that they will never see cities like New York with their own eyes. In fact, their understanding of the complex oppressive relationship between Iran and the United States is comprehensive. In the short story 'Silk Shawl', a casual conversation at a party about escalating real estate prices reveals this succinctly:

> Well, the United States will threaten to attack and then houses will be cheap again, trust me. And it's no tragedy, because inflation is something we can get used to; betrayal and oppression are not.

The tension between Iran and Iraq is also still palpable in 'A River of Milk and Honey'. Sharmin, a young woman with a disability who is shunned by her family and society, observes:

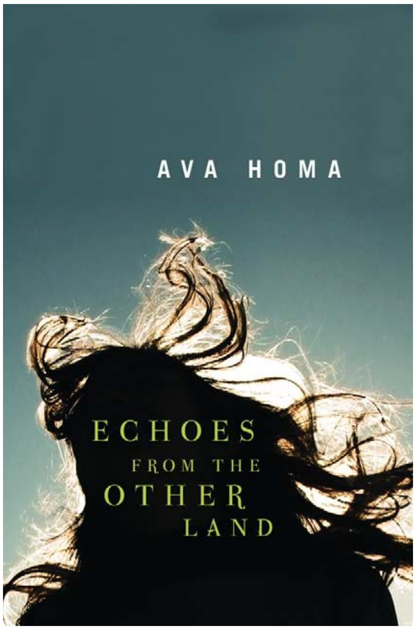
> Sometimes I wonder if God hates all the people in this city, all the people who live on the border of Iran and Iraq. My father says Sanandaj is a city of revolution and mass murder, tyranny, and genocide.

Even though the war is officially said to be over, it is not over in the streets or in the hearts of the people. The wounds are raw, and in some cases, have not stopped bleeding.

There is the constant shadow of male dominance in both Iran and America that darkens the storylines in both books, revealing an oppressive undercurrent that is difficult to escape. It becomes apparent that the gendered injustices that women face in the most intimate aspects of their lives are symptomatic of larger systems of power. Male dominance is evident in politics, on the streets, in personal relationships, and in everyday interactions. In *Martyrdom Street*, dominant views of gender are exposed by Fatemeh as she witnesses an altercation between a man and a woman at her local Iranian post office:

> But no one rushed to support her cause. Maybe it was the desperation in her voice, the hypocrisy of her chador, or the weakness of her gender that made her appear guilty.

Gendered stereotypes have been internalised it seems, even by women, who adhere to them as male dominance pervades their lives. Even more intrusive is the *Komiteh* (the 'moral police') whom Narin encounters when she returns to Iran from America. The *Komiteh* raid several units in an apartment block that she is visiting and she overhears an officer recommend that two young women should be submitted to virginity tests. Nasrin is appalled to learn about the surgical business of re-virginisation, demonstrating the menacing control that the authorities, and men in general, have over women's bodies.



In *Echoes from the Other Land*, male dominance is interlaced though each story, from a bullying unemployed husband, Ali, to a young divorcée whose split from her husband has ruined her reputation and chances of finding new love. In 'Glass Slippers', a husband has the audacity to flaunt his affairs and makes no effort to conceal the bra and lipstick that belong to his lover, which his wife finds in the bedroom of their home. The main character of this story, the woman who is being cheated on, is referred to only as 'you' throughout the narrative, making clear the reality that this can happen to any woman, and is likely to happen to too many women.

In both books, the sinister and often silenced realities of neo-imperialism and patriarchy manifest most profoundly in women's experiences and it is in the confidential details of the characters' lives that this can be witnessed. From a severe eating disorder to mental breakdown, women are paying a destructive price. However, resistance and hope still prevail. In *Martyrdom Street*, Nasrin's resolve to rise against tyranny, not only government tyranny, but patriarchy as well, is the final note on which the book ends. In *Echoes from the Other Land*, the final story portrays a compassionate husband trying to help his wife come to terms with her hair loss, leaving readers with a slight smile and sense of hope. Both books feature courageous women who are resilient and inspiring, poetically resisting the insidious violence of oppression in all its menacing forms. Some characters fight this in the confines of their hearts while others resist with their lives.

Ruksana Abdul-Majid

Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law

David Farrier

Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2011, hb
235pp ISBN 1 8463 1480 3 £65
www.liverpool-unipress.co.uk

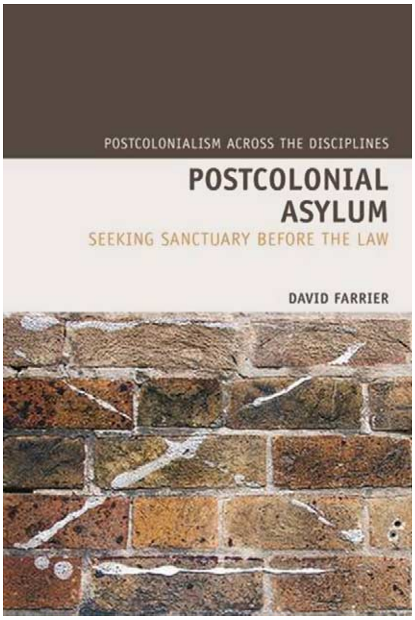
Mutilating Khalid: The Symbolic Politics of Female Genital Cutting

Charles G Steffen

The Red Sea Press, New Jersey, 2011, pb
227pp ISBN 1 5690 2332 8 $29.95
www.africaworldpressbooks.com

David Farrier's *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law* draws on asylum legislation, ethics and political theory, to highlight the tension between postcolonial studies' emblematic interest in migrancy and the politics and poetics of deterritorialisation ('diaspoetics'), its reconfiguration of the marginal and the peripheral as spaces of embedded agency, and the problematic figure of the asylum seeker.

The asylum seeker, Farrier opines, is an unsettling figure for postcolonial studies, one that occludes traditional distinctions between categories of inclusion and exclusion. The book opens with an image documenting a protest staged in February 2002 by Mahzer Ali and other asylum seekers detained at the Woomera Immigration Removal and Processing Centre, Australia. Ali, protesting against the detention of children in the centre, scaled the perimeter fence — he is pictured semi-naked and prone, caught unmoving in the razor wire circling the boundary of the centre as his fellow detainees raise a banner bearing the words 'Freedom or Death'. For Farrier, Ali's body, trapped in the razor wire fence of the boundary, caught 'between the spaces of the citizen and non-citizen' (2), best articulates 'the scandal of the refugee' — he 'incarnates the political and ethical absence to which each asylum seeker is relegated' (7).


POSTCOLONIALISM ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES
POSTCOLONIAL ASYLUM
SEEKING SANCTUARY BEFORE THE LAW
DAVID FARRIER

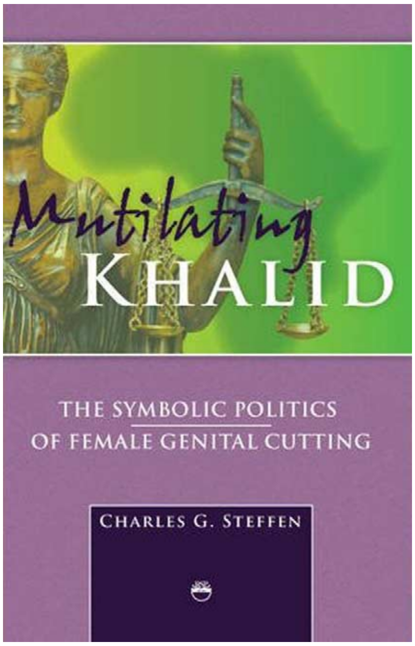
It is precisely this absence that *Postcolonial Asylum* seeks to interrogate. The introductory chapter makes productive use of Giorgio Agamben's theory of the sovereign ban – as outlined in *Homo Sacer* (1998) – to demonstrate the legal paradox faced by asylum seekers. The sovereign ban describes 'a condition where the subject of the ban is held within the purview of law's censure but excluded from its protection' (12), such as is the case for the asylum seeker whose asylum claim has been refused. In such circumstances, left only with the (non)choice between deportation or withdrawal of state support and the threat of destitution,

> the asylum seeker is literally abandoned by the law, but the law remains far from indifferent to them; they are in fact *held* by the law's vested interest in their exclusion. Unable to stay or return, they incarnate the very worst of border-living. (12)

With a focus on UK and Australian asylum regimes, the framing of asylum seekers as contemporary figures of the infrahuman, their departure from *within* and indeterminate position '*before* the law' is developed and expanded in subsequent chapters. Chapter One for instance, examines the use of extra-territorial processing and border 'flexibilization' by both Britain and Australia, in concerted efforts to consolidate sovereign control of the border. Importantly, Farrier supplements Agamben's work with the crucial interventions made by Paul Gilroy and Achille Mbembe, to suggest that the legal machinations of present day asylum regimes connect to a longer heritage of colonial infrahumanity. Coetzee's *Waiting For the Barbarians* (1980) is read as 'a parable of the infrahuman within coloniality' (44), and the cases of Cornelia Rau and Vivian Solen Young, Australian citizens wrongfully detained under immigration legislation as 'unlawful non-citizen[s]' , demonstrate the convergence of asylum and postcolonial concerns 'in Australia's insistence on the infrahumanity of its indigenous and asylum-seeking populations' (49).

Farrier covers a lot of ground; at every stage counterpointing his theoretical discussion with narratives of contemporary asylum legislation and examples of its enforcement, as well as an impressive range of cultural representations of asylum/refugee experience. He grants space in his analysis to, amongst others, Melanie Friend's photography, Tina Gharavi's digital installation work, Pip Starr's documentary *Through the Wire* (2004), Stephen Frear's film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), and literary novels by Leila Aboulela, Abdulrazak Gurnah and Caryl Phillips. Given the sheer breadth of reference, some readers may be less than satisfied with the occasionally synoptic readings offered. Farrier frequently retreats to the theoretical underpinnings of his argument, but is at his most interesting when he reads – as he often does – representative asylum narratives as works that intervene in prevailing asylum/refugee discourse, and at the same time test the limits of some of the more established theoretical positions within postcolonial studies.

Postcolonial Asylum provides a lucid, cogently argued examination of a subject situated at a complex admixture of academic fields. Given the continuously shifting legal and political terrain surrounding the issue of asylum, as Farrier duly acknowledges, it resists easy or comprehensive analysis. In developing a concept of postcolonial asylum, Farrier's approach is explicitly contrapuntal, and he posits a wide range of critical positions, not all of them complementary, but always carefully qualified in his argument. Giorgio Agamben's diagnoses of contemporary biopolitical conditions of existence feature prominently in Farrier's discussion, and readers would be well served with some grounding in Agamben's political theory before approaching this highly theoretical text; however, this does not detract from what remains a challenging and engaging work that certainly charts new ground.



The status of the individual before the law is also the subject of *Mutilating Khalid: The Symbolic Politics of Female Genital Cutting*. Charles G Steffen presents an in-depth examination of a recent highly publicised case of 'female genital cutting' (FGC) prosecuted in a United States court of law. Khalid Misri Adem, an Ethiopian immigrant, was found guilty in 2006 by an Atlanta jury of aggravated battery and cruelty to children for allegedly circumcising his daughter, Amirah Adem, when she was two years old. The case unfolded against a backdrop of what Steffen terms 'the volatile realm of symbolic politics' (3). Unusual in the extensive media coverage it received, both in the United States and internationally, it also prompted an unlikely alliance between international women's rights activists and conservative forces in the States, both appropriating the case to their own agendas, and rallying around a campaign which saw the eventual enacting of legislation criminalising 'female genital mutilation', leading to a precedent setting prosecution against Khalid.

Looking in detail at each step in the legal process of the Adem case, Steffen describes how it was constructed around circumstantial and problematic evidence, and how a train of legal miscalculations led to Khalid's conviction. The prosecution emphasised that the practice of FGC was an irrefutable part of Khalid's Ethiopian 'culture' — police, prosecutors, judges and legislators set themselves the task of deciding the legality of cultural practices imported from abroad. Steffen suggests that the official response to the case contributed to the eventual outcome in that 'the fearful symbolism he [Khalid] came to embody' (7), was linked to the post-9/11 criminalisation and securitisation of immigrant identity, and pointed to a more general anxiety over moral order brought about by an influx of immigrants who were perceived as refusing to assimilate.

In an interesting chapter, 'The Campaign', Steffen considers the colonial antecedents to the case, placing it in the wider context of twentieth-century campaigns against FGC by 'imperial feminists' in Africa. A variation on the Spivakian maxim, these campaigns amounted to 'white *women* saving brown women from brown men' — yet, such campaigns reflected racism and ethnocentricism, consistently failing to acknowledge that FGC was a cultural practice prevalently perpetuated by women over other women. Echoing this colonial heritage, the prosecution against Khalid, despite maintaining his Ethiopian 'culture' as the most incriminating factor in the case against him, failed also to acknowledge that within his culture 'a father would transgress the most formidable taboos by circumcising his own daughter' (186).

Despite making valid observations throughout, Steffen's attempts to link the failures faced by Khalid's defence within the legal process to the existence of a symbolic order in which his guilt was already interpreted becomes, at times, tenuous. The concluding chapter, which gives a detailed account of the appeal made against the conviction, on the grounds that Khalid was denied effective legal counsel, would seem to suggest that the most detrimental factor to Khalid's defence was less 'the blinding force of symbolic politics' (204), and more a lack of appropriate legal representation.

Clare Barker

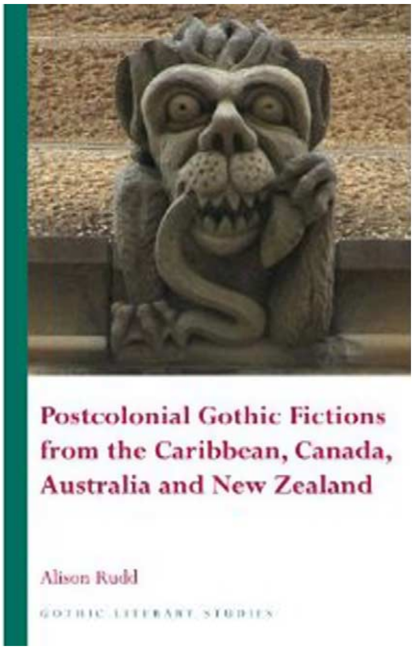
Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand

Alison Rudd

University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2010, hb
233pp ISBN 0 7083 2211 6 £75
www.wales.ac.uk/en/UniversityPress/Welcome.aspx

In recent years, a significant amount of critical work has been produced on the use of Gothic themes and conventions in (post)colonial fiction, with particular attention being paid to the settler colonies that form the focus of Alison Rudd's monograph. Rudd analyses a wide, generically diverse selection of literary texts from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Caribbean, and provides a careful and knowledgeable synthesis of this critical field. The main premise of *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions* is that there are significant parallels between the preoccupations of postcolonial writing and those of the Gothic – an interest in hybridity, fragmented histories and split subjectivities, for instance – and that in postcolonial fictions, Gothic is deployed as a literary strategy that enables authors to 'reveal hidden pasts and create ways of expressing traumatic and often unspeakable histories' (2). 'The "subterranean material" that emerges through Postcolonial Gothic narratives', Rudd writes, 'comes therefore to expose the fault lines in colonial ideologies and political and economic systems' (3). This argument is illustrated in numerous examples from works by 'canonical' postcolonial authors (Jean Rhys, Derek Walcott, Margaret Atwood, Mudrooroo), exciting contemporary writers such as Shani Mootoo, Eden Robinson and Kelly Ana Morey, and a few colonial poets and short fiction writers. This range is both the volume's strength and its weakness. As a cross-cultural survey of Gothic tropes it provides a wealth of fascinating reference points, but as an analytical literary study it often lacks depth, particularly with regard to the cultural and political provenance and resonance of the texts under consideration.

While using 'the Gothic' as an umbrella term to denote a variety of shared conventions and interests (haunting, abjection, the uncanny), Rudd insists on the regional and cultural specificity of the ways in which these concerns are manifested. This is reflected in the structure of the book, in which individual chapters focus on the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand respectively and identify particular indigenous and local Gothic forms. The 'divided psyche' is shown to recur in Caribbean literature, while Canada is associated with anxiety related to landscape and settlement, Australia with guilt over its convict histories and indigenous genocide, and New Zealand with dysfunctional and abject bodies, both individual and social. In the focal fictional texts, we encounter the Caribbean zombie, duppy and soucouyant, the Canadian wendigo, and the Australian bunyip, and in her textual analysis Rudd takes care to identify the unique, culturally nuanced features of these figures rather than homogenising them as 'ghosts and monsters'. In the face of these significant differences, though, 'Gothic' itself becomes a rather diffuse term. At several points in the book I would have liked to see deeper historical contextualisation of local constructions of the uncanny or abject, with some discussion of why 'Gothic' is an appropriate framework from which to comprehend the very different narrative and psychosocial formations from each region. My frustration with the slipperiness of 'Gothic' in *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions* is epitomised by the New Zealand chapter, in which a review of literary and critical texts introduces the New Zealand Gothic, Pakeha Gothic, Maori Gothic, Protestant Gothic, Kiwi Gothic and Aotearoa Gothic, not to mention more localised versions – Taranaki Gothic, Canterbury Gothic, and Dunedin Gothic – with no in-depth clarification of the distinctions between them or of how meaningful such a profuse taxonomy might be.


Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand
Alison Rudd
GOTHIC LITERARY STUDIES

This leads to another related concern about the geographical scope of the book and its status as a comparative work. With localised studies already in print such as Justin Edwards' *Gothic Canada* (2005), Kenneth Gelder and Jane Jacobs' *Uncanny Australia* (1998) and Misha Kavka, Jennifer Lawn and Mary Paul's *Gothic NZ* (2007), among others, Rudd's cross-regional monograph should represent a timely evaluation of the connections and disparities between the aesthetic modes surfacing in aboriginal communities, settler (post)colonies, and culturally hybrid states. However, the engagement with the postcolonial in the Introduction, 'Spectres of the (Post)Colonial', is rather formulaic, with only a very brief account of the history of settler colonialism and no consideration of the book's potential relevance to indigenous or settler studies. This means that the rationale for its geographical parameters is not totally clear, especially given that the Caribbean has a very different historical trajectory from the three settler nations, as Rudd acknowledges, but does not fully substantiate in her readings. While I agree entirely with the need for situated reading practices, I found the lack of connectivity and comparison between chapters, regions, literary forms and previous theorists rather unsatisfactory. *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions* juxtaposes different manifestations of the uncanny and gives a tessellated overview of Canadian, Caribbean, Australian and New Zealand Gothic, but does little to integrate these into a developed theory of postcolonial Gothic. It also stops just short of engaging in political terms with the contemporary conditions of internal colonialism or neocolonialism that often form the backdrop for writers' explorations of revenance and ongoing trauma (there is no reference to Pheng Cheah's important work on spectral nationality, for instance). An intriguing connection is ventured between the circulation of global capital and the zombification of Caribbean subjects, and the chapter on Australia ends by mentioning the historic Mabo decision, to take just a couple of examples, but disappointingly these contextual references are not pursued any further.

Postcolonial Gothic Fictions is well researched and accessible to read, and with its case-study style analyses of individual literary texts, it would be an extremely useful resource for anyone embarking on an exploration of Gothic fictions from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the Caribbean. Those who are already well versed in this field, however, may find that it lacks distinctiveness from existing analyses. Rudd's arguments throughout the book are punctuated by multiple quotations from other critics, and overall her study is more a detailed survey of current thinking than a wholly original research monograph on the postcolonial Gothic.