

# East West Journal of Humanities

Of Books and their Covers: Marketing Fiction in a Globalized Context

Reaching for the 'Other' across the *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Cultural Identity and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

All About Jahaz-bhais and Jahaz-bahens: Politics of  
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Revisiting Classics: Relevance of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*



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# East West Journal of Humanities



## Editorial

This is the second issue of the *East West Journal of Humanities*, a publication of EWU Center for Research and Training. The Center now publishes two journals: this one and the *East West Journal of the Social Sciences and Business*.

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We welcome your contributions and suggestions for future issues. We intend to make ours the leading journal on the liberal arts in this region and look forward to your participation in our venture.

I would like to conclude by thanking my Teaching Assistants, Ms. Farina Huq and Mr. Nasih Ul Wadud Alam, for their help and Ms. Farha Naz, Secretary, CRT, for her support.

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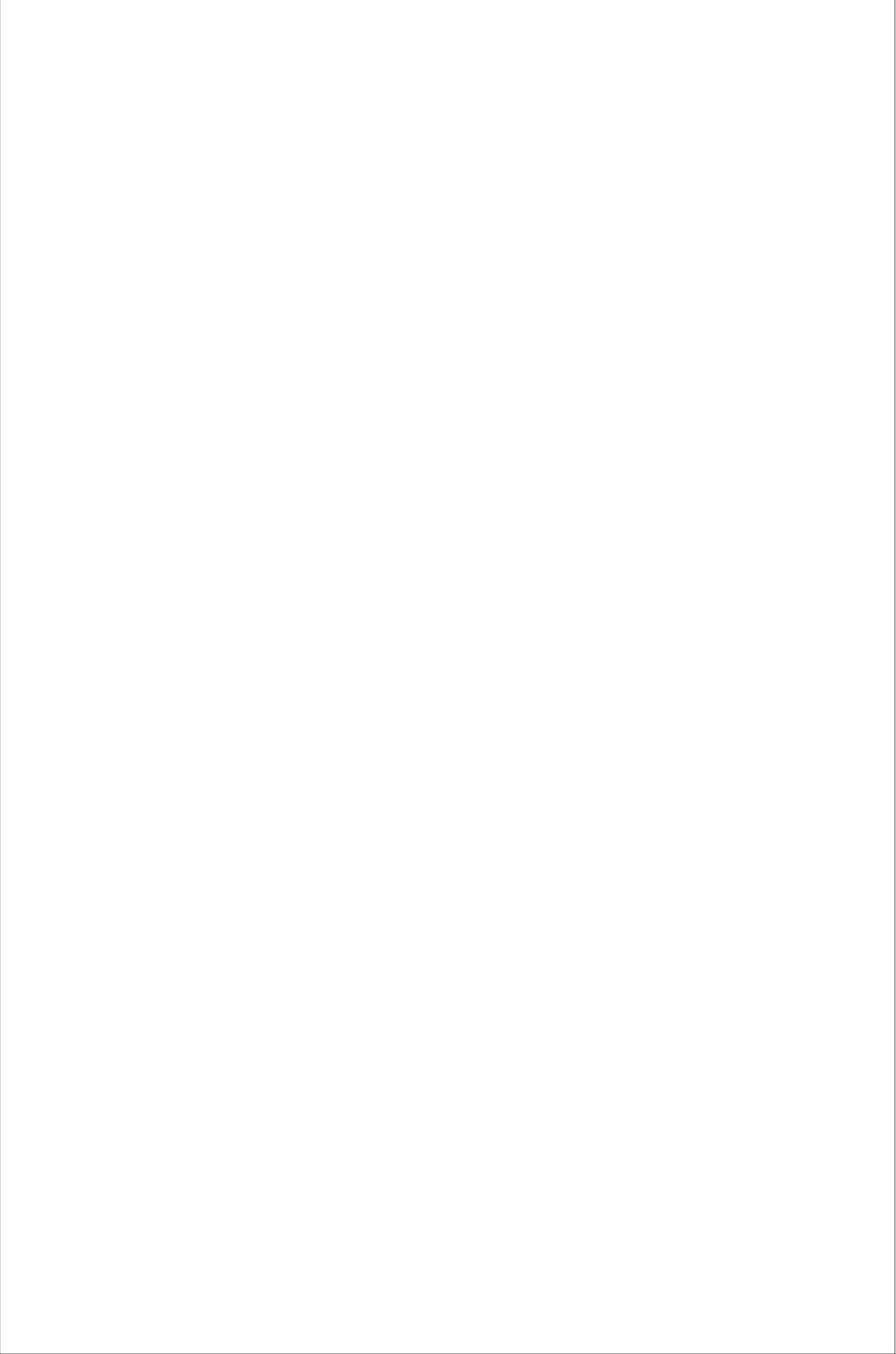
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# Of Books and their Covers: Marketing Fiction in a Globalized Context

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## Abstract

Though a book is not supposed to be judged by its cover, the truth is publishers do their best to make us do so. This paper looks at different strategies deployed by leading publishers to market books and their authors through carefully thought out covers and blurbs. It follows the history of the publication of some key novels by South Asian writers, namely Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri, to show how their works have been designed for niche markets. In fact, it demonstrates how the same book is provided with different covers for different markets and different historical moments to capture particular groups of the reading public. This paper concludes that publishers pursue a policy of blending the global and the local too since their priority is the selling of the books and not merely intellectual stimulation.

For every aspiring writer at the "periphery," there is a publisher at the "center," eager to seize upon their work as a source of marketable "otherness." - Graham Huggan (1994)

In this age of globalization, it seems that the age-old saying "Don't judge a book by its cover" is passe. Once a book's manuscript leaves the author's desk, it becomes a marketable product, similar to many other multinational consumer products. The publisher then works out different strategies to aggressively market the product with special book launch programmes, publicity stunts and reading sessions by the author at different locales where he/she also becomes a performer and salesperson signing out copies for dedicated readers. As several Culture Studies critics point out<sup>1</sup>, in postcolonial literature in the global late-capitalism

system, the book is also commodified as an object of consumption. Thus its production, selection and consumption are regulated by the influence of publishing houses and academic institutions. But how much the author himself has to play in it remains a debatable point.

This article traces the history of the publication of some specific novels in English written by Indian writers and writers of Indian descent that took the global readership by storm. The writers discussed here, namely Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri and Manil Suri, have all been recipients of different literary awards.<sup>2</sup> Going through the various avatars of some of their texts, with different kinds of covers specifically manufactured for a niche market, I will try to show how all this talk about uniformity, transnationality, and multinational publishing policies has embedded in it deeper meaning through which we now have to judge a book not only by its cover but also of covers.

In Hindi there is a saying "*pehle darshandhari peeche goon bichari*" meaning, "you first judge something by its appearance and later by its merit". For the contemporary writer then, the 'book' or the 'product' that he/she is promoting also becomes unique. Good publishing is ultimately a matter of detail — the choice of titles, the editing, design, quality of production, and finally, marketing and sales. Each of these functions involves a whole lot of sub-functions that have to be finalized before the package is finally put into the market. My concern here is with only two aspects of this entire process, namely the pictures on the cover of the book and the dust-jacket synopsis that it offers. So, though a book is now launched worldwide on the same day, it comes in different custom-made forms according to the sensibilities and interest of regional readers.

In his essay, "Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes attempts to "submit the image to a spectral analysis of the messages it may contain." He turns to the advertising image, an image which, he argues, draws from "signs that are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading" and which therefore is more "frank" and explicit in the information it conveys. Barthes wishes to use this clarity to move towards a clearer conception of how the image and its linguistic attendants produces signification. He proceeds by breaking this system of signification into three parts, that of the linguistic message, the coded iconic message, and the non-coded iconic message. He also argues that attention must be paid to the composition of an image as a signifying complex and to the naturalizing role played in photography, where the exact replication of reality "naturalizes the symbolic message ...innocent[ing] the semantic artifice of connotation"(45). The

politics behind different covers produced for the same book involve all the three different types of signification that Barthes talks of.

In other words, the language, the coded and the non-coded signifiers all add up to the understanding of the visual impact disseminated through the cover of the book.

As mentioned earlier, I judge a book by its cover. I also judge a book by its covers. Apart from the image that lies right on top of the book that decides whether I pick it up or read it, I also find pleasure in possessing good multiple book covers of the same book — which, of course, means picking up the same book many times. The first time I noticed this entire well-thought-out strategy to attract the regional reader was in 1997 when Arundhati Roy created history by winning the Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* which was promoted as a 'unique product' and therefore a 'commercial proposition' for the publishers. We have read a lot about how Arundhati Roy was very particular about the entire production of her book, including the type-set and the cover design.<sup>3</sup> Padmini Mongia delves deep into this phenomenon thus:

Let me begin with a consideration of the novel's cover. Most readers of this article are probably familiar with the cover, with its image of blurred lotus leaves within which one can find a single, surprising, small pink bougainvillea flower. Placed almost at the dead centre of the front cover, the small pink flower draws the viewer's eyes both for its placement and for its colour. The flower is the more striking for being a small drop of colour amid the greenish gloom of the leaves and stems of the lotus plants. On the left of the front cover, though, another concentration of the same colour — partly a dead leaf and partly the bud of a lotus flower — draws the gaze. As the reader's eye follows the pink lotus on the side of the spine, an even fuller lotus appears on the back. Although not in full bloom and photographed from the side, the lotus on the back cover is the deepest concentration of colour on the book jacket. Following the path suggested by the colour red leads the reader to the inside jacket, where a winsome author photo greets the reader. Photographed against foliage, she too glows and is luminous. Just as the green lushness allows the flower on the front cover to be more striking, the blurred green background highlights the picture of the author with dreamy eyes. The circularity of Roy's narrative is mirrored in the images which

adorn the cover of her book, where hints of red tinge all its sides, including the author photograph where the red band in her hair rounds out the use of red on the rest of the book jacket. Further, the entire book jacket glows and is iridescent.

The most interesting fact to be noted now is that the cover picture of the pink lotus blooming amid dark green leaves remained the same in all editions but the author's picture and the gist of the story on the dust-jacket differed from country to country, region to region. So we got a happy and smiling face of the author with her bright eyes full of self-confidence on the cover of the Indian edition published by India Ink in New Delhi and a much more dreamy and vague-looking photograph on the Random House edition published in the United States, as if lending an enchantment to this novelist from far off India. In the Flamingo version published in the United Kingdom, the photograph, done in black and white is "more contemplative" and tending "towards sepiatone." Mongia further informs us that here, "the dreamy appeal of the author photo relies on nostalgic softness unlike the beckoning sensuality of the Random House edition."<sup>4</sup> In all these cases, of course, the photographer was none other than her husband Pradip Krishen.

Though seeming apparently trivial, the marketing strategy was clearly exposed when we went through the absolutely different story outlines presented in the two editions under discussion. The Indian edition read thus:

In a purely practical sense it would probably be correct to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem. Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day....

Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story ... Still, to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it...

It could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came... Before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag.

By June 1997 the readers of *The New Yorker* were introduced to a full page picture of Arundhati Roy with the following caption: "A novelist who works as hard to avoid as to reach her destination of forbidden sex and atrocious violence" and so the dust jacket story outline for the Random House edition published from New

York was totally different from its Indian counterpart. Beginning with a quotation in italics it went thus:

*They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The year is 1969.*

In the state of Kerala, on the southernmost tip of India, a skyblue Plymouth with chrome tailfins is stranded on the highway amid a Marxist workers' demonstration. Inside the car sit two-egg twins Rahel and Esthappen, and so begins their tale....

*The God of Small Things* takes on Big Themes — Love, Madness, Hope, Infinite Joy. Here is a writer who dares to break the rules. To dislocate received rhythms and create the language she requires, a language that is at once classical and unprecedented. Arundhati Roy has given us a book that is anchored to anguish, but fueled by wit and magic.

According to Padmini Mongia, "the tropes used in the aestheticization of the book are worth remarking on, especially since the work is clearly very skillfully put together and an enormous effort was expended for its construction and marketing."<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, the totally different cover of the special limited copy hardbound edition made of *The God of Small Things* as one of the shortlisted books for the Booker since 1991 tells us another story. The profusion of the colour pink both in the cover — with the embossed gold lettering of the title on the spine as well as on the hardboard case covering it — seems to be preserving something no longer exotic from India but a prize product that needs to be safely preserved for posterity.

## II

After Roy's book, the novel that probably underwent the maximum number of avatars in its cover design is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. I could locate at least twelve different covers since the time of its first publication in 1981 and probably there are many more. Over the span of all these years, and especially after the book won the 'Booker of Bookers' award, the range and experimentation with cover designs of the novel is amazing to note. While each publisher attempts to provide an attractive design on the front cover, all related to different significant aspects of the story, some shy away from even offering the gist of the story at the back cover. They just fill it up with excerpts of critical comments provided by journals and newspapers. Some randomly selected

editions offer my case in point. For example, let us look at one of the earlier editions published by Jonathan Cape in 1981. Done primarily in half blue and half white, the front cover has several artistically done up clock-like faces — one half displaying the hours of the clock face and the other half with an open eye of a child. The artwork obviously represents imaginatively Saleem Sinai and the thousand other children born on the stroke of midnight on the day of Indian independence in 1947. The plain looking dark blue front cover of the Avon Paperback 1982 edition (published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf) has three entries apart from the title:

- "An Extraordinary Novel"— *The New York Review of Books*
- Winner of the Booker Prize
- Author of *The Satanic Verses*

Apart from the necessary information provided on the front cover, the publishers explain the storyline on the back cover along with two more critical comments focusing on the literary merits of the book:

#### BIRTH OF A CHILD...AND A NATION

Saleem Sinai was born at midnight on August 15, 1947 — the very instant that India attained her independence. Together in this brilliant phantasmagoric saga, nation and child go through the pangs of birth, the tantrums of childhood, the traumas of adolescence, and the anomie of adulthood. Author Salman Rushdie has woven dreams into reality, mystery into magic, and truth into fantasy.

*The New Yorker* has called Salman Rushdie "a glittering novelist — one with startling imaginative and intellectual resources, a master of perpetual storytelling. Like Garcia Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he weaves a whole people's capacity of carrying its inherited myths — and new ones that it goes on generating — into a kind of magic carpet...as a tour de force his fantasy is irresistible."

And the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called *Midnight's Children* "a dazzlingly written novel...a fascinating history lesson as well as an engrossing story."

In 1991, a Penguin Paperback edition was released. The standard cover with a

profusion of dark red on the top and along the borders has the partial image of an oriental building along with a typical minaret in black. This design certainly entices the viewer to pick up this 'exotic' novel from far-off India. The summary on the back cover once again emphasizes the significant traits of the text:

Salman Rushdie won the Booker Prize for this novel, which follows the lives of children born on August 15, 1947, the day India became an independent nation. The book is simultaneously the story of one boy's coming of age, a chronicle of the growing pains of the new nation, and a family drama, all told in a magical-realist style that manages to be humorous and hopeful despite the gravity of the events depicted.

Interestingly enough, the very same year in 1991, Penguin released another edition of the novel that had a totally different cover done in white and blue. Artistically embedding the picture of a riot on the Indian subcontinent by the famous photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, it reminds us not so much of the exotic east as the earlier edition had focused on but more on the issues that led to the partition of India and its consequences, which of course shapes Saleem Sinai's life as it is. Apart from mentioning that the novel is "WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE," it identifies Rushdie as the "author of the bestselling *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*" and also includes praises from *The Washington Post* Book World that states — "Burgeons with life, with exuberance and fantasy ...Rushdie is a writer of courage, impressive strength, and sheer stylistic brilliance." Martin Ogolter, the cover designer, thus manages to inculcate all the necessary requisites that are needed to make a reader pick up the novel.

The back cover of this edition too adds two more critical comments along with the story outline.

- 'In Salman Rushdie, India has produced a glittering novelist — one with startling imaginative and intellectual resources, a master of perpetual storytelling.'

—V.S. Pritchett, *The New Yorker*

- Born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, at the precise moment of India's independence, the infant Saleem Sinai is celebrated in the press and welcomed by the Prime Minister himself. But the coincidence of birth has consequences Saleem is

not prepared for: telepathic powers that connect him with 1,000 other "midnight's children" — all born in the initial hour of India's independence — and an uncanny sense of smell that allows him to sniff out dangers others can't perceive. Inextricably linked to his nation, Saleem's biography is a whirlwind of disasters and triumphs that mirror the course of modern India at its most impossible and glorious.

Brilliant, operatic, comic, and serious, this novel is a wild, astonishing evocation of the maturity of a vast and complicated land and its people — a brilliant incarnation of the universal human comedy, Indian style.

- "An extraordinary novel...one of the most important to come out of the English speaking world in this generation."

— Robert Towers, *The New York Review of Books*

In 1995, Everyman Library brought out a Hardcover edition with a bare brown background but was the only one to include a photograph of the author on the front cover. The same year, Vintage released a colourful edition with the front cover done in dark blue background. Two significant images appear on it — on the upper part we have the picture of Lord Krishna with his blue face, on the lower panel the ubiquitous clock face. The third interesting feature of this cover is the divisive line that gives the illusion that the actual cover is folded and divided into two parts. The back cover of this edition is interesting because it does not give us any outline of the story but just relies on the critical comments of six newspapers and journals to entice the reader:

- 'One of the most important books to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation' —*New York Review of Books*
- 'Huge, vital, engrossing...in all senses a fantastic book' — Sunday Times
- 'The literary map of India is about to be redrawn...*Midnight's Children* sounds like a continent finding its voice. An author to welcome to world company' —*New York Times*
- 'I haven't been so continuously surprised by a novel since I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*' —*The Times*
- 'A brilliant and enduring novel, the latest of India's many

contributions to English fiction, and the most remarkable of them all' — *London Review of Books*

- 'A magnificent book and Salman Rushdie is a major novelist'  
— *Observer*

The 2000 Penguin Paperback edition (Great Books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Edition) has a yellow-ochre cover with the picture of a mother with two wrapped up newborn children on both her arms done in black. The only other visible object within this dark picture is the face of a clock. The back cover includes a picture of Rushdie in the centre and below it printed in white are these lines from the first paragraph of the novel:

"I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date. I was born in Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947."

For more details about the book one has to turn inside the flap of the front cover:

After the publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1980, Salman Rushdie was awarded the Booker Prize and hailed as the voice of contemporary India. A dense interweaving of narratives, cultures and voices, *Midnight's Children* chronicles modern India through the lives of one thousand and one children born within the country's first hour of independence on August 15, 1947. The protagonist-narrator, Saleem Sinai — born at the stroke of midnight, the precise moment of India's nationhood — is celebrated in the press and welcomed by Prime Minister Nehru himself. The coincidence of his birth endows him with telepathic powers that connect him with the other one thousand midnight children, who also possess magical talents. Inextricably linked to his nation, Saleem's story is a whirlwind of disasters and triumphs that mirror the course of modern India.

Ebullient, operatic, comic and serious, this novel is a wild, astonishing evocation of the maturity of a vast and complicated land and its people. It is also a brilliant incarnation of the universal human comedy.

At present the most easily available edition of *Midnight's Children* that was

released by Vintage in 2006 to celebrate the 25th Anniversary edition of the novel and its winning the 'Booker of Bookers' prize has on its cover a serpent surrounding the two children in a nest, done in white and red. The same year Picador also released a paperback volume done in gold and green with the picture of two clock hands artistically drawn on the right hand side of the cover. Mentioning that it is the "Winner of the 1981 Booker Prize," it also adds an endorsement from the *New York Times*:

"The literary map of India is about to be redrawn...Midnight's Children sounds like a continent finding its voice...An author to welcome to world company."

The cover of the May 2008 Vintage Classic paperback edition has a deep blue background with chutney bottles of various shapes and colours on it. On the top right hand corner, instead of the author's full name, we have VINTAGE RUSHDIE — probably signifying that Salman Rushdie has reached such a stage that he is already 'vintage' and 'chutneyfied' and needs no further introduction. From the various covers of this novel it seems that serving old wine in a new bottle will also continue in the future.

### III

In her book *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, Gillian Rose introduces the idea that we need new methodologies to interpret the plethora of visual stimuli surrounding us. According to her, we can understand our culture through various visual representations and there are multiple ways of doing that.<sup>6</sup> How significantly visual images can become tools to mould the reader's attraction to a new book is very well illustrated through Jhumpa Lahiri's latest collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* published in April 2008. Though the official date of this book's publication was throughout the world 1<sup>st</sup> of April, the desire for possessing a copy of the book was fuelled with a large number of pre-publication bookings done at Amazon.com. This design was augmented further with Lahiri's reading in different corners of the US, and pre-publication excerpts available in different newspapers and magazines.<sup>7</sup> In Kolkata, the Sunday supplement of *The Telegraph* magazine published one of the short stories included in the volume, thus enticing a larger segment of non-academic readers to buy the book when it was officially released.

Subsequently when the Alfred Knopf (US edition) edition reached the bookshops, they received a beautiful green coloured book with the picture of a small semi-circular boat tossing amid turbulent waves. For American readers already familiar with the themes of Lahiri's earlier stories and her novel *The Namesake*, it is not difficult to imagine the symbolic connection — the journey of the Indian immigrants (mostly Bengalis) tossed in the turbulent waves of the Atlantic Ocean who face adventure and uncertainty at the same time. They are also aware that as the Vice President of the PEN American Center, much of what Lahiri writes is a personal account as an Indian American feeling the intense pressure to be at once "loyal to the old world and fluent in the new." The cover can also be related to Kaushik, the protagonist of the last three interconnected stories, who gets washed out by the tsunami at the end. The big and stunning portrait of the writer herself on the back cover is also a remarkably well thought out strategy of the publisher as she looks quite attractive. Summarizing individual stories, the inside-cover description of the US edition reads as follows:

From the internationally best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, a superbly crafted new work of fiction: eight stories—longer and more emotionally complex than any she has yet written—that take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand as they enter the lives of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers.

From the internationally best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, a superbly crafted new work of fiction: eight stories — longer and more emotionally complex than any she has yet written — that take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand as they enter the lives of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers.

In the stunning title story, Ruma, a young mother in a new city, is visited by her father, who carefully tends the earth of her garden, where he and his grandson form a special bond. But he's harboring a secret from his daughter, a love affair he's keeping all to himself. In "A Choice of Accommodations," a husband's attempt to turn an old friend's wedding into a romantic getaway weekend with his wife takes a dark, revealing turn as the party lasts deep into the night. In "Only Goodness," a sister eager to give her younger brother the perfect childhood she never had is overwhelmed by guilt, anguish, and anger when his alcoholism

threatens her family. And in "Hema and Kaushik," a trio of linked stories—a luminous, intensely compelling elegy of life, death, love, and fate—we follow the lives of a girl and boy who, one winter, share a house in Massachusetts. They travel from innocence to experience on separate, sometimes painful paths, until destiny brings them together again years later in Rome.

*Unaccustomed Earth* is rich with Jhumpa Lahiri's signature gifts: exquisite prose, emotional wisdom, and subtle renderings of the most intricate workings of the heart and mind. It is a masterful, dazzling work of a writer at the peak of her powers.

As expected, the Dust Jacket storyline of the Indian Edition (Random House India) is radically different. Unlike the US edition, there are no short summaries of individual stories, nor does it explain their geographic locations. Human relationships and the immigrant experience are two things emphasized here:

Everyone has their secrets. In her stunning new collection of stories, Jhumpa Lahiri gently lifts the veil to reveal how even the most ordinary lives have their dramas and tragedies and then, as gently, lets it fall back down again.

A middle aged man discovers that the death of his wife opens up his world in unexpected ways — his daughter worries that she will now have to look after him but finds that the tables have, in fact, turned; a housewife falls in love with a younger family friend — her child ascertains her secrets many years on; a son is revulsed by his father's second marriage to a younger woman who has none of the sophistication and elegance of his mother; a sister tries to save a brother from alcoholism and finds herself rejecting him like everyone else. A young man and woman whose lives cross over the years, finally and fatedly fall in love.

*Unaccustomed Earth* returns to the terrain — the heart of family life and the immigrant experience — that Jhumpa Lahiri has made utterly hers, but her themes this time around, have darkened and deepened. Poised, nuanced, deeply moving, here is a superb collection — the finest she has written yet.

What really draws our attention is the outer cover of the Indian edition. Done completely in black and white, it expresses a typical Indian perspective vis-à-vis its emphasis on nostalgia, loneliness and memory. The empty chair enlarged at

the centre with a reading lamp on one side and the old model rotary dial telephone beside it symbolizes the broken nest syndrome all too well. This telephone with its ubiquitous 1960s look plays a significant role in several of the stories anthologized in this volume — the only mode of connectivity in the pre-internet, pre-mobile phone era. Perhaps this is also the reason why its picture is reiterated in the back cover as well along with the endorsement from *The New York Times* that Lahiri is "A writer of uncommon elegance and poise." Incidentally, the author's picture, remarkably reduced in size now, adorns the inside flap of the dust-jacket at the back. Since we know her quite well, it seems she does not need a great introduction. After all, we have appropriated her as our country's daughter a long time ago.

#### IV

Such studies of different covers might go on endlessly. However two interesting reasons for cover design changes need to be mentioned. First, when a particular novel wins a prize, say a Booker or a Pulitzer, an additional logo mentioning the fact is usually added on to the cover without any major changes of the picture or design. This definitely raises the salability of the book. Again, interesting additions or changes to the cover occur when a film adaptation is made from a particular novel and the picture of the film star usually performing the lead role then contributes his or her share to the marketability of the book. The image of a crouching Amir Khan in grayish sepia tone, waiting with his eyes closed for the train full of refugees from Amritsar to arrive in the post-partition scenario of Lahore that adorns the cover of the Penguin India edition of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* or Kal Penn as Gogol Ganguly walking on the streets of New York that adorns the very colourful red and yellow cover of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* after the 2006 film adaption by Mira Nair are such cases in point. The transformation from the two earlier covers of *The Namesake* is so stark and powerful that one cannot but overemphasize the visual impact the new cover creates.<sup>8</sup> Thus, taking a cue from Roland Barthes we can say that the linguistic message — contained in the titles, the slogans and captions — juxtaposed with the advertising image, enhances the attraction of the book as a consumer product. Barthes distinguished the image from language and defined the relationship between the two.<sup>9</sup> His theory, granting responsibility to the image maker and enhancing their ability to communicate, gains greater acceptability in this analysis.

I now want to focus on another interesting phenomenon that accompanied the February 2008 release of two different editions of Manil Suri's novel *The Age of Shiva*. In both the US edition published by Norton and the UK edition by Bloomsbury there is the picture of a sari-clad Indian woman along with her son facing backwards but the similarity ends there. The cover of the Norton edition is done in black and white, almost verging on sepia. The picture of a woman with a child in her arms covers 80% of the space. The way she wears her sari, does her hair, clutches her child around her waist, makes her a stereotypical northern Indian woman usually seen in semi-urban settings. She is facing the sea. In the Bloomsbury edition (the same one distributed and sold in India), a pink/mauve tinge covers the entire background. Here the woman is also facing the sea but the child is no longer in her arms. He has grown up and is walking with his mother holding his hands. The mother is wearing a bright orange sari that covers her head like a veil. On the left hand side of the cover is the bark of a tall coconut tree whose leaves drop artistically from the top. Interestingly, the woman is reduced considerably in size and appears in the distance almost as if in a long shot. We all know that the *woman in sari* (conjuring up to represent the image of the typical *Bharatiya nari*) has become a sort of trademark, where we can once more identify the old nationalist trope of woman as the embodiment of motherhood and the motherland. In his analysis on "Consuming India" Graham Huggan has already drawn our attention to the fact that 'Indo-Chic' and Arundhati Roy's contribution to it, are not simply to be seen as naïve western constructs; they are products of the globalization of Western capitalist consumer culture, in which 'India' functions not just as a polyvalent cultural sign but as a highly mobile capital good"(2001: 67). In the case of Suri's novel, the publishers on both sides of the Atlantic take recourse to Orientalist marketing tactics that exoticize 'ethnic' literatures in the international markets in order to raise their economic value while devaluating their political ones. The emphasis is now more on mass-market consumption than on aesthetic perception.

To conclude, we can say that whether we analyze the strategies of cover designing through the serious and academically inclined Barthesian formula, or reinterpret Walter Benjamin's use of the word 'aura' that he used to refer to the sense of awe and reverence one presumably experienced in the presence of unique works of art and apply it to commercial book production and show how in the present context his fear is baseless; or agree with Graham Huggan that "[e]xotist spectacle, commodity fetishism and the aesthetics of decontextualization are all at work, in different combinations and to varying degrees, in the production,

transmission and consumption of postcolonial literary/cultural texts"(20); or simply try to understand it from a layman's point of view; one thing remains clear: in today's globalized world, publishers are offering uniformity on the one hand and discreetly offering glocalization on the other. For this blending of the global and the local — whether it is a book or a multinational brand of jeans, shampoo, or soap — the first priority remains marketability and not intellectual stimulation.

## Notes

- 1 Here I include critics like Walter Benjamin whose 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has become a standard reference for any attempts to analyze and understand the interrelation of political, technological and artistic development under capitalism; Anthony Appiah who talk of postcoloniality to be best understood as a condition of a "comprador intelligentsia"; of a relatively small, Western-style, Western trained group of writers and thinkers who "mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery"; Graham Huggan for his part believes that the postcolonial writers are adept at manipulating the commercial codes of the international open market. They recognize that the value of their writing as an international commodity depends, to a large extent, on the exotic appeal it holds to an unfamiliar metropolitan audience. See "The Postcolonial Exotic" *Transition* :24
- 2 Since I provide all bibliographic information about the different editions of the books under discussion in my article, I have not repeated them in the "Works Cited" section.
- 3 For a detailed analysis of how the story of the novel's dissemination is a different one from its literary merits see Padmini Mongia's article "The Making and Marketing of Arundhati Roy." Here she also draws our attention to the fact that the book was released at the time India was also celebrating her fiftieth year of independence and a lot of media attention was geared at what is known as a new 'Indo-chic'. Mongia also goes on to contextualize Roy's discovery story in terms of the global economic climate of the mid-to late 1990s, during which India was increasingly portrayed, in the west, as a new investment opportunity and a place of untapped financial promise. This point of view is also supported by the critic Mike

Featherstone in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* where he states that consumer culture created a new space for the development of postmodernism, particularly in Asia, which experienced a consumer boom in the 1990s (2007: xxiv).

4 Mongia draws three conclusions from the consideration of the novel's cover. First she feels that the picture of lotus flowers amongst dark gloomy leaves on the book jacket is a predictable one, as it is amongst the commonest images used to evoke the 'tropical' and the 'exotic.' The second refers to the qualitative difference of the three different photographs of Roy used in the three different editions. Thirdly, the cover replays the story of the book's 'discovery' — where the exquisite found object is itself, in part, the story of how the book came into being, a story which mirrors how the author emerged on the world literary scene.

5 Several other critics also stress to the new phenomenon of the marketing of *The God of Small Things*. For example, Sadia Toor in her article, "Indo-Chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalization India" states:

Marketing for the book [GOST] has been dominated by glossy photographs of a very photogenic Roy, wispy tendrils of hair framing eyes that stare dreamily out. One publicity poster for the book has a four-foot image of Roy's face, beneath which is the caption 'Set to be the publishing sensation of the year', leaving much ambiguity as to whether the reference is Roy or her book, which is not mentioned even by name. The strategy is clearly one which plays into the Indian beauty myth. (2000:13)

6 Rose specifies different approaches for analyzing visual materials, namely semiology, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis and content analysis.

7 That several of the eight stories published in this volume had already appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and other journals was something that the average reader was not aware of.

8 The first US edition has a cover with three different segments. The top panel is big with a bright blue background with the name of the author Jhumpa Lahiri written in large fonts with the words 'WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE' added below it to add weight. The title of the book is then artistically printed in white letters in the central panel which has a deep crimson background. The third and the lowest panel is the most artistic. On

the left is an image of the American flag and on a blackboard on the right hand side the picture of a typical American mailbox is sketched ( the significance of which in the novel is immense). By the time we come to the second edition, the cover has become more sober — the bright colours giving way to an off-white background with a simple branch of a tree with two multicoloured leaves adorning it. What it most boldly announces at the top is that it is 'THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER.'

- 9 After articulating the three levels of signification, Barthes pursues another question: "What are the functions of the linguistic image with regard to the (twofold) iconic message?" (38) He then comes up with two such functions: anchorage and relay. With anchorage, "the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image... remote-control[ing] him towards a meaning chosen in advance" (39-40, italics in text). In a system of relay, "text...and image stand in a complementary relationship...(41)"

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# Reaching for the 'Other' across the Wide Sargasso Sea

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the representative characteristics of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in an attempt to explore the problems of its representation of the marginal class, its exploitation of this class, and hence its misrepresentation. The purpose of this essay is to reclaim an alternative understanding of the marginal class or the cultural "other" from the heavy-handed clutch of Orientalism. In other words, it will engage itself in reclaiming an understanding of these less powerful groups of people, in order to reconstruct their identity constructed by Orientalism. For this purpose, it will use Franz Boas' anthropological analytical tools to understand the "other" from their local contexts rather than from outside.

The question of the representation of the marginal class is a much-debated issue in postcolonial criticism. This debate surrounding representation stems from its politics. Representation is often politically motivated and stereotypical and can unfairly reduce its subjects. Edward Said in *Orientalism*, labeling such representation as "Orientalism," argues that this aspect of literary and other representations creates and constructs the identity of their subjects, the marginal classes of people, which not only erroneously misrepresents, but also contains them permanently. Among other issues, what makes all marginal classes relevant to Said's theory of Orientalism is first, their disadvantaged position in the power dynamic; second, their experience of domination, oppression and subjugation; and third, their apparent voicelessness or inability to speak.

Said's theory of "Orientalism," which is premised upon the binaries of West/East or colonizer/colonized, puts particular emphasis on power relations. In fact, this binary is structured upon power relations: the powerful position of the colonizer, and the powerless position of the colonized (880). Expanding on this structure of colonizer/colonized, Said observes in "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors":

[F]ar from being a category that signified supplication and self-pity, "the colonized" has since expanded considerably to include women, subjugated and oppressed classes, national minorities, and even marginalized or incorporated academic subspecialties . . . the status of colonized people has been fixed in zones of dependency and peripherality, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less-developed . . . ruled by a superior, developed, or metropolitan colonizer who was theoretically posited as a categorically antithetical overlord. In other words, the world was still divided into betters and lessers, and if the category of lesser beings had widened to include a lot of new people as well as a new era, then so much the worse for them. Thus to be one of the colonized is potentially to be a great many different, but inferior, things, in many different places, at many different times. (207)

In this neocolonial setting, the all-encompassing trait of the signifier "colonized" incorporates less powerful groups of people into its realm of marginality.

The purpose of this essay is to reclaim an alternative understanding of the marginal class or the cultural "other" from the heavy-handed clutch of Orientalism through a reading of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In other words, it will attempt to reclaim a less powerful group of people from misrepresentation in order to reconstruct their identities. For this purpose, it will also use Franz Boas' anthropological analytical tools to understand the "other" in their local context. Although at first glance, Boas and Said might seem antithetical, the two thinkers will be brought together for my purpose.

Since Boas' methodology is centered on a local context, rather than outside, the result characteristically challenges Orientalism, which is "premiered upon exteriority" (875). Said's formulation is indicative: "all of Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient: that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient" (876). What makes Boas crucial for this project of reclamation is his recognition of the importance of "critical self-reflection" in the process of interpreting the "other." Boas realizes that his method is not devoid of complexity, and recognizes that in the process of attaining an understanding relative

to a particular context, there is a possibility that the observer's own standard of judgment could involve him in critical judgment that he has learned to appreciate through socialization and cultural orientation. Boas further cautions that no culture should be thought of as superior or of absolute value, and that the choice of any standard of judgments is arbitrary, being based upon the observer's own socialization and cultural orientation. While such critical self-reflectiveness better equips us to approach the "other," it also informs us about related complexities.

For this project, I am particularly interested in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The distinctive Caribbean cultural contexts of this text will not only be useful in exploring the cultural codes represented by the author, it will also test the applicability of Boas' method outside the domain of anthropology. Because of Rhys' representation of the distinctive cultural codes manifested by natives, they inescapably fall prey to Orientalism's "othering." This is because anything that is an aberration of the normative standard of Western civilization is an Oriental "other." So the choice of this text is determined by the distinctive cultural codes of a marginal class of people and the way their distinctiveness ties them to the politics of Orientalism.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a prequel based on the character of Rochester's Creole Jamaican wife, Bertha, in Charlotte Bronte's classic novel *Jane Eyre*. It is widely known that in her fascinating text, Rhys makes an attempt to give voice to this almost mute female character of Bronte's novel. However, critics, like Carl Plasa, have alleged that, in the process of giving voice to Rochester's enigmatic wife in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys, in return, silences the native black characters (84). But it is to be doubted if Rhys intentionally or driven by political motive has undermined the natives' voice. Rather, it could be that it was the problem and complexity of understanding and representing the cultural "other" that made Rhys fail to give voice to the black characters. Antoinette, the protagonist, represents Rhys' dream and struggle to unite with the culture "other": "I dreamed that I was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight" (26). But because of cultural differences and the history and experiences of slavery, this dream is a dream almost impossible to fulfill. It could be said that Antoinette also resembles the vexed position of Franz Boas' anthropological field worker subjected by her own ideological disposition and cultural contexts. Although she aspires to attain an understanding of the "other," because of her critical position, that understanding is difficult to attain:

The field worker must try to set aside all a priori assumptions, try to adapt herself as much as possible to the way of thinking and feeling of

the people she was studying, try to divest herself of the opinions and feelings determined by her own culture. This could never be accomplished fully, as one cannot speak from any position other than one's own. However, that position is revisable, so long as one attends carefully to the lives and speech of the other and opens a space in which the other can tell her own story in her own way. (Hutchinson, 72).

Nonetheless, one of the major problems in this text is that there is very little space in which the "other" can speak. Or as Boas has it there is little space for her to "tell her own story in her own way." Rather than reading this as acknowledging the inevitable silencing of black voices it should be read as Rhys' struggle to reclaim the "other" because of her socio-cultural and political relationship with the slaves. In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflects Rhys' partial knowledge and understanding of blacks and the Creole that plays a part in making the novel a neo-colonial text. No wonder that this text, in its representation of the character of Antoinette, resonates with the complexity and the consequent frustration that are emanated from the inability to be associated with the "other."

By positing Antoinette in juxtaposition to Rochester in their treatment of the cultural "other," this text underscores the differences between a colonialist outsider and an outsider who resides among cultural "others," embodying a desire to assimilate, and share certain similar cultural codes, yet struggling to reach the "other." Criticizing the effect of slavery, or any other form of colonization, *Wide Sargasso Sea* points out the difficulties of reconciliation, in the post-emancipation period. Or to put it differently, colonization or any history of domination and oppression is a Wide Sargasso Sea which is difficult to bridge.

Boas theorizes that it is only through shared and similar experience that one can attain a sense of the "other" (Hutchinson). Through the character of Antoinette, one can argue, Rhys attempts to fulfill her desire to reach for the "other." In this difficult task, the portrait of Antoinette reminds us of Boas' methodology, and at the same time represents the troubled position of an outsider subjected by a colonial disposition.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is equipped with multiple narrative voices. The narratives shift between Antoinette, the Creole white female protagonist, and Rochester, her European white counterpart. However, the black characters suffer from limited access to the instrument of narration, and thereby, are deprived of the chance to represent themselves or their "others." They are spoken of, or represented from the point of view of Antoinette and Rochester.

This text is full of racial tension. There are three racial groups: the white European Rochester, the Creole Antoinette and the black ex-slaves. Much of the tension, alienation and consequent problem of stereotypical representation emanate from their lack of knowledge or understanding of each other. Rochester comments about his wife Antoinette, "she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (93). He also comments later: "I don't understand you. I know nothing about you, and I cannot speak for you" (171). Yet Rochester recklessly continues to speak for the "others."

That the unknown "other" is also an object of fear and suspicion to the outside observer Rochester is suggested in Antoinette's remark: "[Coulibiri] is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it because it is something else" (130). This fear is evident in Rochester's own narration:

it seemed to me that everything round me was hostile. The telescope drew away and said don't touch me. The trees were threatening and the shadows of the trees moving slowly over the floor menaced me. I had felt it ever since I saw this place. There was nothing I knew, nothing to comfort me (149).

The black obeah woman, Christophine, is particularly an object of fear to both Antoinette and Rochester. At the outset of the text, in many respects, Antoinette resembles Rochester's colonialist disposition in her treatment toward the "other," because at this state, she is unable to completely discard her colonial ideological subjectivity. Her celebration of the image of "The Miller's Daughter" is one of many evidences of this claim. In this sense, the narrators of *Wide Sargasso Sea* represent the problem of understanding and representing the cultural "other," that Boas himself acknowledges as a problematic process: "[setting aside all a priori assumptions, which is the precondition for understanding the cultural "other"] can never be accomplished fully, as one cannot speak from any position other than one's own" (Hutchinson, 71-2). They embody Boas' awareness of the vexed position of any outsider who seeks to represent the cultural "other."

Although Antoinette treats Christophine as her surrogate mother and expresses a desire to be like her, she is unable to overcome the fear of the unknown. This is grotesquely exposed in this narration when Antoinette objectifies her as a practicing obeah:

Yet one day when I was waiting [at Christophine's room] I was suddenly very much afraid. The door was open to the sunlight, someone was

whistling near the stables, but I was afraid. I was certain that hidden in the room . . . there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly . . . No one had ever spoken to me about obeah—but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. Then Christophine came in smiling and was pleased to see me. Nothing alarming ever happened and I forgot, or told myself I had forgotten (31).

Rochester, for his part, describes Christophine as an "evil old woman." She is often compared to a "shadow" (73) by him, suggesting his incomprehension of her, and at the same time, the fear associated with such a lack of understanding. In order to overcome their fear, the narrators of *Wide Sargasso Sea* attribute the unfamiliar "others" with stereotypical renderings that reflect and reinforce the colonial agenda.

Both Antoinette and Rochester try to overcome their fear by racializing each other's group using familiar and stereotypical languages. While the use of familiar and stereotypical language is employed to attain a cognitive sense of the "other," ironically it perpetuates the gap between the speaker and the subject. These languages are embedded with value judgments that serve the purpose of the speaker, while misrepresenting and containing its subjects. In his attempt to understand the "unfamiliar" Antoinette, Rochester addresses her using the familiar name, "Bertha;" she is also his "mad girl on the attic" from *Jane Eyre's* enigmatic character (166). While this process of naming reflects Rochester's attempt to render the unknown with lingo familiar from popular western novels, such a process is also used to transport her from an unfamiliar "other" to a familiar territory. This is only the beginning of his containment process, which ends in the attic of Thornfield Hall in England, where he literally imprisons her later in the novel.

Antoinette, similarly, relies on stereotyped discourse of popular English novels to attain an understanding of Rochester and his English heritage. The following narration is relevant in this context:

[Antoinette] often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made the difference. Her mind was already made up. In some romantic novels, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and ideas were fixed. About England and about Europe. I could not change them and probably nothing would. Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. It would be only a mistake, a misfortune, a wrong path taken, her fixed ideas would never change. (94).

Not only does this evidence reveal the limitations of preconceived knowledge, it also shows the effect of stereotypical renderings in popular discourses. Because of his experience in Coulibiri, Rochester becomes disconcerted and bewildered when he observes the reality in a foreign place that does not conform to his preconceived ideas about that place. However, the fact is that the permanence of ideology constructed over the years through popular discourse determines how one perceives an unknown "reality." In such case, "reality" is no longer "Real" or even reflectively so; it is predetermined.

This notion is more notoriously evident in relation to the black characters, as the most stereotypical representation is imparted in relation to them. To Rochester, the servant Hilda who laughs all the time, is "stupid," Baptiste is "a half savage boy," and Christophine's language is "horrible." Such rendering is perniciously oppressive to the natives' identity, since they do not have the weapon of resistance, and the narrative voice with which to counterattack or even defend. The only audible voices available are Daniel's ambiguous and controversial letter, and Christophine's verbal confrontation with Rochester. While Daniel's letter remains an object of suspicion to the reader, Christophine's fiery dialogue has been overpowered and abruptly curtailed by the mechanics of narration by the colonial narrator, Rochester: "[S]he walked away without looking back" (161). As Carine Mardorossian's observes in "Shutting up the Subaltern":

That Rochester echoes Christophine's words during their talk does not signify that he is absorbing them or being invaded by her culture. Considering his expeditious dismissal of her, he rather seems to act as an obstructing surface from which Christophine's words bounce back unheeded. In fact, it is precisely when Christophine's free will and resiliency explode in Rochester's face that her powers are the most limited: he "no longer felt dazed, tired, half hypnotized, but alert and wary, ready to defend [him]self" (158) and appeals to the "Letter of Law" to subdue the black nurse he can at last identify as an opponent. (1079)

Benita Parry notes about the silencing of Christophine that: "when the novel transfers to England, Christophine must leave the narrative, for there her craft is outlawed, which is why after making her statement, she walks away, without looking back" (250). The cultural difference between Rochester and Christophine is underscored here, as he "act[s] as an obstructing surface from which Christophine's words bounce back unheeded" (Mardorossian 1079). Driven by the anxiety associated with the lack of comprehension and familiarity, Rochester's only escape is to subdue her using familiar language.

These readings recall Edward Said's discussion in *Orientalism* about the permanence of the constructed identity, through the Orientalist discourse of containment and the violence related to it. It is at this juncture that Franz Boas' anthropological analytical tool becomes necessary to reclaim an alternative understanding of the cultural "other." According to Boas, a culture should be understood on its own terms, as having developed within particular circumstances, with its own specific histories and standards of judgments (Hutchinson 66). The "particular circumstances" and "specific histories" that Boas emphasizes, if considered in the context of this text, refer to the experience of slavery of natives. The division, alienation, and lack of understanding among them emanate from this experience. In other words, the reason natives' characteristics and behaviours are foreign and alien to others — specially to Rochester and Antoinette — is because they are "different," for each of them has his or her own experience of slavery and its history. The natives' 'anomalous' characteristics and behaviours are foreign and unfamiliar to the narrators, because they are "different" people with specific experiences.

It seems reasonable at this point to recount some of the distinctive behaviours and characteristics of the black characters, in an attempt to unveil the cultural codes that emanate such distinctness. The porter Emile, who is a native of the island, doesn't know how old he is. This is strange to the outsider, Rochester, and the porter Young Bull. Based on this characteristic, outsider Young Bull tries to show that the people of Massacre are not civilized. He says, "[Emile] don't know how old he is, he don't think about it. I tell you sir these people are not civilized" (68). Noticeably, "civilization" is a universal category based on which these people are being judged, measured and labeled. If any individual or group does not meet the categories and cultural codes of "civilization," automatically a negative connotation is inscribed. Such disposition is implied specifically perniciously in relation to the black characters. This is exemplified when after colliding with Rochester, the servant Bertrand doesn't say "a word of apology" (72). Hilda is characterized as rude and stupid, because she giggles very loudly all the time (90). Amelie, who fights back against Antoinette's physical assault, is frightened and pacified by Christophine's threat of bellyache from which it is inferred that she is superstitious. Christophine doesn't believe in husbands. She gives birth to three children, "each one from a different father" (110). She believes that it is "bad to sleep in the moonlight when the moon is full" (83). Furthermore, these people are not regulated by common law. From such representation, it is assumed that they are unruly, promiscuous and superstitious.

But these distinctive behaviours and characteristics are specific to these people, their history, experience and cultural codes. Hence, these people need to be understood on their own terms, rather than seen from universal categories. If seen through such a Boasian lens, Hilda's giggle can be interpreted differently. As Antoinette argues in her conversation with Rochester:

Sometimes she'd smile a sweet childish smile, sometimes she'd giggle very loudly and rudely, bang the tray down and run away.

'Stupid little girl,' I'd say.

'No, no. She is shy. The girls here are very shy.' (90)

Similarly, Christophine's threat of bellyache, Amelie's belief in 'supernatural power' and their apparent 'superstitious' behaviours can be read as processes of maintaining order and discipline on their own terms. The example of Christophine's threat of bellyache, in response to Amelie's 'seductive' smile towards Rochester, can serve as evidence of restoring order on their own terms:

Amelie looked at me sideways and smiled.

Christophine said in a soft voice, "Amelie. Smile like that once more, just once more, and I mash your face like I mash plantain. You hear me? Answer me, girl.'

'Yes, Christophine,' Amelie said. She looked frightened.

'And too besides I give you bellyache like you never see bellyache.

'Perhaps you lie a long time with the bellyache I give you. Perhaps you don't get up again with the bellyache I give you. So keep yourself quiet and decent. You hear me?'

'Yes, Christophine,' Amelie said and crept out of the room. (102)

Boas' formulation, stated above, supports the claim that in modern society "actions opposed to the ethical code are checked by society, which holds every single person responsible for his actions." But in many distant societies "there is no such power. The behavior of an individual may be censured, but there is no strict accountability, although the fear of supernatural punishment may serve as substitute" (Boas-227). This is what might be taking place when Christophine's "supernatural" power performs the function of authority to maintain order in the community. If the history and experience of slavery are considered, then Amelie's sexually 'immoral' act can also be read differently than what it appears to be ostensibly, for it is well-known how female slaves were often used as sexual objects by their white masters. In many cases, young female slaves would perform the role of sexual objects. Similarly, the obeah woman Christophine can be understood from the point of view enunciated by Kamau Brathwaite: "obeah was

associated in the [white] Jamaican/European mind with superstition, witchcraft, and poison . . . [whereas] in African/Caribbean folk practice, where religion had not been externalized and institutionalized as in Europe, the obeah-man [sic] was doctor, philosopher, and priest" (qtd. in Mardorossian 1079).

Even though Antoinette lives surrounded by native black characters, she does not have a complete understanding of these people. In fact, she only has partial understanding about the community. The following narration supports this claim:

The girls from the bayside who sometimes helped with the washing and cleaning were terrified of [Christophine]. That, I discovered, was why they came at all — for she never paid them. Yet they brought presents of fruit and vegetables and after dark I often heard low voices from the kitchen. (21)

Just because Christophine does not pay the girls, Antoinette, our narrator, assumes that they are terrified of her. She is only partially correct in believing that the girls are terrified, but this is not everything. The act of bringing flowers and vegetables can also refer to their sacrifices and offerings to the supernaturally powerful Christophine. This assumption is validated later in the text through the chapter "Obeah" in Rochester's book, *The Glittering Coronet of Isles* (107). Christophine is portrayed as if she is an outcast who does not show any solidarity with the rest of the black community. But her aloofness from the black community can also indicate the community's reverence toward a priest-figure.

Although Antoinette has partial understanding or half-knowledge of the black characters, she definitely has better knowledge or understanding of them than Rochester. What separates Antoinette from Rochester in relation to the black community is her willingness to be part of it. In fact, *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates Antoinette's struggle to attain a complete understanding of the "other." She aspires to be part of them, as is exemplified through her strong bond with Christophine, and as is further illustrated by her strong urge to become friends with Tia. She laments to Rochester that:

It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you and I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (102)

Because of the history and experience of slavery, Antoinette is either denied access to the black community or she is not trusted. Again, slavery is the issue that functions as an obstacle to assimilation. But ironically, because of the history of slavery, she also becomes victimized by the experience of racial "othering" from the ex-slaves' community. This experience enables her to relate to the black community more intimately than Rochester. This notion conforms to the Boasian emphasis on "similar and shared experience." On the other hand, Rochester as a white European figure who has never experienced oppression or subjugation represents the ideology of the colonizer, arrogantly engaged in the mission to defeat and contain the unfamiliar "other."

The differences between Rochester and Antoinette are further illustrated in the following scene, where his ignorance, coupled with his tendency to superimpose his ideology, is exposed grotesquely:

Her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible and she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor.

'When they don't hold their dress up it's for respect,' said Antoinette. 'Or for feast days or going to Mass.'

'And is this a feast day?'

'She wanted it to be a feast day.'

'Whatever the reason it is not a clean habit.'

'It is you who don't understand at all. They don't care about getting a dress dirty because it shows it isn't the only dress they have. Don't you like Christophine?'

'She is a very worthy person no doubt. I can't say I like her language.'

'It doesn't mean anything,' said Antoinette.

'And she looks so lazy. She dawdles about.'

'Again you are mistaken. She seems slow, but every move she makes is right so it's quick in the end.' (85-6)

Antoinette's embodiment of Boas' approach is evident in this conversation where she demonstrates his point of view: "The field worker must try to set aside all a priori assumptions, try to adapt herself as much as possible to the way of thinking and feeling of the people she was studying" (Hutchinson, 72). In the process, she tries to compensate for Rochester's misunderstanding by performing as a mediator between him and the black characters.

A number of "experiences" gradually enables Antoinette to merge with the black characters. Her childhood experience of racial "othering" from the ex-slave community is one such experience. Rochester's stealing her name is also reminiscent of the workings of slave owning. As Sandra Drake observes; "The slaves lost their African names, and often took the surname of their owners . . . Rochester goes a step farther, and seeks to remove Antoinette's given name too (198). Her marriage with Rochester is an instance of colonization under a new disguise, for it is evident that he marries her for property. With the aid of the institution of marriage, he tries to contain, subdue, and finally transport and translate her into the *Mad Woman in the Attic*<sup>1</sup>. It is only after she experiences similar oppressions by Rochester that Antoinette acquires a better understanding of the "other."

Antoinette reacts to such domination exactly the way she has learned to from the black characters: she sets fire to the house. The term "house" is a trope for containment and capturing. The colonized — both the black characters at Coulibiri and later, Antoinette in England — respond to such domination by burning the house down. In other words, Antoinette is finally capable of grasping the form of subversion the ex-slaves had taught her when they burnt the "house" of Coulibiri. The experience of containment and subjugation at firsthand has given her a moment of enlightenment. It is only then that it is possible for her to leap toward the image of her native childhood friend Tia for complete unity.

Antoinette's physical death should not be read as her defeat or failure; rather, it is a triumph for her to be able to reach across the *wide Sargasso Sea*. Sargasso Sea symbolically refers to the cultural differences, and related distances between natives and our male and female protagonists. Drake's telling articulation regarding overcoming these differences only reinforces the claim: "the novel reads as victory over death itself by changing the cultural belief system from a European to an Afro-Caribbean one" (205). In this spiritual and intellectual journey Antoinette resonates with echoes of Jean Rhys' unfulfilled dream to reach for the "other": "I was curious about black people. They stimulated me and I felt akin to them. It added to my sadness that I couldn't help but realize they didn't really like or trust white people — white cockroaches they called us" (qtd. in Plasa 82). As Judie Newman has also noted, this is a "dream to take flight into the heaven of a different culture" (25). In this intellectual and spiritual journey of enlightenment Franz Boas shows Antoinette ways to reach home. In other words, Antoinette deploys the Boasian method to attain an understanding of the "other."

Antoinette's life-long struggle, and then finally her figurative leap toward the image of the "other," indicates that understanding and consequent alliance is an arduous process, which requires "similar and shared experience." Unless and until the outside observer suffers similar experience and life-style, this understanding can only be attained in an allegorical dream.

Antoinette embodies the vexed position of any outsider who seeks to represent the cultural "other". Rochester, on the other hand, similar to Said's Orientalist outside observer, arrogantly represents the cultural "other," without any substantial understanding. He translates them into his own language, superimposing his own ideological map upon their lives. In the process of understanding, interpreting and representing the unfamiliar "other," he translates their cultural codes into his own familiar language; language that is meaningful to and for his "civilized" group. Said's construction in *Orientalism* is suggestive:

All of Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient: that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible "there" in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient. (876)

According to *Orientalism*, the understanding of the cultural "other" is based upon the cultural codes of the Orientalist observer, rather than the Orient. In such a case, reality is constructed through the rhetoric of representation from "outside." But for Boas, culture should be understood from *within*, a perspective that is unlike that of Said's Orientalist outside observer.

In conclusion, it seems important here to emphasize on Boas' connections with Said's postcolonial debate on representation. Boas is relevant here in a number of ways. His emphasis on "history" clearly directs us to the history of colonialism, which has been underscored in this paper through the division between Antoinette and the native black characters and how it has been difficult for her to bridge the gap that emanates from such a historical backdrop.

Boas' relation with postcolonial debate on the problem of representation is marked by his emphasis on history, problems of classification, and his idea of an inauthentic and incoherent cultural "self." A brief discussion of these premises will explain the connection between Boas' and Said's thoughts.

Although the history of colonialism is a significant cause for the distinctive characteristics of the natives, it is in no way limited to colonialism. History goes back to phenomena preceding colonialism. And this history is plural, consisting of distinctive, dissimilar factors. It would be a mistake, if one attempts to make holistic sense of the cultural "other" based solely on their history. George Stocking summarizes Boas' stance on history in *The Shaping of American Anthropology 1883-1911* thus:

Since the "physiological and psychological state of an organism at a certain moment is a function of its whole history," appearances were frequently deceptive: "The outward appearance of two phenomena may be identical, yet their immanent qualities may be altogether different." Indeed, "the historical intricacy of the acting causes" was so complex in the realm of ethnology that "the development of similar ethnological phenomena from unlike causes" was "far more probable" than its alternative.

Historical processes, furthermore, did not move in lockstep: different aspects of human life were affected in different ways by different historical and developmental processes. (4)

History in the Boasian sense is not only plural, but also constituted by borrowed elements, elements that have affected human life during migration. One remark from Stocking drives the point home: "like effects do not necessarily have like causes" (2).

While a Boasian view explains why it is difficult for an outsider like Rhys to understand the cultural "other," it also contributes to the debate on "representation." It challenges Orientalists' constructed identity of containment and permanence, and warns us about the shifting nature of any cultural identity. Boas gives us a method of interpretation, but he also points out the complexity associated with that methodology. Having said all this, it can be argued that whatever is not represented in *Wide Sargasso Sea* should be considered as a ramification of the complexities of understanding the "other," which emanates from complex historical processes. If *Wide Sargasso Sea* is unable to give voice to the black characters, this is because it is unable to reclaim the "other" from its realm of complexities. Although a Boasian approach prepares us to understand the "other" in order to represent them more effectively than the Orientalist outsider Rochester, because of the nature of historical complexities — histories of colonialism, slavery, migration and so on — it will always be difficult to reclaim anything pure or authentic.

## Notes

- 1 *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a prequel to Bronte's famous novel *Jane Eyre*. The *Mad Woman in the Attic* refers to *Jane Eyre's* enigmatic character Bertha who was locked up in the attic in England by Mr. Rochester. It is also the title of the widely acclaimed feminist work *Mad Woman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar.

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# Cultural Identity and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to read Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* in the light of Stuart Hall's essay on "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". Hall begins his essay saying that identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think it to be and this paper aims to show how the discovery of one's identity is indeed an intricate process, one that is always necessarily complex. When an individual straddles the boundaries of two cultures, as does Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of *The Namesake*, the task becomes even more complex and problematic, being grounded in issues of memory, tradition, and family expectations. Throughout the novel, we see that Gogol remains captive to his conflicted identity — is he Indian or American?— although there is the merest hint at the novel's end that he may choose one identity over the other. His trajectory suggests that, for the second generation Indian–American at least, refusing to choose one identity over the other, which might mean complete renunciation of either Indian–ness or American–ness, troubles one's negotiation of identity. Whereas Gogol's mother, Ashima, as a first generation Indian–American, is able to negotiate a hyphenated subjectivity because she has an original identity as a starting point, Gogol is 'always–already' in crisis due to his birth on 'foreign' soil. This paper throws light on how Lahiri uses Gogol's name to show the duality of immigrant experience and thus explain what Hall meant by diaspora experience when he said that, "diaspora experience is defined by ... the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity."

This paper is an attempt to read Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* in the light of Stuart Hall's essay on "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Hall begins his essay saying that identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think it to be. Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should think of it as a

product, which is never complete, and is always in process, always constituted within, not outside, representation. Hall defines "cultural identity" to be a matter of "becoming" as well as "being" (Hall, qtd in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 1993: 394). Cultural identity belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending time, place, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation (Hall, qtd in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 1993: 394). The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. Jhumpa Lahiri says, "for immigrants... the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for the children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants — those with strong ties to their country of origin — is that they feel neither one thing nor the other" (Lahiri, qtd in "Jhumpa Lahiri on her debut novel. An interview with the author"). This paper aims to show how the discovery of one's identity is an intricate process, one that is always necessarily complex. When an individual straddles two cultures, as does Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of *The Namesake*, the task becomes even more complex and problematic, being grounded in issues of memory, tradition, and family expectations.

The issues of names and identity are presented at the beginning of *The Namesake*. As Ashima's (Gogol's mother) water breaks, she calls out to Ashoke, her husband. However, she does not use his name because this would not be proper. According to Ashima, calling one's husband by his name is "not the type of thing Bengali wives do... a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over" (Lahiri, 2). From this statement we are shown how important privacy is to Bengali families. Bengali children are given two names: one is "daknam", that is, pet name, used only by family and close friends, and the other is "bhalonam" that is used by the rest of the society. At birth, Gogol is given a pet name as his official name because his official name, sent in a letter from his great grandmother in India, gets lost in the mail. Upon entering kindergarten, Gogol is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil, his "bhalonam", by teachers and the other children at school. Gogol rejects his proper name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family. This decision made on the first day of kindergarten school causes him years of distress as it was also his first attempt to reject a dual identity.

*The Namesake* records the plight of Gogol's desperate attempt to change his

identity by renaming himself from Gogol to Nikhil and thus helps us to understand Stuart Hall's definition of diaspora identities as "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" ( Hall, qtd in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 1993: 402). As Gogol grows older, his name becomes the troubled border between what he is and what he wants to be. Thus, before he leaves for Yale, Gogol rejects his identity and decides to reinvent himself by a legal deed as Nikhil, his parents' chosen "bhalonam" for him. Gogol's act of renaming himself from Gogol to Nikhil explains his urge to assume an American persona in order to blend into mainstream American society. It is as Nikhil that he embarks on his adult life, as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party and as Nikhil that he begins to have relationship with white American women, keeping his private life secret from his parents:

by the following year his parents know vaguely about Ruth. Though he has been to the farmhouse in Maxine twice, meeting her father and her stepmother, Sonia, who secretly has a boyfriend these days, is the only person in his family to have met Ruth...His parents have expressed no curiosity about his girlfriend. His relationship with her is one accomplishment in his life about which they are not in the least bit proud or pleased (Lahiri, 116).

Thus as Nikhil, he becomes a part of the mainstream, and not at all a hyphenated American. On the surface, he lives a life that is not that different from those of his fellow American students, yet the name Gogol still has a hold over him. He dreads his visit home and his return to a life where he is known as Gogol. Gogol is not just a name to him; it signifies all his discomfort to fit into two different cultures as he grew up. Being away from home at college makes it easy for Gogol to live as Nikhil in American society. He does so happily for many years, detaching himself from his roots and his family as much as possible.

Chanchala K. Naik quotes Kellner as saying that "one can choose and make, and then remake one's identity as fashion and life possibilities change and expand" (qtd. in Chanchala K. Naik, " The Identity and The Social Self"). But by choosing and remaking one's identity as Gogol did, one is always anxious about the recognition and validation of that identity by others. After remaking himself as Nikhil, Gogol relishes the moments when he encounters people who have never known him as Gogol. The irony, of course, is that the reader, as well as the novelist herself, have invested too much in the significance of his name and can seldom think of him as anyone but Gogol. In other words, the readers as well as the novelist fail to recognize him as Nikhil. Moreover, he reasons that by

changing his name from Gogol to Nikhil, he can shed some cumbersome ties to the past. What Gogol does not realize is that his pet name, Gogol, is more than simply the product of his father's obsession with the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. He is named Gogol, rather, in memory of a train accident in which his father nearly lost his life. Throughout most of his childhood and early adult years Gogol experiences little intimacy with his father and his traditional ways, and perceives his father's name choice to be the greatest burden he must bear. When Gogol's father finally explains the significance of his name to Gogol, it becomes a way of bridging the gap between father and son, as well as his lack of identification with his Bengali heritage:

Gogol listens, stunned, his eyes fixed on his father's profile. Though there are only inches between them, for an instant his father is a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy, a man whose past he does not fully know. A man who is vulnerable, who has suffered in an inconceivable way. He imagines his father, in his twenties as Gogol is now, sitting on a train...and then nearly killed. He struggles to picture the West Bengal countryside he has seen on only a few occasions, his father's mangled body, among hundreds of dead ones, being carried on a stretcher, past a twisted length of maroon compartments. Against instinct he tries to imagine life without his father, a world in which his father does not exist (Lahiri, 123).

Gogol knows nothing of his namesake except what he learns in high school: the Russian writer was a famously "'eccentric genius', who was reputed to be a hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man" (Lahiri, 91). It's hardly the image an adolescent boy would warm to. Gogol hates that "his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian" (Lahiri, 76). Learning about the train accident that set Ashoke on the road to America does not change Gogol's feelings about his name; instead, the name shoulders too much of the burden of the family hopes and wishes, and it adds to the exasperating process of assimilation.

Growing up as an outsider is difficult. And when your name is unlike everyone else's, it can be a greater burden. At fourteen, Gogol wants only to escape his name. "He's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain... He hates having to wear a nametag on his sweater at Model United Nation Day at school. He even hates signing his name at the bottom of his drawings in art class" (Lahiri, 76). To him, the name is a burden, a

disfigurement, an ugly reminder of the many differences between him and his peers. As he grows up, Gogol embarks on a bitter love-hate relationship with his name; he loathes it, denies it, and tries to escape it. It seems that an identity crisis is imminent as Gogol's name becomes the source of greater anxiety: "At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, managed nevertheless to distress him physically like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear" (Lahiri, 76). Gogol, who "cannot imagine saying 'Hi, it's Gogol' under potentially romantic circumstances" (Lahiri, 76), experiences his first taste of liberation when he introduces himself to a college girl as Nikhil. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to understand the huge cost that abandoning one's ethnic identity carry for immigrants who desire nothing more than to blend in. Her Bengali protagonist, acutely aware of his difference but unable to resolve his dual identities, comes to symbolize the anguished decisions all young immigrants must make as they carve out their paths towards becoming American. Gogol Ganguli becomes the archetype for every immigrant who has wrestled with issues of conflicted identity, cultural confusion and humbling marginality. Gogol remains a captive of his conflicted identity — is he Indian or American? — although there is the merest hint at the novel's end that he may choose one identity over the other. His trajectory suggests that, for the second generation Indian- American at least, refusing to choose one identity over the other, which might mean complete renunciation of either Indian-ness or American-ness, troubles one's negotiation of identity. Whereas Gogol's mother, Ashima, as a first generation Indian-American, is able to negotiate a hyphenated subjectivity because she has an original identity as a starting point, Gogol is 'always-already' in crisis due to his birth on 'foreign' soil.

Lahiri uses Gogol's name to, literally and figuratively, represent the ways in which his cultural heritage severs him from the social sphere, forcing a gap between him and his American friends, and serving as a constant reminder of the depth of this disparity. He already knows that his Indian heritage sets him apart from his schoolmates, and that his inner turmoil is evident from a young age. He tries desperately to distance himself from being Indian. He would rather not be forced to attend the weekly gatherings of Bengalis, and would rather not visit his relatives in India. He would rather attend art classes than Bengali lessons and he would rather listen to Beatles than his father's classical Indian music. Being the child of immigrants Gogol begins in a kind of nowhere place. He is firmly of America, but is not quite an American, in part because he is not recognized as such by others. For much of his life, Gogol has difficulty understanding where he is from or who he is. He is often unhappy because it is difficult for him to reconcile the different

cultures, countries, and people that define him. For Gogol, the universal difficulties of adolescence are compounded because he is the son of first generation immigrants. As he enters his teenage years, he begins to resent his Bengali heritage. He begins to address his parents in English, while they speak to him in Bengali. Gogol wants to adapt to American values and life concepts, which are firmly resisted at home. He cannot understand why his parents disapprove of his romantic relationships with American girls; he cannot understand why his parents do not accept his American girlfriends as their parents accept him; he dislikes his parents when he compares them with the parents of his American girlfriends. When Gogol is involved with Ruth, his parents refuse to give him money to fly to England where she has gone for a semester. Afterwards, when he gets involved with Maxine, he sees Maxine's parents, Gerald and Lydia, as stark contrast to his parents. Gogol distances himself from his parents and starts living in New York, away from his parents. He avoids going home on weekends, excusing himself on the false pretext of work and spends his time with Maxine and her parents with whom he feels "none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents. No sense of obligation" (Lahiri, 138). He thinks of the terms of his parents' arranged marriage as "something at once unthinkable and remarkable." When he goes on a vacation with Maxine and her parents "he feels no nostalgia for the vacation he's spent with his parents." Gogol's desire to spend more and more time with Maxine and her family shows his desperate attempt to mimic and assimilate:

He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper. He comes to expect the weight of their flatware in his hands, and to keep the cloth napkin, still partially folded, on his lap. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. ...He learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine (Lahiri, 137).

Gogol's act of appreciating and eating meals with the Maxine's family serve as an act of assimilation. When Gogol makes American culture a part of himself, for example, by making its cuisine his own, he can no longer identify himself as separate from it. As Gogol partakes of these high-class, expensive meals, they become part of him and he becomes part of them. He is both assimilating and assimilated. Through his mimicry<sup>1</sup>, the unfamiliar becomes familiar as he tries to adapt to their culinary tastes and practices as his own. His mimicry of these habits gains him a place in the privileged sphere. However, his assimilation is not a very comfortable act for Gogol. As Homi K. Bhabha has put it, mimicry "emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a disavowal" (Bhabha, qtd. in *The*

*Location of Culture*, 1994: 86.). This disavowal via mimicry is illustrated when Lahiri writes that, "(Gogol) is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (Lahiri, 141). Gogol's moving away from his parents and seeking a life separate from theirs might be interpreted as an exercise in cultural displacement: he did not want to go home on weekends, or to go with them to *pujos* and Bengali parties, or to remain unquestionably in their world. Gogol struggles with the pain of being a second generation Indian American. He also has to cope with his unusual name and his parents' inability to break away from their origins. Like most Americans, he leaves home for university because he finds his parents and their life in Cambridge suffocating. He has affairs without their knowledge. He lives a life of isolation and alienation because he does not share his parent's past and their connections with India. Jhumpa Lahiri has thus brought out the sense of displacement, rootlessness, alienation and non-belonging that often besiege members of diasporic communities in her exploration of the relationships between non-resident Indian characters.

*The Namesake* illustrates what Stuart Hall meant by diaspora experience when he said "diaspora experience is defined by ... the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" ( Hall, qtd in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 1993: 394). In the course of the first quarter of the book, the Gangulis go through the many rituals of the immigrant experience, and retrace the steps most Indian families take in the process of becoming American. Ashima and Ashoke, products of an arranged marriage, and acutely conscious of being different from the largely Ivy-League educated elite academics they live among, do not find it easy to shed their Indian identities in America. After the birth of their son, Ashima reflects that "being a foreigner ... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding" (Lahiri, 49-50). Moving to a suburb with a decent school district, they graduate from the instamatic camera to a decent hi-tech one, to hosting yearly Christmas parties for their Indian friends. Transplanted from a land of centuries-old customs of kinship and pre-arranged marriages into a country of haphazard chance, reinvention, and opportunity, the Gangulis experience the freedom to reinvent themselves, and also the freedom to lose themselves in the process. Gogol's father sums up this dangerous freedom best when he gives Gogol permission to rename himself Nikhil: "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish" (Lahiri, 100).

Thus addressing the theme of immigration, collision of cultures, and the importance of names in *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle immigration can be. To pack your bags and head off to a foreign land seems unbearably difficult, even though we know immigrants have done it since time immemorial. *The Namesake* is a fictionalization of travails of people who leave their homeland and make their way to another country. The novel takes the readers deep into the Gangulis' immigrant experience: their puzzlement at and isolation from an alien culture, their loss of connection with families in India, where births and deaths occur apart from them; their seeking old ties in a circle of other Bengali immigrants, several of whom become substitute aunts and uncles to Gogol and his sister, Sonia. According to Dubey, "the immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world" (Dubey, qtd in "Jhumpa Lahiri. b.1967: Biography-Criticism"). This constant struggle is portrayed in *The Namesake* as first generation immigrants and their children struggle to find their places in society. As the Ganguli parents struggle to adapt to a culture different than the one they are used to, Gogol and Sonia, their children struggle, trying simultaneously to respect their roots while adapting to American society. What these characters all go through in *The Namesake* is the difficulty of identifying with the new world, the old world, or both. First generation immigrants straddling two worlds, they strive to achieve a fine balance between the transplanted world of their parents and the native one that they seek to embrace as their own.

Jhumpa Lahiri, reflecting on her personal experiences and her keen observation of diasporic culture, brings legitimacy and poignance to the predicament of the Gangulis in this foreign land. This is indeed a work that is created by a woman who understands the complexities that arises from a cultural merger. Lahiri does an excellent job of juxtaposing the autonomous, assimilated American way of life in a manner that avoids suggesting the superiority of one over the other. *The Namesake*<sup>2</sup> does not propose the importance of either fully embracing one's cultural heritage or completely assimilating into American culture; instead, it allows the reader to comprehend, if not completely, the full complexity of negotiating a life where one has a foot in American culture, and the other in the Bengali tradition.

## Notes

- 1 In his essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Homi K. Bhabha explains mimicry to be "almost the same but not quite" (86).
- 2 *The Namesake* was made into a film and was released in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and India in March 2006. Director Mira Nair briefly introduced the film by saying that it was her most personal project as she herself lived in Kolkata for 12 years and then in New York City for 25, the two cities that the characters in the film travel between as well). She dedicated the film to the legendary directors Ritwick Ghatak and Satyajit Ray. In the words of the film's screenwriter, Sooni Taraporevala, "*The Namesake* is a family portrait that reveals individual lives, which separate and then merge as they are carried towards their destinies." (*The Namesake*: Film Review by Subhamoy Das).

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# About *Jahaz-bhais* and *Jahaz-bahens*: The Politics of a Transnational Family in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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## Abstract

Primarily concerned with the South Asian diaspora in the different regions of the world, Amitav Ghosh has set himself the task of narrating an anti-Hegelian history of the world, incorporating hitherto left-out narratives of ordinary people and their attempts to resist the hegemony of the nation through their own stories and search for identity. Interestingly, it is because of this preoccupation with individuals and his postcolonial instinct to foreground their stories that the *family* has assumed such a central position in all of Ghosh's narratives. For Ghosh, family stories are always important because it is through them that history is experienced. The familial space in Ghosh, however, is not a passive site. Rather, it offers the individual a space that situates his identity away from the confines of the 'restrictively imagined collectivity' of the nation. It is an imagined space where bonds of personal love replace the troubled terrain of the nation with all its discontents. At the same time, this familial space is in no way unproblematic since it too involves power. It is a space to create, expand and protect subjectivities. But most importantly, in the fictional world of Ghosh, it is this nature of home that enables it to be relocated transnationally, beyond the 'shadow lines' of the borders of the home country, in different foreign physical spaces. Ghosh's basic point seems to be that home is everywhere; it only needs to be reinvented. Ghosh's characters are able to combat the diasporic angst through their successful engagement in an irresistible quest for the family in transnational locations. My paper aims to explore Ghosh's latest novel *Sea of Poppies* from this perspective.

## I

In 'Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins' (*The Location of Culture*, 139-70) Bhabha shows that nationalist representations are highly unstable and fragile constructions which can never produce the unity they seek to achieve. In his analysis of nationalist discourse, he speaks of a 'double narrative movement' which problematises nationalist discourse. Bhabha argues that discourse becomes split by an ambivalence similar to the ones that threaten the coherence of colonial discourse. In order to create community out of difference, to convert 'many' into 'one', nationalist discourse engages two contradictory modes of representation, which Bhabha calls the 'pedagogic' and the 'performative.' Consequently, nationalist discourse is split by a disruptive 'double narrative movement'. On the one hand, nationalism is a pedagogic discourse. It claims a fixed origin for the nation and asserts a sense of a continuous history which links its people to their forefathers who too were national subjects. It is 'pedagogical', because it is inflected by the authority, legitimacy and primacy of the nation as the central political and social unit which collects a population into a 'people'. The people thus constitute the *object* of pedagogical discourse.

But Bhabha argues that nationalist discourse is simultaneously 'performative'. He implies that nationalist icons and popular signs (all those representations which help fix its 'norms and limits') must be continuously rehearsed by the people in order to keep secure the sense of 'deep, horizontal comradeship'. A national culture must be endlessly performed; the arbitrary range of symbols which it uses to forge unity require repeated inscription:

The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*. (*LoC*, 145-146 emphasis in the original).

People are, therefore, also *subjects* of nationalist discourses, actively involved in the (re)production of its signs and traditions: they must repeatedly tell the nation's history, perform its rituals, celebrate its great figures and commemorate its anniversaries. Hence, nationalist discourses in their performative aspects function under a different temporality, that of the 'repetitious' and 'recursive.' Because of this tension between the pedagogic and the performative, the nation is split by

what Bhabha terms 'conceptual ambivalence' (*LoC* 146) and between these two positions, a sense of the nation's homogeneous 'people' begins to fragment. What emerges, in fact, in this 'uncanny moment' of the interface between these different identities is a new hybrid identity, which remains perpetually in motion and is open to further change and reinscription. The idea of subjectivity as stable, single and pure is forever demolished.

One of the most prominent identities which constantly intervene and challenge the hegemonizing attempt of the pedagogical grand narrative of the unified nation with its performative micro-narratives is the 'familial'. While nationalist discourse requires essence, origin, unity and coherence, the familial space continuously disrupts this unity by bringing in a jarring note, a difference from within. Failing to exclude these 'different' stories, 'different' experiences, and 'different' histories, the nation's dream of smooth self-generation at the level of the performative is constantly elided. In *Locations of Culture*, Bhabha refers to the 'recesses of domestic space' as 'sites for history's most intricate invasions', because in them the 'borders between home and world become confused, and uncannily, it is here where the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.' (*LoC*, 9) Thus national history and family-history, national space and familial space, are all interlocked at a moment of tension, the outcome of which is an intriguing hybridity of history and displacement of narratives.

In the first place, the familial space at once provides its members an identity, much more basic, immediate and intimate than any identity the nation can provide. It connotes in our mind a private sphere of shelter, comfort, nurture and protection that contrasts with the chaos and anxiety outside. Ideally, the family protects and lends its status and honour to its members when they venture into the world outside. The family, as a space, helps an individual to assert a subject position that draws its validity and energy from a close contract with an intimate circle of family members, friends and kins. Moreover, while the illiberal aspect of nationalism 'leads to the interpretation of diverse phenomenon through one glossary, thus erasing specificities, setting norms and limits, lopping off tangentials' (Marangoly George, 14) and hence tries to hegemonise, family gives the self-identity necessary for the individual to negotiate the problems faced in the outside world. So the familial space or home fulfills the need for a coherent subjectivity and the desire for origin. Precisely because of this, tendency home is represented as fixed, rooted and stable, and hence people supposedly 'feel at home' within familial space. So, the identity that one receives from one's familial

space is crucial because it alone enables one to resist the nation's tendency to achieve hegemonic, totalitarian control over the individual.

Nevertheless, this very desire to use familial space for consolidation of ego-based subjective identity complicates this space considerably. Going by Bhabha's idea of the differential, one can note that the family itself is a very large space. So the concept of the pedagogic and the performative that Bhabha associates with complexities created by the nation problematises the family equally. Keeping this problem in mind, we must declare that the family is not, a readymade identity, which one can automatically slip into, without complications. The conflict between the pedagogic and the performative caused by the nation is equally noticeable in familial space. It gives birth to a number of micro-narratives for the individual. Through them, the individual self resists the hegemonic desire of the 'family' to mould the identity of its constituent members through its own pedagogic tools. In his book *Smritichhanda*, Sachitanand Vatsyan Agyeya gives us two very important formulations in connection with space and identity: in the first, one is at the center of the space; in the second, space is that in which one is at the centre. The creation, nurturing and protection offered by familial space is an example of the second condition, because, it is an attempt to consolidate the identity of the self through the creation of subjective space. In the first place, the family is an area of conflict as well as support, a scene of violence as well as nurturing. As a psychic space, it witnesses conflicts involving the ego, struggles for power and the desire to dominate, because, these too are common ways to establish subjective identity. The varied bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control that the individual establishes with different members in this familial space, helps him to create, nourish and protect his or her identity.

It is important to note that this will to dominate and consolidate power does not have to involve violence. It may come through love as well. Home is the fundamental territory where all these varied desires is manifested. Finally, one most important micro-narrative that individuals produce is through the creation of innumerable familial bonds made according to their own choice, outside the connection of blood.<sup>1</sup>

So, the familial space is flexible and manifests itself in various forms, following a basic pattern of inclusion/exclusion. Its prime importance lie in the fact that it is not equally available to all — it remains a restricted place that is contested over and embraced as the exclusive domain of a few. The familial space, therefore, redefines and stretches itself again and again, in line with the incessant search of the self for identity. This leads to micro-narratives, often

produced transnationally. Consequently, familial space is in a state of constant flux, and its interface with various other spaces like that of the nation can become complicated.

## II

It was Salman Rushdie who initiated the exploration of the performative micro-narrative of familial space in *Midnight's Children* (1981). Subsequently, the project has been taken up by a number of other Indian novelists. Among them, Amitav Ghosh is by far the most prominent. Particularly concerned with the South Asian diaspora in the different regions of the world, Ghosh has set himself the task of narrating what amounts to an anti-Hegelian history of the world. In the process, he highlights the hitherto left-out narratives of ordinary individuals and the predicament of individuals seen against the backdrop of history and their attempts to resist the hegemony of the nation through stories they tell and their search for identity. Interestingly, it is this context of the preoccupation with individuals and their postcolonial instinct to foreground their stories that the family has assumed such a central position in Ghosh's narratives.

The most fascinating aspect of Ghosh's treatment of this familial space seems to be his ability to recreate it across borders. It is almost as if these borders were porous. Since it is a territory to be created, protected and consolidated as a manifestation of subjective identity, it is no longer limited to the *roots*. It can be relocated transnationally; for example, beyond the 'shadow lines' of the borders of the home country, in different foreign physical spaces, so that it is no more a simple journey away from home/family, but from one home/family to another. Ghosh's basic point of contention seems to be that home is everywhere; it only needs to be reinvented. So, in his fictional world, a transnational 'home' is compatible with the idea of *routes* (and no more limited to roots). Consequently, Ghosh's world is peopled with characters who engage themselves in an irresistible quest for family and are able to invent it in a transnational location. That is how they are able to combat the angst of the diaspora.

From the intimate, relatively small space of *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Ghosh has taken a big leap to the vast, transnational world in his novel, *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In this first part of a trilogy conceived on a vast compass of time and space, Ghosh deals with the problems and politics of the diasporic movement in history in details, more miniscule in intent than has been attempted earlier by most writers. In the process, he explores a host of interesting issues — the sense of loss involved in the state of homelessness, the role of memory in the recreation of

the transnational family, and the truth behind the seductive pleasures of homes, communities and nations.

*Sea of Poppies* is about a voyage on the *Ibis* — a ship that takes coolies, convicts, sailors and officers to Mauritius.<sup>2</sup> The backdrop of the journey — the beginning of the opium war in the early nineteenth century — is important. Much has been written in different forms of literature on the Indigo Plantation, but no Indian writer before Ghosh has focused so intensely on the opium trade of the British in the entire network of China, India, Mauritius, Trinidad and Maldives in the nineteenth century as an offshoot of a colonial power in the process of consolidating its gains. Almost like Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* (1860), this book is an *Opiumdarpan*, as it were, executed with the help of wonderful narrative skills. Ghosh is able to bring together in the novel a motley crew of sailors, convicts, migrants and even lovers gathering from varied corners of the world — from the interiors of Bihar and Bengal and other parts of Asia, and even England and the United States — all of whose lives were intricately linked with the opium trade. The slump in the sale of opium affected the lives of Bhojpuri peasants and factory hands in Gazipur as much as the fortunes of the English merchants and the Bengali Zamindars at one point of history. The *Ibis*, a tall-masted ship, therefore becomes a floating cauldron of different histories, geographies, language and culture. An interesting metaphor of such mingling of incongruent components is Deeti's shrine, which, like any other shrine in a poor/middle class Hindu Indian family, encapsulates a motley assembly:

There was a small alter inside, with statues of Shivji and Bhagwan Ganesh, and framed prints of Ma Durga and Shri Krishna. But the room was a shrine not just to the gods but also to Deeti's personal pantheon, and it contained many tokens of her family and forebears — among them such relics as her dead father's wooden clogs, a necklace of rudraksha beads left to her by her mother, and faded imprints of her grandparents' feet taken on their funeral pyre... (*SoP*, 9).

Among the prominent passengers on board is Neelratan, an educated, polished zamindar of the Rashkhali estate, who, despite his financial problems, is not ready to compromise with his refined taste, or abandon culture, etiquettes or the 'babu' tradition that meant having lots of attendants and mistresses. It was not uncommon that even the most refined of zamindars would fall victim to a colonial game plan and was cheated by the likes of a Mr. Burnham. Neelratan is consequently convicted as a forger and was on the *Ibis*, on his way to be deported to Mauritius. Sarang Ali is one of the most important members of the crew but

with a not-so-remote history of a pirate; Ah Fatt, another inmate, is an opium addict and a convict of Parsi and Chinese descent. Zachary, the second mate of the ship, is the key example of the mixture of race, class, costume and language created by trading in the high seas. He is not at all a 'pucca sahib' (his father is white and his mother is a quadroon). Nor is Paulette, daughter of a French Botanist at the royal Botanical gardens across the river from Kolkata, a pucca memsahib. Born to French parents, she grows up more as a Bengalee having got Jodu's mother, a poor boatman's rustic but efficient wife, as her foster mother. This mixture reminds us at once of Jodu (one of the lesser mortals on the *Ibis*) who is an interesting foil to Paulette. Born to a boatman, he grows up with Paulette in the affluent cosmopolitan ambience of Mr. Lambert's sylvan bungalow. Ghosh does not forget to remind us that Jodu himself never felt at home in his native village where he went back for a brief period of time after the death of Mr. Lambert.

Then there are the 'girmitiyas' — the 'lesser mortals'. Deeti is a poor and oppressed Bhojpuri subaltern who engages our attention in the first part of the novel because of the way she has to give up her hopes of making a decent living due to opium, which she describes as the *shani* (evil) of her life. Engaged in a daily struggle to remain alive by growing and selling poppy seeds, she loses her husband, falls victim to the social and sexual oppression of her in-laws, but is saved by the untouchable Kalua from being a sati, that is to say, a widow destined for immolation, and ultimately finds refuge on the ship. Despite his gigantic physique, Kalua is not able to resist the tyranny of society either, not only because he is poor but also because he is a low caste *chaamar*. Saraju is a midwife who made the mistake of delivering a thakur's son and this caused those high caste people to drive her away from her 'home'. Munia, a low caste *mussahar*, sees her parents and her illegitimate son burn to death before her own eyes. Then there is Dukhane, a married woman, who decides to sail with her husband having had enough of a violently abusive mother-in law. Also, on the deck are Ratna and Champa, whose husbands' lands were contracted to the opium factory, leaving them with nothing for sustenance. Heeru, on the other hand, was deserted by her husband. And then there are the hillsmen from the plateaus of Jharkhand who have brought with them stories of a land in revolt against its new rulers, of villages put to flames by the white man's troops. So, the reader cannot miss the one common luggage that all these marginalized have-nots share among themselves — the luggage of a painful memory of enduring tyranny, suffering, and seemingly endless pain.

What makes the novel more interesting subsequently is the thread that ties all these characters together. All of them want to live even when they are thrown into the most hostile condition of life. Undeterred by tyranny, they engage themselves in a quest for a new home. Through its three sections, the novel tries to narrate the voyage undertaken by these varied people from their original homes where they had been rooted, to their new home as a new family on the *Ibis*. 'Land', 'River' and 'Sea' — the topographic themes of the three sections into which Ghosh divides his tale of migration speaks of unimpeded space — of a journey of deliverance from a claustrophobic setting to a more and more open space. The novel "lurches unsteadily from the despair of marooned lives to the hope of reprieve, from the dull certainties of confinement to fleeting portents of an unborn freedom," as Swapan Chakraborty puts it in a review of the novel<sup>3</sup>. If we follow the narrative closely as the *Ibis* gradually makes its way from Kidderpore to the Bay of Bengal, we will be able to trace the different phases of transition of this shift to a new home and a new family.

Leaving one's homeland, however, despite the pain and subjugation suffered in it, is not easy. The pain, unease, confusion and sense of apprehension that loom large in the initial phase of the journey are remarkable. All sorts of rumors and apprehension grip them:

Up to this point, the migrants had avoided the subject of the Black water — there was no point, after all, in dwelling on the dangers that lay ahead. But now, as they sweated in the steamy heat of the jungle, their fears and apprehensions bubbled over. The pulwar became a cauldron of rumours: it began to be whispered that their rations on the Black Water ship would consist of beef and pork; those who refused to eat would be whipped senseless and the meats would be thrust down their throats. On reaching Mareech, they would be forced to convert to Christianity; they would be made to consume all kinds of forbidden foods, from the sea and the jungle; should they happen to die, their bodies would be ploughed into the soil, like manure, for there was no provision for cremation on that island. The most frightening of the rumours was centered upon the question of why the white men were so insistent on procuring the young and the juvenile, rather than who were wise, knowing, and rich in experience: it was because they were after an oil that was to be found only in the human brain — the coveted *mimiai-kattel*, which was known to be most plentiful among people who had recently reached maturity. The method employed in extracting this substance was to hang the victims upside down, by their ankles, with

small holes bored into their skulls: this allowed the oil to drip the oil slowly into a pan.

So much credence did this rumour accumulate that when at last Calcutta was sighted, there was a great outburst of sorrow, in the hold: looking back now, it seemed as if the journey down the Ganga had given the migrants the last taste of life before the onset of a slow and painful death. (*SoP*, 246-7)

The passage shows how the rumours, ill-founded as they are, grip these people in panic and make their passage more and more rough. The situation turns more difficult as memories of the land make them nostalgic:

But even when removed from view, the island could not be put out of mind: although none of them had set eyes on it before, it was still intimately familiar to most — was it not, after all, the spot where the Ganga rested her feet? Like many other parts of Jambudvipa, it was a place they had visited and revisited time and again, through the epics and Puranas, through myth, song and legend. The knowledge that this was the last they would see of their homeland, created an atmosphere of truculence and uncertainty... Among the women, the talk was of the past, and the little things that they would never see, nor hear, nor smell again: the colour of poppies, spilling across the fields like abir on a rain-drenched Holi... *No matter how hard the times at home may have been, in the ashes of every past there were a few cinders of memory that glowed with warmth — and now, those embers of recollection took on a new life, in the light of which their presence here, in the belly of a ship that was about to be cast into an abyss, seemed incomprehensible, a thing that could not be explained except as a lapse from sanity.* (*SoP*, 397-8 emphases added)

Thus the burden of the past, and the memories of the warmth that sustained different familial bonds they enjoyed in their lives, as well as recollections of myths with which they grew up from their childhood — all these taken together make their diasporic situation acutely painful. In an interview to *The Outlook* on 26 May, 2008, Ghosh confides to Sheela Reddy about how this diasporic pain had been one of the major stimulant behind writing the novel:

I think we have such a distorted idea of our history of the nineteenth century in some ways. When you actually look at the past, it was so different. From writers like Naipaul and so on, we had a picture of what it was like for the Indian migrants after they arrived in places like Mauritius. But for me what was so hard to imagine, so incredibly

poignant, was the moment of departure. What did it mean for them? They were farmers, the most rooted people. The courage it took at that time for a bihaari to set out across the kala pani is something you and I can barely conceive of. I felt so moved by that, such admiration for them in a way that I wanted to write about it. I wanted to think about it in detail, what was it really like, the actual moment of departure when you see everything you know disappearing behind you.

And yet, life, for these characters does not become moribund. This is because the people are on the *Ibis*, itself a trope for movement since it is a ship shifting its nautical position every hour they move forward.

The achievement of the characters, therefore, lies in their successful struggle with memory, in their positive zest for life and readiness to engage in the task of forging a new home, having escaped out of the dungeon like pulwar and the prison cells where they were supposed to have rotted. Characters in the novel such as Deeti, Paullete, Kalua and Nob Kissin, carry a private knowledge of private histories, trying to conceal them by resorting to different kinds of guile. Nevertheless, they fail ultimately to keep their own identity inviolate and mix with others, establishing meaningful relations with others on board, relationships that cut across all boundaries whatsoever. These relationships transform them, as they assume new membership in a new family. Neel, the erstwhile zamindar, is a classic example of such transformation. He naturally begins with a sense of loss:

With departure looming, the images and memories Neel had tried to bar from his mind came flooding back: of Elokeshi, of his home, of his husband-less wife and fatherless child. When he dozed off, it was only to be visited by a nightmare, in which he saw himself as a castaway on the dark void of the ocean, utterly alone, severed from every human mooring. Feeling himself to be drowning, he began to toss his arms, trying to reach towards the light. (SoP, 342)

But then, this man who once was a zamindar and had always relied on his attendants for all his comforts, and who had never even touched food cooked by anyone other than a brahmin, realizes that in order to remain alive, he will have to engage himself in meaningful relationship with others. Caste, riches, and cultural boundary — nothing can sustain him any more — and he must thus willingly engage himself in the task of writing letters for other prisoners. Such transformation in Neel is possible only because gradually he can transform pain to a positive impetus. At the beginning, Neel shudders at the prospect of living alone with Ah Fatt :

Spinning around in disgust, Neel clutched the bars of the cell, calling out after Bishuji: You can't leave me here, have some pity, let me out...  
(*SoP*, 316)

But gradually, he starts taking care of Ah Fatt, who has been reduced to an utterly helpless existence by his addiction to opium. He bathes him, feeds him and takes care of him like a mother:

To take care of another human being — this was something Neel had never before thought of doing, not even with his own son, let alone a man of his own age, a foreigner. All he knew of nurture was the tenderness that had been lavished on him by his own caregivers: that they would come to love him was something he had taken for granted... it occurred to him now to ask himself if this was how it happened: was it possible that the mere fact of using one's hands and investing one's attention in someone other than oneself, created a pride and tenderness that had nothing whatever to do with the response of the object of one's care... (*SoP*, 325-326)

The passage marks the beginning of a transition in the Zamindar's mindset. For the first time in his life, he exhibits altruistic responses. By adopting this altruistic role, he forges a familial bond with a stranger, whom he was repulsing at the beginning. A bond is instantly formed out of the sheer will to live between two convicts, proving that all barriers of nationality, culture, economic difference, language can be porous.

The bond is consolidated further by a touching reciprocity shown on the part of Ah Fatt. After the traumatic incident where the first Mate of the ship lured Ah Fatt by the promise of a ball of opium and made him urinate on Neel's body the shock takes both Ah Fatt and Neel to a world of silence:

... although the incident on the fo'c'sle deck had lasted no more than a few minutes, it had hit them with force of flash flood, sweeping away the fragile scaffolding of their friendship and leaving a residue that consisted not just of shame and humiliation, but also of a profound dejection. Once again...they had fallen into uncommunicative silence.  
(*SoP*, 463-4)

But ultimately 'deep communication' is possible between these two convicts outside the conventions of language. In his heart of hearts, Ah Fatt begins to feel for Neel. The bond of love that develops between them gives birth to righteous anger in Ah Fatt. So, towards the end of the novel, when he suddenly attacks the

First Mate brutally to take revenge of the humiliation that the man had heaped once on Ah Fatt and Neel and stabs him to death, it is certainly a transgression of the law but is also a classic case of consolidation of the familial bond.

Aizaz Ahmed makes an important point in his essay "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality" where in addressing the politics of migrancy, he differentiates between different class formations that compartmentalize different groups of migrants. "Postcoloniality is also, like most things, a matter of class," he observes (Ahmed, 16). One of the greatest achievements of Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* is his success in breaking down class-barriers. The readiness with which Paulette adapts herself to the girmitiyas on board, points to this achievement. Of all the characters on the move, Paulette is perhaps the one who is most mobile, as she continues to move across the social groups she encounters, from time to time. In the beginning, she also suffers from pain, though her journey is very different from Neel's. For her the beginning of the journey (or an adventure in her case) is not without the pull of memory. But she also overcomes the pain as she takes an active part in pulling all her resources together to bring freedom for the four most prominent figures on the *Ibis*. Right from the beginning of the journey, the readiness with which Paulette mingles with the girmitiyas, sheds off all her past and adapts with the new, is the secret of her successful adventure on the *Ibis*. She, too, goes through a total transformation, as she declares:

"...from now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings-*jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-bahens* — to each other. There'll be no difference between us." (*SoP*, 356)

This bond again shows how the *ibis* becomes a site of new community-formation — communities composed of lives that had become unfixed from the cultural moorings.

It would be pertinent at this point to invoke Bhabha once again, for in *The Location of Culture*, he suggests new and exciting ways of thinking about identity born from 'the great history of the language and landscapes of migration and diaspora' (*LoC*, 235). Bhabha has in his mind particularly those who inhabit 'border lives' located in the margins of nations, in-between contrary homelands. Borders are crucial because they are important locations where one contemplates moving beyond them. Therefore, they tend to be ambivalent, since 'we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.' (*LoC*, 1) So for Bhabha, the border is the place where all

these opposites commingle, and a new, shifting complex form of representation emerges, defying any attempt at binary patterning. These 'in-between' spaces, therefore, "provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity." (*LoC*, 1)

In his essay "DissemiNation," Bhabha focuses on the importance of 'performance' as the means by which new, hybrid identities are forged at border locations. Standing at the frontier, according to Bhabha, a migrant intervenes actively in the transmission of cultural inheritance or tradition of both the home and the host land, rather than passively accepting its customs and pedagogical wisdom. He, therefore, becomes an agent of change, and a unique 'subject' is produced from the process of hybridization. This hybrid identity is neither total nor complete in itself, but remains perpetually in motion and open to change and reinscription.

Avtar Brah's idea of 'diaspora space' (209) is also relevant here. According to her, a 'diaspora space' is an intersection of borders where all identities become "juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate, and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition" (Brah, 208). It is in this new space that we view in the *Ibis* that new families are formed, breaking all existing barriers.

Deeti is another character who enters this new familial space of the *Ibis*. As soon as the journey begins, one notices with wonder how Deeti appoints herself the guardian of all the single women on the ship. She cares for their safety, and admonishes Munia for her frivolity, though she never fails to guard her with her motherly presence. She is the busiest woman on board, ready even to brave the formidable maistries, and even taking the initiative in arranging Heeru's marriage. She eventually becomes the *bhauji* (sister-in-law) to her shipmates, which helps her to overcome the memory of her own daughter, the last tie she had with the land.

By the third book of *Sea of Poppies*, we see a new world taking shape where everybody on board has begun a new life. Pain is definitely not left behind. But keeping up with the starboard and larboard movement of the ship, the people on board lurch from the memory of the land they have left to hope as well as fear of the future. And finally, as their sea-sickness ends with the *Ibis* steadying on the seas, all the characters overcome physical as well as mental pain.

What, then, is the source of the new energy exhibited by those on board the *Ibis*? It is their indomitable spirit to struggle for life. This has been a characteristic exhibited by characters in all previous novels by Ghosh. In the face of new threats all the characters from different economic status, races, cultures and castes, come close as they huddle together in a new emotional space where co-residence rather than blood determines the evolution of the family. And what is it that gives them the necessary push forward? What keeps them alive? It is at this point that a judicious handling of memory becomes necessary. Look at their different sources of sustenance. Neelratan would remain alive for the sake of his wife and child:

...his tears dried on his cheeks and he spread out his arms to pull his wife and son to his chest. Listen to me, he said: I *will* stay alive. I make you this promise: I will. And when this seven years are over, I will return and I will take you both away from this accursed land and we will start new lives in some other place. That is all I ask of you: do not doubt that I will come back, for I will. (*SoP*, 271 emphasis original)

So he is carrying the luggage of memory, which is essentially a fond memory, and which helps him to fight for his and his family's future. For Paulette and the girmitiyas, it is freedom from a tyrannical society that has oppressed them in their own land. In their case, they would prefer amnesia, preferring to travel light, because memory is such a heavy burden for them.

Another very interesting aspect of the novel is how convergence of cultures entails a mix of languages. After all, languages shuffle and mix as much as do class registers, lowly and lordly idioms, whether oral or graphic. From Neelratan's sophisticated tongue to Serang Ali and Jodu to Ah Fatt, we hear a whole farrago of tongues ranging from chaste Bangla to Lascar Pidgin, pointing, once again, to the motley of cultures which they represent. It may be quite interesting to note in this connection the innumerable references to *achar* in the novel: the girmitiyas talk of its different varieties and recipes! This *achar* or chutney can appropriately be read as a symbol of the cultural mingling that takes place in the novel.

So for Ghosh, a new home is possible not out of a sense of loss, but out of the ability to transform all adverse conditions of life into positive energy. Deeti's pregnancy and Heeru's proposal of marriage from Ecka are two of many symbolic events that Ghosh uses to show this indomitable spirit and depict the flow of life en route. Moreover, the construction of this new home is achieved through judicious handling of memory and amnesia. Belonging in any one place involves

both forgetting and remembering — forgetting the painful memory and remembering the fond memory as part of one's luggage as one would carry the favourite photographs of one's ancestors or the family deities. This act of forgetting and remembering becomes the new survival *mantra*. The girmitiyas in *Sea of Poppies* carry with them the fond burden of their marital practice and try to perform all rituals in all possible ways even at the face of all hostilities to make a new home.

Thus at the end, we find a new family created in the *Ibis* en route out of this cultural mingling. And even this is not the ultimate conclusion. At the end, Ghosh has only promised us a new beginning with a more active mingling of cultures when we find four characters embark on a new life based on the hybridity of the *Ibis* in further motion. And most importantly and suggestively they do not even have their small *putlies* (bundles of clothes) this time. This is perhaps Ghosh's answer to *unheimlichkeit*, where the mystery of lived human experience transcends the artificial borders of nation and race.

## Notes

1. Sociologists like Firth Raymond, Jane Hubert and Anthony Forge remind us in *Family and their Relatives* that family is essentially a relative term. It is not

"...simply a term of demarcation of certain categories of kin. It tends to be a *term of affective significance*, and the inclusion or exclusion of kin in 'family' is a mode of classifying people not so much by degrees of consanguinity and affinity as by the effective quality of their relation to ego. In other words 'family' is a really a way of expressing a sense of identity with specified persons who are members of one's kin universe. The kinship relation of the persons specified may vary greatly from one Ego to another and even on different occasions for the same Ego. This sense of identity may have complex components, negative as well as positive, but for a person to be recognized as part of the 'family' means that the relation to him or her is not neutral." (Raymond et al, 92)

2. It would be pertinent to remember in this connection, Paul Gilroy's interesting use of the image of the ship in his influential book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). While exploring the transnational connection between black people located in and moving between Africa, the Caribbean, America and Britain, Gilroy uses the ship to symbolize the formation of a new community. This ship, according to him, is 'a living, micro-cultural, micro-

political system in motion' (Gilroy, 4) which bears witness to the history of black oppression, but also, the possibility of mingling of diverse ideas and cultural practices enroute. For Gilroy, these transnational routes provide a better way of thinking about black identities in the present than notions of roots and rootedness. The *Ibis* in *Sea of Poppies* is exactly such a ship, where all cultural, economic and racial borders are rendered porous, giving birth to a new hybridity.

3. The review was published in *The Telegraph* (India) on 8 August, 2008.

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# ESL Students' Reflective 'Burning Experiences' at a Writing Workshop

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## Abstract

Writing workshops can become a site of igniting a genuine passion for writing. This paper explores how writing workshops can be used to empower and liberate students. It describes the experiences of graduate students in writing workshops in which students learned to empower and liberate themselves as creative writers while writing a personal book. Grounded in a narrative research approach, this study is a description of ESL students' reflective 'Burning Experiences' at a writing workshop held in a graduate class in the United States. Based on personal interviews and ethnographic observations, a Thai student narrated her experiences and those of her thirteen classmates from seven countries toward the creative writing project in the workshop. Findings reveal that sharing stories that students were "burning to write" allowed them to get rid of the 'I can't write syndrome'. These students also felt empowered, were freed of constraints, and found their own voices. Most importantly, the writing workshop was a site where students used writing not simply as a tool but also as forum to express their real identity. Finally, the compelling experiences in this writing class included the negotiation of writers' roles, the discovery, exploration and identity negotiation and construction. This study provides teachers an alternative way of teaching ESL composition.

## Introduction

A product of a 90s class in Thailand, I learned English through a product-oriented approach. In this respect, writing workshops, peer responses, and theories of the writing process were all new concepts to me when I took a masters course in the United States. On a snowy day during the spring semester, I attended a "teaching writing" graduate class with high

expectations. I had heard positive things concerning the reputation of the professor who taught this class since first entering the program. The first class began with a general outline and specific requirements of the course. Unlike other courses, the professor came with a one and a half page course syllabus written in a casual format, detailing a schedule of "workshop, workshop, and workshop".

A composition classroom was warmer not because of the heater but because of the professor's energizing lecture. The room seemed to burn with his energy and his students' curiosity. I sensed that not only I, but all of the students were moved by his lecture. At that moment, I felt that the classroom was gradually transformed to a performing arts studio. It was the scene of writing I had been looking for; the scene where we could act freely; the space where we could "paint" in writing in colors of our choice. We had been encouraged to write the story we were burning to tell the world. At the end of the class, I talked to a classmate, "I have no idea what to write." My statement ran counter to one maxim that had been presented in the writing workshop, namely that, "all writers have stories to tell". On the way home, I wondered what my first workshop would be like.

### **Burning to Tell the World**

In the second week, I went to the first writing workshop in my life with hope, joy and curiosity; it was a thrilling journey. Gabriel (2002) had prepared me to be open and to examine the role of writing workshops from multiple perspectives. He states:

The writers' workshop is bundled paradoxes: the private act of writing mixed with group criticism, the gift economy of shared works mixed with mercenary workshop moderators, and the generosity of supportive comments in a forum that seems better suited for cutting people down (p. xv).

Gabriel further argues that while some students may expect a glorious affirmation of their own talent and skill as writer from their first writing workshop, others may experience emptiness at the end of the workshop. For some, there are tears, fears, doubts and shame. Some writers go on; some quit. What struck me most was Gabriel's notion that, "the writers' workshop is a dance, and without knowing the steps, a participant might trip, even fall ... the feet that are most badly hurt will not be those of the experienced, but those of a new writer, a young

person" (p. xvi). The writing workshop proved to be even more fascinating than I had first imagined it.

We students were to craft a ten-page book of creative writing unified by the theme "burning to tell the world". The aim of this creative writing project was to provide an opportunity for us to create something permanent. Students made photocopies of the drafts of their work and distributed them to the class one week in advance. There were two drafts submitted each week. Then, the class sat in a circle to have a share-meeting (Calkins & Harwayne, 1987) and carry out the public act of writing (Graves, 1983a). From time to time the professor kept calling for the students who would be sitting out of the circle to get closer to him. While sitting in this circle of learning I felt the power of love and care. Then each student made one comment about what he/she liked or recommended the draft for revision. One comment did not seem enough for students; some added "two and a half"; some made "one and a half" comments; some were told to stop when they seemed to take others' time. It was a joyous experience of sharing responses.

The workshop brought together a variety of people with varying skills and knowledge. It was a great opportunity to meet, learn, and share stories with twelve PhD and two MA students in the workshop during that semester. The workshop opened up the "burning experiences" of writers from various walks of lives. It was also a once-in-a-lifetime lesson involving diverse readers from seven countries: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, South Korea, Guam, Taiwan, Thailand and the US. As Calkins has observed, "Writing invites us to put ourselves on the line, to bring ourselves into classrooms, into teaching-learning transaction. And that has made a world of difference" (Calkins & Harwayne, 1987, p. 21). In this workshop, we read, wrote and gave feedback in a harmonious atmosphere. There was no "whiteness"; what we shared was the "color of love" through writing. Most importantly, the workshop allowed me to write with others — an experience I had not gone through before in my home country.

### **Teacher's Roles in the Writing Workshop**

In *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, Graves (1983b) emphasizes the role of the teacher as a facilitator in the writing process. He notes that in any classroom the feelings generated comes mostly from the tone of the teaching that takes place there. The tone of writing workshop teaching, then, begins with teachers seeing their students as writers. The tone of any interaction begins with how those involved feel about each other, how they identify with each other. Teachers who

genuinely like their students will have a different tone to their teaching than teachers who think their students are "little troublemakers" (Ray & Laminack, 2001, p. 42). In this workshop, the tone of the professor's teaching and that of the workshop really facilitated learning.

Calkins & Harwane (1987) contend that it is important to remember that teaching impacts not only by what we say but also by how we say it. More importantly, Grave (1983b) points out "the tone for writing is set by what the teacher does, not by what the teacher says" (p. 12). I was certainly very gratified to be a part of the conversations in this workshop, which was neither a forum to show off nor a site of a dominant discourse. In effect, students were free to write on their own. Consequently, they experienced the kind of freedom that leads to creative writing. Experts in the field of teaching writing agree that, in order to be effective, teachers must write with their students, modeling, demonstrating, and sharing in the writing process (Graves, 1994; Calkins, 1994). In this workshop, even though the professor did not write with us, his comments, delivered from a point of view of an experienced teacher, editor, and writer were very meaningful and helpful for us. He showed us how to write, enjoy and create meaning through writing in general and writing "what you burn to tell the world" in particular. I learned that the more we responded to others' drafts, the more we felt confident in our own writing abilities, because we trusted the teacher. As Calkins (1994) stressed, teachers do not necessarily need to perceive themselves as writers or write on a daily basis in order to teach writing effectively. More important was the need for teachers to experience the power of writing at least once in their life and draw on that experience in order to teach. Indeed, Grave (1983b) identifies the best writing teachers as those who ask big questions and deal with them honestly, as those who make big decisions about their own literacy and expect students to do the same. At this point, I was gratified to come into contact with the heart of writing and experience the art of good teaching. This workshop, to put it simply, had worked wonders for me.

### **Students' Reflections on the "Burning Experiences"**

Using multiple lenses and drawing of different multicultural identities, students articulated various aspects of their experiences in the creative writing workshop. Brooke (1991) declares, "Writing only becomes meaningful in social interaction, in discussion, thinking, and collaboration with others we respect." For example, Angela, who never had any previous experience of a writing workshop, reflected upon her experience very interestingly thus:

I learned the value of positive feedback. That is when criticizing others' writings; be nice, find something good to say; writing is personal; it is comprised of peoples' souls. Then ask questions instead of telling them what you think it should be like; in other words don't be arrogant.

The workshop encouraged students to focus on subjective understanding, and lived experiences. In the process it helped shape a writing pedagogy that prioritizes the lives of students, considering them central to the act of writing. For example, Nicky wrote a poem by experimenting with "key words" from the workshop's conversations. She revealed her feelings about the experience saying:

I really enjoyed writing my book ... I wanted to do creative writing-poetry — because I wanted to write with more emotion, more honestly than when I write academic papers. I feel like a part of me is removed from my academic writing in order for it to fit in somewhere (I don't know where). I don't feel that way when I write poetry.

Like Nicky, Mathew enjoyed his experiments in the workshop, "It has been great to be able to experiment in a graduate class." In addition, the workshop opened doors to inexperienced writers such as Wanda, Wong, Angela, Diana and as well as myself. Wanda, writing about the love story that she had composed, said:

I never write something like this. I learn a lot from this workshop. I'm sometimes nervous. I think we should start from small group first. Without experience in writing workshop, there is lot of anxiety when we have to listen to the readers in a big group like this.

A writing workshop can bring to students' writing a texture that is "concrete, filled with specific content and accented as individual utterance" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272). In the workshop the teacher not only accommodated but also actively promoted the creative potential inherent in self-expression and subjective experience. In this way, the writing workshop became a site where students used writing not simply as a tool but also a way of expressing the self they already had. Simply put, the writing workshop can become a means by which writers find that they have a self to express (Harris, 1987, p. 161). Diana for example, noticed, "I realized I didn't constrain myself when I wrote this book. It's not academic papers, so, I just wrote it for me." Like Diana, I felt free from academic constraints when writing my book. I discovered then what writing really meant. Writing about my childhood was an incredibly rewarding experience; learning how audiences "see" my writing was even greater. Elbow and Berlanoff's notion (1989) helped me understand the art of writing. That is, if writers want to get

readers to experience something, writers must experience it first. In this workshop, reader responses taught me how to write to make readers "see" my writing rather than "tell" them what I had in the writing. In other words, I wrote with bodies and a somatic mind (Fleckenstein, 1999).

Murray (1991) believes that students have unlimited freedom to think and to act. Creative writing and personal writing genres in this workshop provided a widely open space for self-expression. Besides, since students were granted freedom to choose any topic to write about in this workshop, we were able to experience the elasticity of the frames within which we wrote and to transform them, albeit in small ways. In this regard, the writing workshop pedagogy was flexible and democratic enough to embrace the expression of diverse students. The varied topics that came from the writing of different students made for a richer and, livelier learning arena (Lensmire & Satanovsky, 1998). For example, Wong, an international student, talked about his work thus; "Since the professor doesn't limit us to a certain genre, so I just write anything I want." Mihas, writing about the aftermath of 9/11, acknowledged, "This is the first time I am asked to write personal writing in this program. I have more freedom to write in a new free way." Philip added, "It was nice to write something different from the traditional academic essay".

While most of the students enjoyed writing in their preferred genre, there was one student who did not feel at home with the genre allowed in this workshop (Bawarshi, 2003). Relating a personal writing genre with power relationships, Carmella said:

Knowledge is power. When you take information or "knowledge" related to your personal life and you put it in writing, you are making parts of yourself accessible to others. Your words do have the power to move and influence others, but also you are giving your words a power over you by creating a permanent record that contains a piece of you.

The writing workshop is a site that leads us to different kinds of genres, a site where students can construct their identities through genres they choose on their own. In this context, a genre, according to Bazerman (1997) is "a tool for framing challenges that bring students into new domains that are yet for them unexplored, but not so different from what they know" ( p. 24). While a genre may kill, restrict, reduce and mutilate for someone like Carmella, for me and other students in this workshop, a genre seemed not to "kill but it gives birth, it midwives, it makes possible" (Brook & Jacobs, p. 215).The paradox of genres

reminded me of Gabriel's notion of a paradox of writing workshop, which is the conceptualization of literacy as power (Gabriel, 2002). Carmella's case clearly showed that in writing workshops, the paradox of genre is experienced individually, within the choices students make, and within the wider identity negotiations that match individuals' stages in college and life. In writing workshops genre becomes a fruitful site for identity negotiation. This is the genre's strength and its possibility.

For me time flew during the act of writing. The workshop was quite student-centered; participants were active, involved, and had a sense of belonging. I was excited while working on my drafts. I spent one week on my book, planning, setting a theme, projecting scenes and sequencing many stories in my mind. Ultimately, I decided to write with the genre I loved and found that I felt most comfortable with autobiography. I took another two weeks to finish the first draft. It was an act of writing I would never forget; I enjoyed recalling the scenes of my life, selecting, and negotiating what I wanted to present as "me". While writing, I was curious about the feedback received from readers, especially, the professor. From the comments I received, I gained freedom to write and felt like I was allowed to be myself having experienced the spirit of reader response in real practice.

To me, the secret of writing my book was courage. Unlike Camella and Kiko, I was not afraid and did not feel resistant/or hesitant to open up my "burning experience". Besides sharing my personal slice of life with others, I found writing from memories to be a healing process that offered me temporary escape from reality. Adopting a different point of view, Kiko wrote her response in my book;

I love your writing. You use very descriptive language — beautiful language. This kind of language is sometimes very hard for me to do because it is so personal. Such writing makes us dig deep into ourselves. I am scared of what I will find; and sometimes I simply get tired of searching. But your search is written down beautifully here, and you should keep writing.

Some students looked at the creative workshop as a site for liberating writing and enhancing identity construction. Different students expressed different viewpoints. For instance Rachael said: "A writing workshop allows student to discover and formulate his/her values, attitudes, and beliefs. Writing helps a person identify who she/ he is." Diana agreed with Rachael, "A writing workshop is definitely a site for constructing identity and I think it has potential for

liberating writing." Regarding free writing, Paula observed that it happens on, "Only if the student is given the leeway to choose his/her own topic. If strict guidelines are imposed there is nothing liberating about it." From a different viewpoint, Lauren responded, "Indeed, writing is liberated because the primary feedback doesn't come from the instructor, who theoretically has the authority. This provides feedback from a number of sources." In this regard, Philip observed:

A writing workshop, for me, is more than liberating and helpful in the construction of identity. Writing workshop offers students a chance to collaborate on, share, and create ideas that inform and transform their writing and thereby the ways in which students communicate and construct their identity through language, which can be a liberating experience.

Some students relate their workshop's experience with voice. According to Lensmire (1998), the goal of a writing workshop is the expression of the soul. The goal of voice is a part of the workshop's attempt to humanize writing pedagogy through the acceptance and encouragement of students' assertions of 'I am' in the classroom. Rachael commented on the subject thus, "Writing workshop allows students to discover their own voice, which cannot be taught by direct teaching". Developing a voice can only happen through writing". Diana too related the genre of her choice to voice, "I can write with my voice freely. My book is something that I have definitely taken ownership of."

I learned most in this workshop from listening and contributing to discussions about other students' project particularly those that were unlike my own. When the workshop examined the difficulties in a particular piece, I could sometimes quite clearly see those difficulties in my own work. Wong shared his feeling about this issue in this manner "I learn by seeing what other students write and benefit from the constructive comments they made on my book." Angela declares, "How good it feels when people say that they like my writing; then, I should treat other writers the same way." Nicky reflected on her experience differently from others:

The biggest thing I learned was to reconsider comments on my work. I really got to see how different people in the class reacted differently to the same piece of writing. For example, one person would say, "I love this line the way it is, the imagery is great!" but then the next person would say, "You know, that line was confusing, maybe you should cut

it." It really helped me as a writer to not try to "please" my reader, or all of my readers.

Angela, Paula and other students reported gaining invaluable advice and feedback. Gabriel (2002) writes, "What we cannot make alone, we can make together. This is the promise of the writing workshop" (p. 168). Gabriel states that the author gives the gift of work-in-progress to a group of writers, each just as afraid as the other, and that the group will own the work for a while and give back the gift of suggestions. As Angela observes, "I learned the value of their feedback, especially when it is clear that the intended meaning is different from what the readers interpreted." Paula notes, "I learned how to be slightly more constructive in my criticism. I like the "HWICYMI (How would it change your meaning if) technique." On occasions, I experienced the workshop as a place where I learned to trust myself, believe in my ability and grow beyond the workshop. In this regard, Kiko and Angela echoed my feeling. Kiko shared her feeling at the end of the workshop: "This class makes me trust my ideas. I never felt as comfortable as this before. Since we also have international students in this class, it makes me understand what it means to be Native Americans." Angela articulated her experience in this manner:

I thought it was a wonderful experience. I really did have a story that I was "burning to write." I have a bunch of others too. After having had this experience, I have decided that I would like to join a group of writers who write creatively so that I can work on all of other stories that "I'm burning to tell." I imagine that they exist on campus.

Rachael left the workshop with the feelings that she, "was able to write about topics" that she had had in "mind for quite a while".

In sum, writing about the "burning experiences" book gave me and other students high self-esteem and helped us get rid of "'I can't write' writing syndrome" and the feeling that we do not know what to write, that we have nothing to write, that we do not have the ability to do it, and that we are not good enough to write. Kiko's reflection is a good example of the way the workshop impacted on all of us: She wrote: "most of all, I appreciated what I learned about writing from this class: to say what I mean, and mean what I say."

## Conclusion

Because of this workshop, I now see writing instruction as being about role negotiation, and identity negotiation (Brooke, 1991). The "burning experiences" in the writing workshop, as Brooke says, is not learning a set of strategies for text production or a set of conventions for genres or academic or business prose — the burning experience in writing class is the negotiation of writers' roles, of discovery, exploration, identity negotiation and construction.

The workshop came to an end on a sunny day in spring. Looking back, I recall the laughter, smiles, questions, lessons, and friendship. This workshop was over; the workshop I would conduct, however, had already begun growing in my mind. Looking forward, I dreamt of hosting my own writing workshop, where my students could experience "writing life" as I had in this workshop. Like Atwell (1991), I hope that my own writing workshop will be a place where students behave like writers, performing the act of writing, and finding the time, choices, and access to others' responses, just like real writers, just as I had myself received a wonderful writing opportunity from this workshop. I hope my students will be apprentice themselves to an adult practitioner of the craft of writing. I wish someday in the very near future I will get the opportunity to use writing workshops to change students' perspectives to be a better writer and a more complete human being.

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# Introducing Listening to Adult Learners — 'The Fun Way'

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## Abstract

Using songs to practice listening skills is not a new concept. However, in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Bangladesh where listening remains the least practiced and most neglected of the four basic skills up till the higher secondary level of education, the very idea of listening to a recorded speech in a foreign accent far removed from whatever English they have been exposed to, appears to be quite intimidating to most learners. The paper argues that as learners, especially young adults in Bangladesh, are pretty much into English music, it can be used as both a familiar and interesting resource requiring minimum of logistics support and enhancing student participation in promoting and developing their listening skills. This paper will also discuss issues relating to maximizing listening inputs in language classrooms by using songs, the kinds of songs to be chosen, and ways to use them effectively in such classes. Keeping in view the practical constraints of using listening activities in the language classrooms in Bangladesh, the paper sets out to provide useful suggestions on using songs embracing a whole spectrum of activities designed to promote acquisition, entertainment as well as production of the target language for adult learners.

## Introduction

Considering the amount of time individuals spend in total communication, (listening 45%, speaking 30%, reading 16%, writing 9%) (Rivers and Temperly 1978; Celce Murcia 1995) and its role in learning one's first language (first languages are learnt mostly by listening); it is surprising how listening had been an almost completely ignored and non-existent skill in language learning for so long. It is only fairly recently that with the vast technological advancement and

globalization when effective 'communication' has become the buzzword that oracy (the ability to participate and understand spoken discourse) and listening has begun to occupy the central stage in language learning. Nowadays, even first language learning involves projects on listening. However, because listening is one of the most elusive and complex skills, there is an ongoing debate in the discipline of Teaching English as a Foreign or Second language (EFL/ESL) on issues such as simplifying listening to texts in classroom, developing learners' confidence through listening or pursuing strategies that can become useful in making use of listening texts (Hedge 2000).

In Bangladeshi English Language Teaching (ELT) classes, however, listening remains the least practiced and most neglected among the four basic skills essential for developing communicative competence. The prime reason for this neglect is that it is not separately tested at any level (secondary, higher secondary or tertiary) of education. For learners listening thus remains one of the most dreaded skills, as the very act of it entails listening to some taped conversations in a foreign accent far removed from whatever limited English they are exposed to in and outside the classroom. Also, due to proper lack of logistics support, and guidance and student inertia teachers feel it not worth their while to invest time in an activity students can not make much of. Consequently, listening is set aside as a skill that learners are expected to learn by themselves. It is as if by 'osmosis' or through their exposure to media, internet, movies etc. they will learn listening.

However, like any other skills listening should be taught systematically and methodically. Keeping in view the practical constraints of using listening activities in the classroom, this paper will discuss ways to deal with learner inhibition and maximize learner output by choosing appropriate songs in ELT classes for meaningful and effective practice of listening skills.

The paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, it gives a brief account of the position of listening in the context of ELT in Bangladesh. Secondly, it analyses why listening is considered to be the most problematic of the four skills and suggests strategies for successful listening. In the last section, it shows how songs can act as a useful resource for introducing listening at the tertiary level to promote acquisition, entertainment as well as production of the target language for adult learners.

### *Teaching Listening in Bangladesh: ELT Classrooms*

In ELT classes in Bangladesh, listening remains a skill that is scanted by both teachers and students in language classrooms. One of the key reasons for the lack of listening practice in language classes in Bangladesh is probably because it is not separately and systematically tested at the secondary and higher secondary levels of education. Teachers, who are pressured further for the completion of syllabuses and in a rush to meet the deadlines of examinations ever looming at the horizon, do not feel listening to be something worth investing time in. For students, to whom exams and grades are the 'be all and end all' as far as motivation is concerned, the idea of wasting time on something that will not be tested in examinations does not hold much appeal. Again, lack of proper logistics support, guide lines, class size and quality of materials remain major deterrents. Consequently, listening is shelved as a skill that learners are expected to learn. It is as if by 'osmosis' or through their exposure to the media or any other forms, or if they are motivated enough, they will develop this aspect of language learning.

The entire learner situation, however, is reversed as these same students enter their tertiary level of education. As most of the course books in higher levels are written in English and most lectures are either delivered in the language or a lot of English words are used in interactive classrooms, most learners face difficulty when they come to acquire university education due to their lack of listening skills. Even extra language courses offered in public and private universities to make up for this deficit do not provide much help as these can not make up for the lack of a skill that has hardly been practiced. Listening remains a skill infrequently practiced in classrooms and even more rarely practiced outside it. At the learners' end it remains one of the most dreaded skills, as the very act of listening entails straining to understand some taped conversation in an accent far removed from the English they are exposed to, in and outside the classroom. Harmer (2001:231) aptly comments that the two main problems associated with listening can be summarized as 'panic and difficulty'.

Students often panic when they see the tape recorder/ cd player because they know that they are faced with a challenging task. The panic is bound to increase for students who do not feel up to the task knowing that the activity would only expose their individual lack of performance. This automatically raises their affective filters (Krashen 1985), thus defeating the whole purpose of listening. Thus for the majority of learners, especially for Bengali medium learners, coping with class lectures and texts written in English imposes an added burden to the already challenging and uphill task of coping with university studies.

One of the most baffling questions that Bangladeshi Language teachers often find themselves asking is, why despite learning English simultaneously alongside with Bengali for almost ten to twelve years our learners can not communicate properly in English? Often students' lack of practice and unwillingness to speak outside the classroom are held as prime reasons for their lack of fluency. What we tend to forget is, that speaking is a productive skill which requires more effort than a receptive skill (e.g. reading and listening) (Harmer 2001:46) and many learners will naturally not be readily prepared to speak. In the communicative continuum speaking comes after listening. Speaking not only means producing random words without meaning, it means uttering and producing meaningful words and also being able to decipher or decode whatever the other party is saying (Widdowson1983:1). Inability to make sense of what is being communicated results in utter breakdown of communication, which in my opinion, is more responsible for the failure of our learners being able to produce and continue conversations. With one of the basic skills severely unpracticed or underpracticed, our learners lack the ability to think and comprehend in the target language and work freely within the language system.

Also, quite frequently overlooked is the issue of exposure to a second language through the means of language learning. Indeed, it is possible to get exposed to non-productive listening and acquire a working knowledge of a language in process. Witness the way Hindi is making inroads in Bangladesh; courtesy of Indian soaps or film music from Hindi films devoured by millions! It can be argued that as far as media exposure is concerned, a wide array of English channels are available via satellite and internet to all. However, so far improving listening or speaking skills are concerned, most students feel either too intimidated, bored, culturally alienated or demotivated to watch English programs for instructive and educational purposes! Even when one is motivated enough to learn from the media, it remains a difficult task as successful listening, like any other skill, needs proper training and guidance. Thus before dumping the responsibility solely on learners, they should be trained in the techniques and strategies leading to successful listening which should be provided in classrooms by instructors.

### *Theoretical underpinnings of listening*

In the context of ELT in Bangladesh, nevertheless, teaching listening skills is difficult due to logistical problems and lack of the kind of technical supports necessary to ensure successful listening practice, also listening remains one of the most difficult skills to be presented in classrooms. Research in SLA and cognitive

psychology, however, has shed light on the process of listening and its implications in classroom teaching and learning. Though the full nature of how we process and comprehend speech is yet to be explained, as receptive skills both share some common characteristics; like reading, listening too, can be explained with the help of the "bottom up" and "top down" processes.

### *Bottom-up strategies*

Current knowledge of "bottom-up" strategies is derived from the investigation of three groups of researchers: psycholinguists interested in speech perception (e.g. Bever 1970; Clark and Clark 1977; Conrad 1985; Marslen Wilson and Tyler 1980); the work of communication researchers (Cherry 1957) and those interested in memory (Neisser 1982, as quoted in Hedge 2000). "Bottom-up process" makes use principally of information which is already present in speech. In listening when we use the "bottom up" process we try to pick up acoustic signals to make sense of the sound of the speech. By using the information in speech to comprehend meaning we segment speech into words, clauses, phrases and sentences. We use our lexical knowledge to assign meaning to words and use logical reasoning to establish relationship between them. We also pay attention to discourse markers, or using these strategies we try to first infer meaning from what is heard and then anticipate what might come next. For example, if we hear the following words in a news broadcast: "flood situation... worsened... country; after... the coastal regions... proceeded" we can infer from the word sequence that the overall flood situation in the country has deteriorated and then anticipate that we are going to hear about more of its destructive path indicated by the temporal marker 'after' and the verb 'proceeded'.

While listening and employing these strategies memory plays a vital role in comprehending and retaining what we hear. Research on listening has shown that while syntax is lost to memory within a very short time, meaning is retained for a much longer period. Thus 'echoic memory' helps us to hold word sequences for a few seconds where only initial analysis of language is possible by helping us to concentrate on key words or pauses or other significant clues or features. The load on short-term memory is quite heavy as listeners try to hold various parts of the text in mind inferring meanings and deciding on the parts they feel should be retained. This is where choice of text is crucial as overload can occur; if there is too much unfamiliar information the greater part of the text might get lost. Ultimately it is more the gist of the listening text than its detailed structure that is stored and retained in long term memory (Underwood 1989). Although the working of memory as an 'active' and constructive process is yet to be fully

understood, what ever information we have on it has implication for choosing texts and tasks for facilitating listening (Neisser 1982 as quoted in Hedge 2000).

### *Top-down strategies*

A "top-down" process or approach, on the other hand, makes use of previous knowledge ("higher level knowledge") in analyzing and processing information which is received (words, sentences, discourse etc.). Often called 'inside the head information', top-down comprehension strategies involve the knowledge that a listener brings to the text. Top-down listening involves inference from contextual clues and making connection between the listening text and the existing prior knowledge that the learner brings with him/her. Contextual clues refer to the learners' prior knowledge, which is also termed as schematic knowledge (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981; Carrell and Eisterhold 1983) which refer to one's knowledge of a particular situation; for example, the number of speakers, their relationship to each other, the setting (home, office, school etc.), the topic, the purpose of the spoken text and linking the discourse with what has been said earlier.

### *Schema Theory*

According to schema theory, our memories retain mental frameworks of various topics and settings. For instance, tables in red and white chequered tablecloths, in set with plates and forks, and chairs arranged around them, would immediately trigger restaurant schema in our mind. Miscommunication and misunderstanding can arise even amid speakers of the same language, when schematic knowledge differs, due to, cultural, regional or other differences.

While listening, listeners usually employ two kinds of schema. One is formal schemata where one has the knowledge of the overall structure and format of the speech event, e.g. 'Once upon a time there was' would automatically trigger the story schemata in our mind where we would expect to have characters, events, conflict, outcome, possibly a moral outcome with the ending like '...and then they lived happily ever after'. The other one is content schemata which involves general world knowledge, socio-cultural knowledge, and topic knowledge. Local knowledge would be necessary for inferring meanings, e.g. on the eve of Qurbani if one asks 'Cow or goat?' one needs to have the knowledge that animals are sacrificed on this religious festival of Muslims and the speaker is asking which one they have bought. Again, in contrast to the above example, many listening situations may be quite predictable. There are situations where one has elaborate mental frameworks or routines for those situations stored in

memory. Schank terms these as script and defines it as 'an elaborate casual chain which provides world knowledge about an often experienced situation' (1975: 264 as quoted in Hedge). Asking for doctor's appointment, asking for information, going to shopping, going to restaurant, booking a ticket, asking for direction etc are typical examples of scripts that we often use.

In actual listening, the "bottom-up" and "top-down" strategies and schematic and contextual knowledge are not mutually exclusive; rather, they work in conjunction to make us comprehend whatever we are listening to. Thus in real life listening, listeners first work out the purpose of the message from contextual clues, the content and setting; then they will activate their schematic knowledge and knowledge of script to make sense of the content; finally, they will try to match their perception of meaning with the speakers' intended meaning. Any mismatch between the two can result in communication breakdown.

#### *View of Listening: Product vs. Process*

Implicit in all skills is the dual concept of product and process. It was in the 1980s and early 1990s, what with more attention being paid to human beings as language processors that the focus on language teaching shifted from "product" to "process". Earlier language was deemed as a "fixed system, 'a finished product' where 'texts' (whether written or spoken) were presented as objects to be understood" (McDonough and Shaw 2003). The "process" view of language learning is important for all skills, but more so for receptive skills like listening, given its transient nature compared to the stability of, for example, written texts.

At the processing stage, a competent listener processes listening at two levels — at the level of sound and at the level of meaning; comprehension is achieved by combining the two. At the sound level one has to segment the stream of sound, and recognize word boundaries and contracted forms. This is a complex process, especially in spoken discourse, as sounds often overlap. This is particularly true in English where in connected speech one sound runs into another; for example 'what is happening?' in spoken discourse sounds like 'whatzappening?' Also, contracted forms like 'Am I not your friend' (Ain't I your friend too?) pose comprehension difficulty. One also has to recognize the vocabulary, clause and sentence boundaries, stress patterns, speech, rhythm, accent intonation speed of delivery etc. while processing sounds.

Processing meaning, on the other hand, takes chunks of listening texts and divides them into meaningful sections. In processing meaning one has to pay attention to linguistic clues like "however", "although", "nevertheless", "next" etc.

One also has to recognize cohesive clues which Brown and Yule (1983) terms as "co-text", linking larger chunks into a meaningful whole. Compared to reading and writing spoken discourse is often more simple in structure and less dense. In conclusion, speakers often repeat what they say directly or indirectly and a competent listener often identifies redundant materials and turns them into useful strategies to gain extra-processing time. One also has to activate one's schema and contextual knowledge to analyze language data and anticipate what a speaker is going to say next, e.g. someone saying he /she was late in class due to traffic jam will possibly go on expounding what happened.

### *What is successful listening?*

Considered in isolation, the micro-skills discussed so far might make listening appear like some kind of complex, internal process taking place with the brain of the listener and language divorced from real, everyday life. Successful listening , however, is a complex and automatic process which involves a combination of the micro-skills of processing sound and meaning, use of both "top-down" and "bottom-up" strategies where needed, and activating our previous knowledge of the world and contextual knowledge which contribute to comprehension and successful listening. The current model of listening is thus an interactive one where linguistic information, contextual clues and prior knowledge interact to enable comprehension. All the subskills that make up the overall skill of listening can be listed under the following headings—

- Perception skills
- Language skills
- Knowledge of the world
- Dealing with information
- Interacting with a speaker (G. White 1998: 8–9 as quoted in McDonough and Shaw 2003 )

Competent listeners call upon, engage and activate the requisite combination of subskills simultaneously while processing spoken discourse: the choice of skills in turn depends on the text, situation and reasons they are listening for (*ibid.*).

### *Purposes for listening*

In our day to day life we are required to listen for a variety of purposes. We listen to news, socialize, ask for information or direction, listen to class lectures or attend conferences etc. Listening can be reciprocal and participatory, requiring

the listener's active participation (e.g. chatting with friends) or non-participatory (e.g. listening to news). Sometimes the main purpose of participatory listening is to get information for a specific purpose such as asking for direction or finding out how to book an E-ticket via internet. Brown and Yule (1983) termed the purpose of exchanging information as transactional (one-way informational flow from one speaker to another) and the social purpose of communication as *interactional* (two-way speech). However, in real life listening can not always be divided into such neat segments, and often actual listening is an interplay and merging between two purposes e.g. conversation between two friends about how to go about applying to the university of their choice, which will involve a move between the interactional and the transactional.

### *Learners: active or passive?*

In keeping with the view of listening as 'product', the role of listeners have traditionally been regarded as passive, where they simply receive the incoming language data and interpret them. Rost (1990 as cited in McDonough and Shaw 2005) however, point out that in case of interactional speech the communication is 'collaborative' as in such situation we work as both listeners and speakers in shaping and controlling discourse. He is critical of the view of learners as passive language processors who supposedly perform action in a fixed order. Listening is not a one-way traffic where listeners just receive incoming data and processes it as passive receptors. He points out that a listener interprets what is being said, constructs meaning and finally responds on the basis of that interpretation. Thus a listening context is open-ended and flexible where the listener acts as a key figure in regulating the shape of the spoken discourse. Listening, in other word, does not only mean comprehension; it also involves regulating shared meaning with speaker on which the listener will act.

However, in reality, especially in ESL/EFL classes learners are still treated as passive over-hearers of taped materials, which is far removed from actual listening and does not prepare second language learners for the complex task of listening in real life situations where they are required to employ a daunting array of skills to understand whatever is said in a foreign tongue!

### *Problems encountered while listening*

Owing to its complex nature, listening can sometimes be tricky and can pose comprehension difficulty even for L1 speaker-listeners. External factors like too much background noise (traffic noise, phone ringing, loud conversation),

ambiguous or indistinct message or speech, mutterings, mismatch between local, regional or cultural knowledge etc. can prove distracting and make understanding difficult. Similarly, internal pressures like lack of motivation or interest in the topic, negative feelings towards the speaker or event, anxiety to contribute to a conversation or debate, and insufficient knowledge of the topic can make one loose thread of what the speaker is saying (Hedge 2000). The complexity of listening for L1 listeners clearly points out to the difficulties that L2 listeners are bound to encounter in processing listening, since they also have other uncertainties to deal with. Hedge (2000:237) refers to a number of such uncertainties; for example, uncertainties of confidence, uncertainties deriving from the presentation of speech, uncertainties due to gaps in speech, uncertain strategies, uncertainties of language, uncertainties of content and finally visual uncertainties. Underwood (1989) also lists seven main reasons for learners' anxiety while listening;

- (i) Learners-listeners cannot control the speed of delivery.
- (ii) They cannot always get things repeated.
- (iii) They have limited vocabulary.
- (iv) They may fail to recognize 'signals'.
- (v) They may lack contextual knowledge.
- (vi) It can be difficult for them to concentrate in a foreign language.
- (vii) Learners may have established learning habit, such as a wish to understand every word.

### *Listening Materials*

These findings and what we know of the nature of listening as a skill have implications for materials designing. Listening materials should be sensitive to learners needs and should be able to expose them to samples of authentic language use in different situations if we intend them to handle real-life listening.

It is, however, very difficult to present an authentic stretch of conversation (the definition of *authentic* being any text not created for language teaching purposes) in the class due to the interruption, shortness, background noise, ellipses, redundancy, and physical gestures of the speakers which at times might be impossible to recreate in language classrooms without proper logistics support (Ur:2-10) To further complicate the problems there are also issues of different registers, accents, dialects and use of colloquial languages and expressions which might appear intimidating to learners.

Let us consider what happens in a real-life listening situation. Unless we are talking over the telephone, in real life we are usually face to face with the speakers and as such get cues from the speaker's body language which gives us a lot of clues to what the other person is saying even if we do not understand each and every word of what s/he is uttering. Also, background noise is part of any conversation which though not impossible to produce in a taped-conversation is not always reproduced for fear of creating too much distraction (ibid). Such efforts to present naturalistic conversation in the language classroom often become a pale replica of the original. As a result, in most cases listening texts provided in the listening classroom for training learners is not *real-life listening* (italics mine).

**Listening text in Bangladeshi language classes:** Most listening texts designed for classroom use are discourse, dialogue or spontaneous speech that is improvised, or a fair imitation of it. The most popular form of listening texts in Bangladeshi language classes is usually listening comprehension followed by comprehension questions or listening exercises. Due to lack of logistics support, the sole material available and used in most EFL/ EFL classes is taped materials.

### *Strategies for successful listening*

Difficult as it may appear, like any other skills, there are certain strategies that can enhance beginner learners' listening skills. While introducing listening in a class, it is important for teachers to remember three basic points. Priming learners to these strategies beforehand can go a long way in ensuring successful listening to any stretch of conversation.

**Looking for key words** — In real-life conversation we do not pay equal attention to everything that is said; rather, we look for key words or phrases. Similarly, it is not important to understand each and every word in a given piece of listening material.

**Inferencing:** Even when one may not understand every word, a skilled listener always makes intelligent guesses from the contextual clues in a conversation. In any given piece of listening there are usually other sentences related to the main topic and it is often possible to infer what the speaker is trying to convey even if one misses or does not understand some part of the speech.

**Understanding the theme:** As long as one has understood the central message of the conversation, successful listening has been achieved.

However, it will be difficult to implement these points in a listening task in

a second language and proper guidance and practice will be required. Often, it so happens that in trying to understand every word uttered in a listening task learners lose thread of what the listening task is all about. This is where songs can come in handy as listening materials to promote acquisition and entertainment simultaneously while keeping the learners' affective filters low.

### *Why Songs?*

Using songs for listening is not a new or revolutionary idea. However, songs have often been used in listening classes as fillers or for purely entertainment purposes (Mc Rae 1991: 35, Ur 1984: 64). Moving away from this usual practice of using songs as fillers, this paper will discuss ways to deal with learner inhibition and ways to maximize adult learners' output in language classrooms by choosing appropriate songs for meaningful and effective practice of listening skills. Keeping in view the practical constraints of practicing listening skills in the classroom and student inhibition, this paper suggests the use of songs providing topical and relevant materials in listening classes as a motivating and enjoyable tool for introducing and practicing listening. Songs can be a great way to begin listening classes, especially with adult learners, and for multiple reasons:

- Firstly, in Bangladesh, English songs have always been a part of youth culture. Most learners are familiar with chart busters in both UK and USA. Thus starting from the premise that they are well acquainted with hit songs, we can help lower student anxiety and make them feel more relaxed as they start from a familiar ground, rather than expose them immediately to some drab or boring dialogue, or give them listening comprehension lessons or description tasks.
- Also, playing songs require minimum logistics support as procuring a CD player does not usually pose any difficulty.
- Songs can help learners understand the nature of listening and activate both "bottom-up" and "top-down" strategies. L2 learners are often uncertain about which strategy to employ while listening and tend to focus on micro-skills like phonological decoding of the speech. Tasks like looking for key words in songs and anticipating what might come next are good exercises that can initiate learners into looking for 'key words' to unlock the meaning of a listening text instead of trying to understand it word by word. Similarly, asking them to focus on what the 'message' of the song is can make learners aware of the fact that communicative purpose is achieved not by decoding the spoken text in

its entirety but by coming to a reasonable interpretation of the 'gist'.

- No learning takes place in a void. L2 learners do not come to class as empty receptacles; rather, they have a rich and varied knowledge of the world that if successfully employed can act as springboards for further learning. While listening in a foreign language, L2 learners often have the tendency to suspend their mother tongue skills and 'hear' rather than 'listen' to whatever they are supposed to listen. This tendency coupled with their anxiety to rehearse what they are going to deliver, prevent most of them from listening properly, reducing the speech to a stream of blurred, unintelligible sounds making no sense at all (Hedge 2000). Songs are particularly effective in countering these feelings as they trigger learners' song schema and make them more relaxed and receptive to the input they receive.
- In most Bangladeshi ELT classrooms the only resource for practicing listening are either the teacher reading aloud from written a text or playing taped materials. While these are useful resources, the problem with the first method is that it does not expose listeners to authentic listening as variations in accent, speed of delivery, colloquialism, background noises and interruption, different registers and other subtle nuances that are part and parcel of spoken discourse are absent in it and can not be simulated in such practice. While many of the above-mentioned features can be captured with taped materials, they fall short in replicating authentic speech. This is because taped conversations are often marked by slower pace, exaggerated intonation patterns, Received Pronunciation (RP), regularly repeated structures, more formal language, complete utterances, grammatically correct sentences, infrequent ellipsis, minimum background noises etc. for learners' benefit (*ibid.*). Songs, however, are authentic materials and unlike other materials there is no need to improvise or 'tamper' with them. Exposure to different genres of songs (rap, rhythm and blues, rock etc.) is an excellent source to help learners 'notice' (Schmidt 1990 as quoted in Harmer 2001) different features of speech. McRae (1996: 37) comments that it is possible to introduce different registers, dialects and accents through songs without making learners feel inhibited. It is not important to teach these features or even analyze them in-depth.

What is important is student exposure to these wide-ranging varieties; to the way 'rules are broken', to differences between written and spoken (or, here sung forms); and to colloquial, local, sectorial,

racial, social and regional expressions in English (*ibid.*).

- Again, with taped materials, in most cases, the only role learners are required to play is that of passive, non-participatory overhearers (G. White 1998). Most taped conversations are transactional in nature and leave little scope for interactional and participatory conversation. This leaves out and underplays the interactional part of speech although it is vital in communication. Any communication by nature is interactional and collaborative. Songs can be useful in emphasizing the participatory, collaborative nature of listening-speaking skills as we do not simply listen to songs as passive receptors but respond to them affectively. We often talk about songs we like or dislike, the genres we prefer, the singers we like and so on. As music is something most young adults are very much into, songs can induce them to generate a lot of integrative activities, pair and group work, open discussions etc. enhancing the interactive and participatory nature of communication.
- Visual cues are a very important feature for interpreting listening. Often non-verbal visual clues e.g. facial expressions, gestures, and the body language of the speaker tell us more and help us to make sense of a speaker's intention. Songs are particularly useful here, especially in limited resource set-ups, as unlike other listening texts it is not important to see a singer to understand a song.
- Although human beings are often compared to language processors, one essential difference between them and computers is that we cannot retain hundred percent of what we hear or have committed to memory. L2 learners, however, while listening to speech, have the unreal expectation of themselves having to hurry to remember a text word by word. This leads them to overburden their memory and they lose thread of what is being relayed. For example, while recalling or recounting a past conversation we seldom repeat it word for word. We rather focus on the gist. Songs can easily be used to expound the process of listening to learners. Just as we listen to songs holistically by not focusing on just the lyrics or the music separately but in their entirety, similarly listening should be approached as a multi-level process where learners must not focus on phonological decoding at the expense of semantic decoding.
- Spoken discourse is often less densely packed and more straightforward than written discourse. We often repeat and reemphasize what we say. Using refrains in songs as analogy, learners can be made aware of redundancy in speaking. Recognizing redundancies is a good strategy

for gaining extra-processing time while listening.

- The fun element in song can help lower L2 learners' affective filters considerably. The notion of affective filter suggested by Krashen (1985) refers to affective factors such as attitude, anxiety, competitiveness and other emotional responses which help or hinder language learning. Adult learners are often self-conscious and easily demotivated. Although the precise functioning of a filter in language learning is yet to be explained, it is widely agreed that affective filters play a crucial role in language acquisition. Due to the type of listening activities prevalent in ELT classrooms that test learners' comprehension ability without contextualizing the text or activating their schemata, learners often end up having a negative assessment about their listening ability. Introducing listening with songs keeps learners relaxed and students receptive. They usually try to figure out if it is a song they have already heard! If they conclude that it was not that song the element of fun involved creates a healthy atmosphere of competition, be it in individual or group work as students vie with each other to find out who has got most of the meaning.
- Class size does not matter, as it is possible to use songs with fairly big classes.
- It is possible to recycle old materials. Good songs are timeless and students do not mind listening to numbers they have already heard, while they are also open to new songs and eager to introduce the lyrics of their favorite songs.
- Finally, the best part about using a song is it is not antiquated, exclusive, inaccessible material that learners only get to hear in the class. It is easy for them to get hold of the songs played in class and practice in the privacy of their home.

However, while using songs for teaching listening issues like song selection, how to use them effectively and turn them into useful language learning experience should be taken into account.

### *Selection of Songs:*

Although most songs are entertaining and quite fun to listen, not all songs are fit to be played in a listening classroom. Keeping in mind the reason for playing songs, namely enhancing learners' listening skills, it is important to choose songs with elements of a story, a character clash, a point of view, or some social, moral or political message. Although it is totally up to the teacher to choose appropriate

songs depending on the level of the learners and objective of the course, for beginners it is best for them to choose slow numbers for example, country songs or soft rock numbers with minimum background noise, acoustics and sound effects. It is also important that the pronunciation and rendition of the singer is clear. As McRae (26) suggests that learners first acquaintance with register, dialect and accent will very often come from 'exposure to text from songs and rap music' and this can indeed act as a very useful resource for introducing learners to linguistic variety.

### *Activities:*

It goes without saying that choosing appropriate songs plays a crucial role if one is to turn it into a successful enterprise for both learners and teachers. Once the teacher decides on the song it is up to them what kind of activities they would like their students to practice. It is possible to teach both micro and macro skills through songs (Rivers and Temperly 1978: 65). If the target is to just practice listening skills the teacher might play the song once at first. This part is non-verbal and intended to acquaint them with the song. The second part is verbal where the teacher can play the song again and elicit responses to ascertain how much students have understood. Finally, the teacher can provide the lyric sheet on overhead slides or handouts and replay the song with the whole class singing the song. Thus after the initial introduction of the song and listening tasks the teacher can use the same material (song) to initiate multiple follow-up activities. For example, students can do research on the singer or the song and present their findings in the next class for oral practice or to hone their presentation skills. Students can also write their feelings or reflections on the theme of the song, or to make it more fun, find Bengali songs with similar themes, comparing and contrasting local and Western presentations and treatment of the same theme and commenting on the cultural differences between east and west. Again, if it is a vocabulary task then students can be given a list of key words from the lyrics and raise their hands whenever they listen to the words from the list. As a variation of the same task students can have the lyric sheet with blanks and fill in the gaps as they listen to the song. In this way learners can be taught 'focused listening' where they will realize that it is not important to listen and comprehend every word in a piece of listening task to get to the central message. To make the activity more competitive and fun the whole class can be divided into two groups and the group which can identify the most number of words along with the central meaning of the song will be the winner! Also, working in groups in introductory listening classes will make students feel less inhibited as the burden of success or failure is shared instead of being shouldered by any single individual. Thus once the text is presented, depending on the teacher's creativity and

student's level and adaptability, the directions a lesson can take are numerous. The list is by no means exhaustive. Like any other language teaching materials it is possible to use songs simultaneously to enhance listening skills along with a whole spectrum of activities from teaching language points, structures, verb-tenses, cloze, re-writing, practicing inferencing skills to even role-playing!

Finally, choice of songs will largely depend partly on the teacher-student's choice, on what is easily available or can easily be acquired. As Ur (1984: 66) points out, since fashions change rapidly, tastes differ; it is not easy to recommend songs. Students are unlikely to enjoy songs they do not like, but again if teachers do not enjoy the songs they use they will probably not teach them very well. Because the FM radio stations and music phones students of Bangladesh are acquainted with both Bengali and English music; there are even Bengali versions of some popular English classics, e.g. the Bengali versions of John Denver's 'Country Road' or 'Anne's Song'. These songs are pretty popular, frequently broadcasted and can be played alongside the English version for comparison and contrasting exercises. Also, before deciding on which song to play teachers can also ask students about their favorite English songs and can pick and choose from the most heard or common ones. As pointed earlier, good songs are timeless and students rather enjoy listening to familiar tracks. Thus starting from familiar grounds will keep the students relaxed while the element of fun and competition will keep their affective filters low, leading to better acquisition.

## Conclusion

To achieve communicative competence like other aspects of language learning, usage (knowledge of linguistic rules) and use (use of these rules for effective communication) of language are both equally important (Widdowson: 3). With one of the basic skills severely underpracticed, it is not possible for learners to work freely within any language system. Because there is no debate regarding the sad state of listening in Bangladesh, little is being done to improve the situation. It is important to realize that instead of dumping responsibility on learners and thinking 'listening will take care of itself' it has to be taught methodically like any other skills in language classrooms. The efficacy and therapeutic power of music and, its use in learning has been emphasized since olden times. Since listening is mostly dreaded and shunned by language learners in Bangladesh, this paper advocates using songs as to develop listening skills, thus turning one of the most favorite pastimes of EFL learners in Bangladesh into something enjoyable, educative and productive to practice one of the most essential and least practiced of the four basic skills.

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# A Comparative Study of English and Non-English Major University Students' Motivation to Learn English Oral Communication

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## Abstract

This study examines the differences in motivations of English and non-English major university students in Bangladesh to learn English oral communication. Altogether 355 (184 English and 171 non-English majors) university students participated in this study. To measure learners' motivation a modified version of the questionnaire constructed by Schmidt's et al (1996) was administered. In order to figure out the significant differences between the two groups an independent sample t-test was performed on each questionnaire item and on motivational subscales. Pearson correlations (2-Tailed) were analyzed on motivation data of both groups to understand the interactions among motivational subscales. Some similarities and differences between the groups are found from the analyses. Based on the findings of this study some suggestions are proposed for their pedagogical usefulness.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years most Asian countries have been emphasizing communicative language teaching to make English education more relevant to learners' necessities. Communicative English education has been made use of in curriculum reform in many countries where English is a foreign/second language. Many governments around the world are introducing English to young learners. For example, in Korea, the age for compulsory English education was lowered from 13 to 9 in 1997 (Park, 2000). The Japan government has introduced English language teaching to the nation's 24000 public elementary schools, and English education was to start there at primary grades from 2008 (Honna, 2008).

The perceived importance of English communication proficiency is evident in the reformation policies adopted by these countries. According to Nunan (2003), the English language is a crucial tool for economic, social and technological progress and this goal is made evident in the recent education policies of many Asian countries.

English as a foreign/second language is also playing a vital role in the whole education system in Bangladesh, as in many other Asian countries. As an attempt to upgrade English education, the language has now been introduced at the earliest grade possible (Yasmin, 2005). Since 1991 English is being taught as a compulsory subject from grade I to XII in public schools. In the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1995-2000), the government resolve to improve English language education is clear. The major objectives of the reformation process include expanding and improving the quality of English language education at secondary and higher secondary levels, and to improve the efficiency and standard of teachers through intensive training. In a recent education reformation policy, several steps have been taken to upgrade the prevailing English education system by introducing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology in the national curriculum (Hamid, 2008). It was assumed that CLT would be effective in developing students' 'communicative competence' and contributing to the human resource development efforts of the Government of Bangladesh (NCTB, 2003).

In Bangladesh English education is emphasized at all levels. English is taught as a compulsory school subject in public schools starting at grade one. In many private schools it is used for instruction at all levels. At many private universities, instruction is in English for most disciplines, including law, business studies, engineering, medicine, science and agriculture. The importance of English communication proficiency is also stressed in job interviews. Since a good command of English is an indispensable tool for information exchange and smooth economic transactions, demand for workers with English oral proficiency is strong in a globalizing world. English has become the *via media* in research, education, technology, tourism and so on. Most jobs require proficiency in spoken and written, or at the very last spoken English (Hamamoto, 2002). Society in Bangladesh has accepted this requirement as inevitable in the era of globalization.

In order to respond to the demand of communication proficiency prevailing in society, most universities in Bangladesh have initiated basic English communication courses. Both English and non-English majors attend those

courses to improve their oral competence in English and to increase their own proficiency. But English and non-English majors may not learn spoken English with the same kind of motivation. There might be some differences in their purposes, attitudes, level of anxiety and degree of motivation. The purpose of this study is to examine these issues. Course designers as well as teachers of spoken English courses should be aware of those issues while developing teaching methodologies.

## 2. Literature Review

Motivation is one of the main determining factors in developing proficiency in a second or foreign language (Gardner, 1985). Motivation is very significant because it influences the extent of learners' involvement in learning (Oxford & Shearin, 1996), and improves performance in curriculum-related achievement tests, and enhances the proficiency level. It also is a factor in perseverance and maintenance of L2 skills after formal language study is over (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). But motivation is an extraordinarily complex and multifaceted construct (Oxford, 1996) and it is essential for educators to understand what motivates students motivations to learn an L2 (Oxford et al, 1996).

The Socio-Educational Model (Gardner, 1985) promoted by Gardner and his colleagues has dominated thinking about language learning motivation for about three decades. Although developed in the Canadian second language context, the model has been influential in many other second language and foreign language research. It consists of two major aspects, integrative orientation and instrumental orientation. Integrative orientation refers to the intention to culturally and linguistically integrate with the target language group, while an instrumental orientation is identified when the learner wants to learn a language because of the practical advantages, such as to pass an examination or for economic and social achievements.

The foreign language environment differs from second language settings. Whether motivation differs between learners of foreign and second language is a question that has been repeatedly asked in recent years (Au, 1988; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1990; Oller, 1981). Oxford (1992) argues that the Socio-Educational Model with two motivational orientations; intrinsic orientation and extrinsic orientation, although helpful, is insufficient to explain the vast array of learners' reasons to learn languages. Dörnyei (1990) states that the model is not properly applicable in a foreign language environment. According to him, foreign language learners rarely have experience sufficient with

target language community that can help integrative motivation. Au (1988), Crookes & Schmidt (1991), Oller (1981) thus insist on the necessity for reevaluation of the dichotomous distinction of the model.

The dichotomous model, *intrinsic-extrinsic* motivation, explained in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000) in mainstream psychology has shed substantial light on second and foreign language learning motivation research. Some L2 researchers have attempted to incorporate elements of the self-determination theory into L2 specific models. The extrinsic–intrinsic distinction is not identical to the instrumental–integrative distinction (Schmidt et al, 1996). An extrinsic motivation is defined as something done because of an external reward obtained from the action, while an intrinsic motivation is presumed when one does something because the activity itself is rewarding. Though the recently posited continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2000) of self-determination theory puts forward various aspects of motivation, this theory itself provides little focus on the negative features associated with second language or foreign language learning (e.g. anxiety, hesitation, lack of confidence).

During the last four decades one of the influential conceptualization in motivation psychology is the *Expectancy-value* framework set out in Atkinson's achievement motivation theory (Atkinson, 1974). It was developed subsequently by a number of researchers (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Wigfield, 1994). The main principle of the *Expectancy-value* theory is that motivation to perform a task is the product of two vital factors; the individuals' *expectancy of success* in a given task, and the *value* the person estimates to that task (Dörnyei, 2001b). In other words, the higher the individuals' perceived likelihood to attain the goal and the greater the incentive value of the task, the more the degree of individuals' positive motivation. According to the theory, one is unlikely to be motivated by a task when either factor is missing. If the individual perceives success to be impossible or no valid outcomes from the effort to succeed, s/he will not do anything. The principle of *Expectancy-value* model is not thoroughly adopted in any of L2 motivation research; rather, some components associated with the *Expectancy-value* framework have been incorporated (Dörnyei, 2001b) into it. All aspects of the theories are not compatible to L2 related studies though they are associated with other human behavior. In a study on EFL learners Schmidt et al. (1996) constructed the collection instruments adopting several elements (intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, anxiety, motivational strength, and attitude) from the theory. The research instrument Schmidt et al.

(1996) constructed to investigate L2 motivation based on selective components of *Expectancy-value* theories comprehensively reflects the potential features of the L2 learning context.

L2 learners' motivations to learn English have been investigated by many researchers in foreign language environments. Dörnyei (1990) conducted a study of a group of 134 adult EFL learners in Hungary in order to investigate their motivational profiles. Schmidt et al. (1996) pursued a study based on a sample of 1464 learners to identify components of motivation of adult Egyptian EFL learners. Yamato (2002) tried to find out the motivations to learn English in a Japanese EFL setting by conducting a study on a group of 261 adult learners. He compared the factors of motivation between university students and voluntary learners of English. Nakata (2006) conducted a study of Japanese Non-English majors to gain an insight into their motivational constructs.

Compared to overseas studies, to date research in Bangladesh concerning motivation of EFL learners has been sparse. Haque & Maniruzzaman (2001) have conducted an empirical study to find out the interaction between EFL/ESL learning motivation and proficiency of Bangladeshi university students. The participants in their study were 61 non-English major undergraduate students from three departments of the University of Dhaka. The participants received an average of ten years of formal instruction in EFL. A modified version of Gardner's AMTB and a test on reading and listening skill and grammatical proficiency in English were used as instruments of the study. In this study no significant correlations between attitude and English proficiency was detected. The relationships of learners' integrative and instrumental orientations with their EFL proficiency were also found to be insignificant. In another study, Rahman (2005) examined the motivation to learn English based on a sample of 94 private university students in Bangladesh. The study was based on the Socio-Educational Model promoted by Gardner (1985) in Canadian bilingual setting. Through frequency distribution and mean score analysis, he found that in Bangladesh instrumental motivation is the major motivational orientation for university students to learn English.

### 3. Research Objectives

The studies discussed above deal with general L2 motivations to learn English as a foreign/second language and do not concern learners' motivation to learn any particular L2 skill such as reading, writing, speaking, or listening. In fact, learners' motivations to learn oral communication in foreign language settings have not yet

received sufficient attention of language researchers. Therefore, considering the necessity of English communication proficiency for both English and non-English majors in Bangladeshi socio-economic perspective, the present study has the following objectives:

- What are the differences in motivations, attitude, level of anxiety, and motivational strength between English and non-English majors?
- What are the relationships among motivations, attitude, level of anxiety, and motivational strength of English and non-English majors?

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 355 students of four different universities in Dhaka. There were 184 English Major and 171 non-English Major participants (majoring in Pharmacy, Architecture, Law and Business Studies). Their academic levels ranged from undergraduate to graduate, with an age range from 18 to 25. All participants were Bengali native speakers. Both English and non-English major participants were enrolled in communicative English courses that were parts of their curriculum.

### 4.2 Instruments

The self-report questionnaire used in this study to measure learners' motivation is a modified version of Schmidt's et al. (1996) instrument that was used in a survey on Egyptian adult EFL learners. To meet the objectives of the present study 30 items were selected and modified from the questionnaire. The instrument was composed in simple English. The instrument used in this study consists of five motivation subscales — intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, attitude, anxiety and motivational strength. The present study adopted five point Likert scale responses, where 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree' were the two poles (Appendix 1). The internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire was assessed by means of Cronbach's alpha coefficient and a reliability of .80 (English major) and .84 (non-English Major) were obtained. Cronbach's alpha statistics were also computed for each motivation subscale. These are shown on each section of the questionnaire (Appendix 1). In addition, the questionnaire contained some demographic information about the participants (e.g. major, academic level).

### 4.3 Procedures

The analyses of the collected data were carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 14.0. The participants were divided into two groups, English majors (Group 1) and non-English majors (Group 2). Inferential statistics was used to analyze the data. In order to figure out the significant differences between the two groups an independent sample t-test was performed on each questionnaire item and on motivational subscales. Pearson correlations (2-Tailed) were analyzed on motivation data of both groups to understand the interactions among motivational subscales.

## 5. Results

The descriptive statistics of the most agreed and the least agreed statements of Group 1 and 2 are listed respectively in Table 1 and 2. It is interesting to see that the most agreed motivation items were almost identical in this sample of Bangladeshi English and non-English major students. These participants reported that they learn spoken English to be prepared for their careers, to travel abroad, and they invest time and effort to improve their speaking skills. Some striking differences between the two groups were revealed in the least agreed items, although the standard deviations of some items are very high. Table 2 shows that English major participants do not feel uncomfortable or embarrassed when they need to speak English and they do not learn English to please their guardians. Non-English majors, however, reported that they do not enjoy the activities of learning oral communication that much; rather, they wish to gain proficiency in other easier ways. They also disagreed with the statement concerning fascination for western life style. Both groups disagreed on the issue of having keen interest in English music and/or movies.

**Table 1 The most agreed statements of both groups**

The 5 most agreed items of Group 1 M	Mean SD
If I can speak in English, I will be able to get a better job. 4.45	.651
Increasing my English speaking proficiency will have financial benefits for me. 4.20	.705
I want to speak in English because it is useful when traveling in many countries. 4.16	.741
I will try to improve my English speaking skill in every possible way. 4.11	.855
I often think of how I can improve my English speaking proficiency. 3.98	.786

The 5 least agreed items of Group 1 are differences in motivations, attitude, and anxiety, motivational strength between English and non-English majors, independent sample t-tests were performed. The results are presented in Table 3. Here we see that significant differences between the two groups were found only in two subscales, intrinsic motivation and the anxiety level.

I will try to improve my English speaking skill in every possible way. 4.05	.803
I want to speak in English because it is useful in many countries. 4.01	.914
I often think of how I can improve my English speaking proficiency. 3.91	.730
Increasing my English speaking proficiency will have financial benefits for me. 3.88	.750

**Table 2 The least agreed items of both groups**

The 5 least agreed items of Group 1 M	ean SD
I feel uncomfortable if I need to speak in English. 2.51	1.035
It embarrasses me to talk voluntarily in English. 2.60	.935
I am afraid other people will laugh at me if I speak in English. 2.65	.992
I am learning how to speak in English because my guardians want me to improve my skill. 2.84	1.038
Most of my favorite musicians and actors are English speakers. 2.85	1.002
The 5 least agreed with items of Group 2	
I wish I could acquire English speaking proficiency in an easier way, without much effort. (Reverse coded) 2.49	.836
Speaking in English is a challenge that I enjoy. 2.60	.756
Speaking in English is a hobby for me. 2.63	.659
Most of my favorite musicians and actors are English speakers. 2.92	.976
The life-style of native English speaking countries fascinates me very much. 2.96	1.076

**Table 3 T-test results on motivation subscales of Group 1 and 2**

Motivation sub-scales	Group 1 (n=184)		Group 2 (n=171)		t-test	Sig.(2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
Intrinsic Motivation	3.22	.66	2.84	.47	6.26	.000**
Extrinsic Motivation	3.58	.55	3.60	.58	-.217	.829
Attitude	3.09	.73	3.03	.74	.807	.420
Anxiety	2.77	.79	3.11	.79	-4.15	.000**
Motivational strength	3.89	.63	3.78	.66	1.65	.101

\*\* P<.01

To identify the differences between the two groups on each item of the questionnaire, t-tests were carried out. The analyses reveal significant differences between English major and non-English majors in 13 items out of the 30 (Appendix 2). Of the 13 differences 4 items are from intrinsic motivation, 4 from extrinsic motivation, 4 from anxiety and 1 from motivational strength subscales. No difference was found in the attitude sub-scale.

T-test identified significant differences in four intrinsic motivation items; 'Speaking in English is a hobby for me' ( $t=4.666, p=.000$ ), 'Speaking in English is a challenge that I enjoy' ( $t=7.956, p=.000$ ), 'I don't enjoy speaking in English, but I know that this proficiency is important for me' ( $t=2.282, p=.023$ ) (reverse-coded), 'I wish I could acquire English speaking proficiency in an easier way, without much effort (reverse-coded)' ( $t=4.666, p=.000$ ). In all of these items English majors scored higher than non-English majors. These results indicate that English majors possess higher intrinsic motivation compared to non-English majors. But both groups reported that they enjoy speaking in English very much.

There were significant discrepancies between the two groups in four extrinsic motivation items. In the item 'I am learning how to speak in English because my guardians want me to improve my skill' ( $t=-4.220, p=.000$ ), non-English majors scored higher than English majors. This difference indicates that non-English majors are comparatively more pressurized by their guardians to learn spoken English than English majors. In the item 'Being able to speak English will add to my social status' ( $t=2.286, p=.023$ ) English majors scored higher than non-English majors. It appears that English majors tend to use English proficiency as a tool to increase their social status. Again, in the item 'I want to speak in English because I would like to immigrate' ( $t=-2.270, p=.024$ )

non-English majors scored higher than English majors. The finding shows non-English majors' interest in immigration is one of their goals in learning English. Another difference found between the two groups is in the extrinsic motivation item 'Increasing my English speaking proficiency will have financial benefits for me' ( $t=4.048, p=.000$ ). Here English majors' higher scores indicate that they are more aware about financial gain utilizing their oral proficiency than non-English majors.

In the 'anxiety' subscale differences were found in 4 items. In all the 4 items non-English majors scored higher than English majors. These results reveal that English majors are comparatively less tense about participating in learning activities in spoken English compared to non-English majors. Differences were found in the items: 'I feel uncomfortable if I need to speak in English' ( $t=-4.604, p=.000$ ), 'It embarrasses me to talk voluntarily in English' ( $t=-4.398, p=.000$ ), 'I am afraid other people will laugh at me if I speak in English' ( $t=-3.467, p=.001$ ), 'I think I know English well, but I don't perform well in speaking' ( $t=-2.483, p=.014$ ).

In motivational strength sub-scale difference was found in only one item, 'Even if I need to spend much money to learn spoken English, I will continue' ( $t=2.265, p=.024$ ). In this item English majors scored higher than non-English majors. This result shows that English majors are comparatively more committed to improving their English oral performance even by investing money for course fees or material expenditure.

Pearson correlations (2-tailed) were performed to understand the relationships in motivations, attitude, anxiety and motivational strength of the two groups. The correlation results of English and non-English majors are presented respectively in Table 4 and 5. Table 4 shows that Group 1 has a strong negative correlation between intrinsic motivation and anxiety. This group showed significant positive correlations of extrinsic motivation with attitude and motivational strength. Significant positive correlation was also found between attitude and motivational strength.

According to Table 5, Group 2 showed significant positive correlations of extrinsic motivation with attitude, motivational strength and, somewhat unexpectedly, with anxiety level. This group also showed strong positive correlations between attitude and motivational strength. In correlation analysis of motivation subscales, no other significant relationships were found in this study.

**Table 4 Correlations among motivation subscales of Group 1**

	IM	EM	A1	A2	MS
IM	1				
EM	.094	1			
A1	.049	.606**	1		
A2	-.707**	.092	.076	1	
MS	.037	.416**	.274**	-.014	1

IM: intrinsic motivation, EM: Extrinsic motivation, A1: Attitude, A2: Anxiety, MS: Motivational strength. \*\*p<.01

**Table 5 Correlations among motivation subscales of Group 2**

	IM	EM	A1	A2	MS
IM	1				
EM	.027	1			
A1	-.004	.545**	1		
A2	-.081	.193*	-.061	1	
MS	.023	.445**	.682**	-.014	1

IM: intrinsic motivation, EM: Extrinsic motivation, A1: Attitude, A2: Anxiety, MS: Motivational strength. \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05

## 6. Discussion

The first research objective addressed in this study was to identify differences in motivations, attitude, level of anxiety, and motivational strength between English and non-English majors. From the t-test results we see that in intrinsic motivation there are significant differences in 4 items. According to the results of t-test analyses English majors are more sincere about communication skill than Non-English majors. A possible interpretation of this finding might be that in Bangladesh a substantial proportion of English graduates end up as teachers (Alam, 2001). This trend of career interest might be reflected in their sincerity in developing English oral proficiency. In the reverse coded items non-English majors reported that they attach more importance to performance than to the learning process. In other words, though they know that the proficiency is important for them, they do not enjoy learning activities much. In the last intrinsic motivation item, non-English majors reported that unlike English majors they are interested in improving oral proficiency if the methodology is

easy, and does not require much effort. A potential reason for this attitude might be due to pressure of disciplinary courses, non-English majors do not find sufficient time to practice speaking skill, and therefore, look for easier ways to meet proficiency demand. In such circumstances it is necessary to provide English and non-English majors with separate classrooms to make speaking courses effective for the latter. Again, instructors would need to be more careful about preparing teaching materials to attract and motivate non-English majors.

In extrinsic motivation subscales, differences between English and non-English majors were detected in four items. In two items English majors scored higher than non-English majors. In these items English majors consider the skill as a means to increase social status and to gain financial benefits. It appears that compared to non-English majors English majors are more dependent on proficiency to ensure social status. In contrast, non-English majors reported two reasons that affect their effort to learning spoken English; one is the pressure from guardians and the other their intention to immigrate. The former reason may be attributed to the relatively less intrinsic motivation of Non-English majors compared to English majors which makes them take guardians' pressure as a strong influence to learn spoken English. The second reason reveals a feeling of insufficiency in non-English majors. They are probably more frustrated by the lack of attractive careers in an unindustrialized country like Bangladesh. It is a common goal for many non-English major graduates of these areas to immigrate to foreign countries and to seek jobs there (Quadir, 2008). Therefore, sometimes non-English majors' learning of English communication is guided by their wish to seek work in foreign countries.

Non-English majors scored higher in four items on the anxiety subscale. In L2 contexts where learners have infrequent contact with native speakers, anxiety can be high in output activities such as speaking and writing (Nakata, 2006). In Bangladesh learners do not have enough exposure to spoken English outside classrooms. In many universities non-English majors find fewer opportunity to speak English with their co-learners and teachers compared to English majors. In foreign language learning situation due to insufficient contact with native speakers of English, learners feel anxious in practicing the productive skill of speaking (Clement, Dörnyei & Noels, 1994) and tend to deal with learning activities less effectively and easily disengage from anxiety-provoking task (Aida, 1994). Nakata (2006) reflects on the cultural aspect of anxiety in Japanese EFL contexts where 'making mistakes' is not socially acceptable. Similarly, for Bangladeshi learners it is a humiliating experience to make mistakes

and loose face in public. Learners with low confidence would probably try to avoid anxiety-provoking tasks like speaking. Aida (1994) emphasizes the importance of teachers' role in alleviating classroom tension by creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere that can help reduce students' embarrassment in front of their peers. It is the teachers who can help students overcome the feeling of anxiety by recognizing their mistakes in L2 speaking (Nakata, 2006). An interactive and enjoyable teaching approach is needed to help learners to reduce hesitation in speaking English.

The second research objective of this study was to find out the relationships among motivations, attitude, level of anxiety, and motivational strength of English and non-English majors. In correlation results English majors showed a significant negative correlation between intrinsic motivation and level of anxiety. This result implies that English majors' high intrinsic motivation helped them to lower the level of anxiety to deal with learning activities. This finding corresponds to Gottfried's (1985) finding in his study that intrinsic motivation and anxiety are dependent factors. This result is also supported by findings of Schmidt et al. (1996) in their study of adult Egyptian learners. Their work revealed that learners who enjoy English class the most are less anxious. Again, according to t-test results it is found that English majors were significantly more intrinsically motivated and less anxious to deal with learning activities compared to non-English majors. In correlation results of non-English majors the relationship between intrinsic motivation and anxiety was found negative but not significant. However, the positive correlation between extrinsic motivations and anxiety found in this study is somewhat odd. This result implies that non-English majors' extrinsic motivations increase their level of anxiety. One possible explanation for this result might be that their high extrinsic motivation makes them a bit too worried about acquiring proficiency. This type of feeling is recognized by Aida (1994) as 'positive anxiety', which sometimes help learners to improve their skills because of a high degree of motivation. In correlation results, too, significant positive relationships between extrinsic motivation and attitude were found in both groups of learners. We also found strong positive correlations between attitude and motivational strength in both groups.

## 7. Conclusion

Learners' motivation is of pragmatic interest to language teachers and program designers who want their courses to be congruent to learners' needs and interests (Schmidt's et al, 1996). The differences in motivation factors between English

and non-English majors found in this study through t-test, and correlation analysis should help course designers and instructors and make them aware of the relative features and enable them to find out potentially effective methodologies. Like most EFL research this study suffers from the inevitable limitation of convenient sampling which makes the results open to question and verification. Further research is needed to clarify these issues and to examine the generality of the findings of this study. It is also necessary to conduct follow-up studies to find out whether the findings of this study have any correspondence with other Asian contexts where both English and Non-English majors are learning English oral communication in academic environments. Investigation is also necessary at different levels to understand learners' motivation to learn spoken English.

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## Appendix 1

### A Motivation Questionnaire for EFL Learners of Spoken English

(a) Strongly agree	(b) agree	(c) neither agree nor disagree	(d) disagree	(e) strongly disagree
5	4	3	2	1

### Part A (Intrinsic motivation) English major $\bar{x}=.74$ / Non-English major $\bar{x}=.55$

1. I enjoy speaking in English very much.
2. Speaking in English is a hobby for me.
3. Speaking in English is a challenge that I enjoy.
4. I don't enjoy speaking in English, but I know that this proficiency is important for me. (reverse-coded).
5. I wish I could acquire English speaking proficiency in an easier way, without much effort. (reverse-coded).

### Part B (Extrinsic motivation) English major $\bar{x}=.77$ / Non-English major $\bar{x}=.80$

6. I am learning how to speak in English because my guardians want me to improve my skill.
7. I need to improve English speaking proficiency because I want to impress people around me.
8. Being able to speak English will add to my social status.
9. I am learning how to speak in English because I want to spend a period of time in an English speaking country.

10. I want to speak in English because it is useful when traveling in many countries.
11. I want to speak in English because I would like to immigrate.
12. One reason I am learning to speak English is that I can talk to and make friends with foreigners.
13. If I can speak in English, I will be able to get a better job.
14. Increasing my English speaking proficiency will have financial benefits for me.
15. If I can speak in English, I will have a marvelous life.

**Part C (Attitude) English major  $\alpha=.77$  / Non-English major  $\alpha=.83$**

16. Native English speakers are very friendly people.
17. Most of my favorite musicians and actors are English speakers.
18. The culture of native English speaking countries has contributed a lot to the world.
19. I like to follow the modernity of native English speakers.
20. The life-style of native English speaking countries fascinates me very much.

**Part D (Anxiety) English major  $\alpha=.83$  and for Non-English major  $\alpha=.82$**

21. I feel uncomfortable if I need to speak in English.
22. It embarrasses me to talk voluntarily in English.
23. I am afraid other people will laugh at me if I speak in English.
24. I think I know English well, but I don't perform well in speaking.
25. Speaking is harder than other language learning skills (reading, writing, listening).

**Part E (Motivational strength) English major  $\alpha=.75$  / Non-English major  $\alpha=.82$**

26. I can honestly say that I really try to put my best effort to improve my English speaking proficiency.
27. I plan to improve speaking proficiency in English as long as possible.
28. Even if I need to spend much money to learn spoken English, I will continue.
29. I often think of how I can improve my English speaking proficiency.
30. I will try to improve my English speaking skill in every possible way.

## Appendix 2

### T-test results of all motivation items of Group 1 and 2

Questionnaire Items	Group 1 M	(n=184) SD	Group 2 M	(n=171) SD	t-test	Sig. (2- tailed)
<b>Intrinsic motivation</b>						
1. I enjoy speaking in English very much.	3.65	.887	3.51	.792	1.476	.141
2. Speaking in English is a hobby for me.	3.02	.905	2.63	.659	4.666	.000**
3. Speaking in English is a challenge that I enjoy.	3.34	.989	2.60	.756	7.956	.000**
4. I don't enjoy speaking in English, but I know that this proficiency is important for me. (reverse-coded).	3.20	.910	2.99	.847	2.282	.023*
5. I wish I could acquire English speaking proficiency in an easier way, without much effort. (reverse-coded).	2.90	1.009	2.49	.839	4.251	.000**
<b>Extrinsic motivation</b>						
6. I am learning how to speak in English because my guardians want me to improve my skill.	2.84	1.038	3.33	1.168	-4.238	.000**
7. I need to improve English speaking proficiency because I want to impress people around me.	3.14	1.055	3.29	1.050	-1.400	.162
8. Being able to speak English will add to my social status.	3.89	.929	3.66	.971	2.286	.023*
9. I am learning how to speak in English because I want to spend a period of time in an English-speaking country.	3.22	1.159	3.24	1.015	-.147	.883
10. I want to speak in English because it is useful when traveling in many countries.	4.16	.741	4.01	.914	1.658	.098

11. I want to speak in English because I would like to immigrate.	2.92	1.176	3.19	1.048	-2.270	.024*
12. One reason I am learning to speak English is that I can talk to and make friends with foreigners.	3.28	1.032	3.32	.992	-.413	.680
13. If I can speak in English, I will be able to get a better job.	4.45	.651	4.42	.658	516	.606
14. Increasing my English speaking proficiency will have financial benefits for me.	4.20	.705	3.88	.750	4.048	.000**
15. If I can speak in English, I will have a marvelous life.	3.69	.909	3.56	.933	1.317	.189

### Attitude

16. Native English speakers are very friendly people.	3.15	.842	3.01	.797	1.612	.108
17. Most of my favorite musicians and actors are English speakers.	2.85	1.002	2.92	.976	-.724	.469
18. The culture of native English speaking countries has contributed a lot to the world.	3.37	.978	3.17	1.000	1.904	.058
19. I like to follow the modernity of native English speakers.	3.17	1.031	3.06	.928	1.050	.294
20. The life-style of native English speaking countries fascinates me very much.	2.91	1.149	2.96	1.079	-.484	.628

### Anxiety

21. I feel uncomfortable if I need to speak in English.	2.51	1.035	3.02	1.037	-4.604	.000**
22. It embarrasses me to talk voluntarily in English.	2.60	.935	3.05	.990	-4.398	.000**

23. I am afraid other people will laugh at me if I speak in English.	2.65	.992	3.03	1.087	-3.467	.001**
24. I think I know English well, but I don't perform well in speaking.	3.05	1.062	3.32	.995	-2.483	.014*
25. Speaking is harder than other language learning skills (reading, writing, listening).	3.02	1.079	3.15	1.077	-1.134	.257

### Motivational strength

26. I can honestly say that I really try to put my best effort to improve my English-speaking proficiency.	3.90	.938	3.84	.916	.554	.580
27. I plan to improve speaking proficiency in English as long as possible.	3.92	.859	3.80	.818	1.442	.150
28. Even if I need to spend much money to learn spoken English, I will continue.	3.55	.979	3.31	1.008	2.265	.024
29. I often think of how I can improve my English-speaking proficiency.	3.98	.786	3.91	.730	.958	.339
30. I will try to improve my English-speaking skill in every possible way.	4.11	.855	4.05	.803	.702	.483

\*\*p<.01, \*p<.05

# Revisiting Classics: Relevance of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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## Abstract

Although many readers and critics of the present era might consider Jane Austen's fictional writings to be outdated and clichéd, her work nevertheless retains an undying appeal. During the last decade of the twentieth century the English-speaking world has experienced an Austen renaissance as it has been treated to a number of film and television adaptations of her work. The reasons for viewers and readers enjoying and identifying with Austen's fiction are numerous. This paper contends that the 'mutual cognitive environment' which Jane Austen so skilfully and dexterously creates in her masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice*, accounts for its present day relevance and appeal. This claim will be elucidated and established through an analysis of the novel within the framework of the concept of a 'mutual cognitive environment' as explicated by Sperber and Wilson in their discussion of Relevance Theory (2002:249). The contention is prompted by the assumption that a comprehensive account of how this 'mutual cognitive environment' is created by Austen and the process of its interpretation by readers should generate accounts of how this text gives rise to particular effects. Further, the paper maintains that for the present-day reader of *Pride and Prejudice* this environment is created due to the interaction of contextual assumptions which include knowledge of hierarchical social status, predicament of women in a male-dominated society, and human traits.

Society has a pervasive influence on the encoding of both verbal and nonverbal signals during the process of creation, as well as the decoding of those signals during the process of interpretation. It influences personal and social beliefs, perceptions, values, word meanings and message interpretations, thus directly impacting on communication. The fact that the novel under discussion has continued to be popular and has appealed to generations after generations of

readers for more than two centuries poses a challenge to any theory which aims to analyse the literary text and discover the reason for its sustained popularity. Relevance Theory, which will be used to explain the popularity of the novel under discussion, is founded on the notion of *optimal relevance* (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:256). This may be explained as the readers' processing ability in terms of their processing effort and its possible effects on them during the interpretation process. The theory postulates two principles about the role of relevance in cognition and communication, which facilitate a better understanding of how decisions are made during processing of utterances against dynamic interrelations amongst contexts and a shared background knowledge or mutual cognitive environment (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:39). The main focus is on the inferential processes implicated in deriving effects, the central claim of Relevance Theory being that these inferential processes are constrained by two principles. The two principles upon which the theory is based are:

- a) The Cognitive Principle of Relevance which states that, "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, 2002: 251)
- b) The Communicative Principle of Relevance which states that, "Every act of ostensive inferential communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:256)

The paper underscores the fact that insofar as the purpose of literary criticism is to develop interpretations or readings of a text and readings are generated by evidence from literary texts and contextual assumptions, Relevance Theory can enhance literary criticism by exploring how readings are arrived at and considering how much evidence there is to support a particular text's never-ending value. Relevance Theory is a comprehensive account of human communication and cognition developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (2002), which has been successfully applied in the literary domain by several scholars. According to Sperber and Wilson (2002:251) 'relevance', can be described as the property of inputs (such as an item of information, a perceived phenomenon, and an utterance) which automatically determines the direction of cognitive and communicative processes. It is defined in terms of positive cognitive effects, which include true contextual assumptions that reinforce or modify existing assumptions and stimulate the processing effort required to achieve these effects. The relevance of an input will increase as long as the positive effects achieved increase or the processing effort expended decreases,

and vice versa. Further, Relevance Theory is supported by two general principles, the first of which is *Cognitive Principle of Relevance* (Sperber and Wilson, 2002: 251), which states that human cognition automatically tends to maximise relevance. Further it states that apart from the tendency to maximise relevance, humans are endowed with the ability to meta-represent other people's thoughts and intentions, which allows people to make fairly accurate predictions about particular interpretations likely to be relevant to others and use these predictions for various purposes, both benevolent and deceptive. The second principle, the *Communicative Principle of Relevance* (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:256), states that each act of communication conveys the presumption that the speaker has chosen the most relevant utterance in consideration of her/his abilities and preferences and that the hearer automatically expects the utterance to be sufficiently relevant to be worth putting in some effort to process it. Hearers start processing utterances by decoding their linguistically encoded meaning and then, following a path of least effort, they enrich the recovered meaning at the explicit level and complement it with the derived implicit meanings (implicatures); they stop when they reach interpretations that satisfy their expectations of relevance.

These principles of communication and cognition and the notion of optimal relevance are considered by Relevance Theorists (Sperber and Wilson) to be the key to relevance-theoretic pragmatics and pragmatic stylistics. As stated earlier in this study, these principles also operate in the domain of literary discourse if one views the latter as a form of communication taking place between an author and a reader. Further, the author may be termed as a discourse initiator and the reader as a discourse recipient. Communication, Sperber and Wilson argue, raises and exploits definite expectations of relevance. They also state that Inferential Communication is not just a matter of intending to affect the thoughts of an audience; it is a matter of getting the audience to recognize that one has this intention. Thus it is an integral and crucial part of the entire process as Sperber and Wilson consider communication as an *asymmetrical* process wherein the discourse initiator has the complete responsibility of handling the communication in such a way that there is no misunderstanding between him/her and the discourse recipient. The discourse initiator within a mutual cognitive environment has insight into the discourse recipient's possible interpretive processes and uses this knowledge to create the input in such a way that the discourse recipient obtains contextual information in order to interpret it. In defining the term 'cognitive environment' Sperber and Wilson make the following proposition:

'A fact [or, more generally, assumption] is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true.' [Hence] an individual's total cognitive environment is a function of his physical environment and his cognitive abilities. It consists of not only all the facts [or assumptions] that he is aware of, but also, all the facts [or assumptions] that he is capable of becoming aware of; in his physical environment...Memorized information is a component of cognitive abilities' (Sperber and Wilson 1995:39).

Thus one can state that a cognitive environment for any individual is a group of assumptions that are valid to him/her on the basis of the fact that they are understandable and distinguishable. On this basis a *mutual cognitive environment* is further defined as, "any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it. In a mutual cognitive environment...every manifest assumption is *mutually manifest*" (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 41- 42). Collating these ideas in the context of a classic English literary text leads us to the fascinating issue of how language and society (which includes attitudes to people's status in society, to women in a patriarchal society, and human traits etc) constantly interpenetrate as well as modify each other; what we can find out about a particular society by studying its language and vice versa, and how this can be explained with the help of Relevance Theory.

In the following section, we use Relevance theoretic analysis based upon the theory of Sperber and Wilson to illustrate how Austen uses language and recurrent images in her novel to construct and vividly portray characters and their lives. However, this analysis does not illustrate the complex relations and constant interaction existing between our cognition and its manifestation. Rather, it attempts to give a somewhat schematic idea of the potential sources from which information can be supplied during the process of communication which takes place between the author and readers and map the location of discourse-internal information and its meaning within the broader picture of the plot of a literary text such as *Pride and Prejudice*. By analyzing the mutual cognitive environment created by Austen within the framework of the three categories (viz., predicament of women in a male-dominated society, human traits and hierarchical social status) identified earlier, this study underscores how and why Austen's novel still appeals to most readers:

### **1) Predicament of women in a patriarchal society:**

Marriage and matrimony and preoccupation of women with getting married are

central concerns in Austen's fiction. She vividly represents a point which many social historians have made: that marriage, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was an economic necessity for women. Far from being a matter of romantic or personal choice, the constraint on women to marry was very considerable, Austen's novels thus illustrate some of the reasons that most women of that time decided to get married. Mary Evans argues in *Jane Austen and the State* (1987) that Austen's work reveals marriage to be enforced upon women by the type of society they lived in:

Jane Austen...vividly represents the point which many social historians have made: that marriage, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was an economic necessity for women. Far from being a matter of romantic or personal choice, the constraint on women to marry was very considerable. (Evans, 1987:46)

From Austen's novels we can infer that women were subjected to patriarchal institutions such as marriage and further rendered weak by being relegated to the role of a wife and mother. Undoubtedly, as compared to Austen's time, in contemporary society blatant propaganda encouraging women to lead a life of domesticity no longer exists. Today, women in most parts of the world are not educated to lead exclusively domestic lives but mostly have access to the same type and level of education as their male counterparts. In addition, women have increasingly become part of the world's workforce and have started sharing household duties with their husbands or partners. Despite this type of progress, traces of a legacy, and of such a practice which would have women believe that it is their duty and calling to take care of the home and the family, can be found. Despite the fact that women today are no longer explicitly encouraged to develop their domestic talents in order to attract a husband (as they were in Austen's day), there are still some individuals who would have them believe that overseeing the housework is their responsibility. Further, the conventions of courtship have not changed as much as one would like to believe. Modern women have inherited a legacy of waiting to be asked. Some of them may have managed to shed this legacy completely, and initiated relationships, but most still wait for the man to make the first move, as recent popular feminist writing, such as that of Germaine Greer, has illustrated:

As recently as August 1995 Imogen Edwards-Jones agonized in *The Times* over the fact that a woman still cannot ask a man out for a date. (Greer, 1999:316)

Scholars have drawn parallels between eighteenth-century conduct books (which prescribed women's role in society) and a book written in 1995, *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* which clearly stipulates the role men and women play in society, as seen, interestingly enough, by its women writers. These writers believe that it is "the male prerogative to say hello first, make the first phone call, arrange the date, pay for it, bring presents, and propose" (quoted in Kollmann, 2003.Web). Further, Nancy Armstrong maintains that 'conduct books' continue to exist in the modern era. Though they might have a different appearance they still manage to dictate women's identity:

And although today we find authors neither designing curricula to educate young women at home, nor writing fiction to demonstrate the properties of feminine conduct, the conduct book is still alive and well. Besides all the books and advice columns telling women how to catch and keep a man, and besides numerous magazines imaging the beautiful home, there are also home economics courses that most women must take before graduating from high school. (Armstrong, 1987:62)

Armstrong's observation about how 'conduct books' and advice columns continue to influence women's lives and choices in the present day substantiates our argument that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is still significant and relevant for her readers. This is a consequence of the mutual cognitive environment she creates very skillfully in the novel regarding women's situation in a patriarchal society. The manner in which she creates this mutual cognitive environment will be highlighted and explicated by analyzing the following examples from the novel:

- 1.1) "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." (PAP, 1960:1)
- 1.2) "I do assure you, sir, that I have no pretensions whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it...Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart." (PAP, 1960:121)

The first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* as example 1.1) stands as one of the most famous first lines in literature. Even as it clearly introduces the arrival of Mr. Bingley at Netherfield the event that sets the novel in motion, this sentence ironically also offers a

miniature sketch of the entire plot, which concerns itself with the pursuit of "single men in possession of a good fortune" (PAP,1960:1) by various female characters. The preoccupation with socially advantageous marriage in nineteenth-century English society manifests itself here, for in claiming that a single man "must be in want of a wife," (PAP, 1960:1) the author reveals that the reverse is also true: a single woman, whose socially prescribed options are quite limited, is in want of a husband. In example 1.2) despite Elizabeth's entreaty, Mr. Collins refuses to be persuaded that she means to reject him; instead, he insists that her statement is characteristic of the courtship ritual wherein a woman invariably refused a marriage proposal once before accepting it. The reader may view Mr. Collins as lacking intelligence and common sense, yet his behaviour is in keeping with the author's aim of the exploration of female identity and aspirations in much of the novel. The female desire for marriage and matrimony and its economic necessity sustains the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. Yet Elizabeth's comments illustrate the disparity between the internal feelings and thoughts of a woman and their socially acceptable exterior manifestations.

If 'elegance' consists of dissembling and falsifying feeling, Elizabeth surely cannot satisfy the societal standard, "My feelings in every respect forbid it" (PAP, 1960:80). She herself points out the dichotomy between femininity and being true to oneself: "Do not consider me now as an elegant female...but (rather) as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart" (PAP, 1960:80). The socio-cultural milieu within which Austen's characters lived and the situations faced by them are not specific to that period alone, but are prevalent even now in a patriarchal structure. The 'mutual cognitive environment' that she created in her text can still be processed with least effort because the concept of money and well-being provided by a husband is still optimally relevant. Austen's society is a microcosm of the desire present in human beings which is not restricted to one place or time but encompasses society's belief regarding women's need for comfort and stability, which as has been mentioned earlier, is still relevant in a patriarchal, male – dominated society. In the second example too we can easily relate to Elizabeth as a woman who acts against the social conventions of her time which prescribe that a woman should reject a man once before finally accepting him. As mentioned earlier, social norms regarding courtship and proposing marriage have not changed materially since Austen's time which accounts for its relevance in present day society. The right to choose is still not acceptable insofar as a woman is concerned and the right to propose is still in the hands of men.

## 2) Human Traits:

This category discusses the basic human traits and characteristics that have existed since time immemorial. The pride of a rich well-established man of high social standing and the prejudice of a woman against that man resulting from being slighted or insulted in a social gathering is not difficult for present-day readers to relate to. Even the cynicism of a witty man who is married to an uncommonly dim wife is not a situation that is unimaginable for denizens of any society. Austen's use of these traits in her characters gives the novel their human appeal which reaches across temporal and spatial barriers. Here are two examples:

- 2.1) "You judge very properly," said Mr Bennet, "and it is happy for you that you possess the talent of flattering with delicacy. May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?" (PAP, 1960:73) or "Mr Bennet treated the matter differently. " So, Lizzy," said he one day, "your sister is crossed in love, I find. I congratulate her. Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little a little now and then" (PAP, 1960:151)
- 2.2) "...Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us." (Mary Bennet, PAP, 1960:20)

Fundamental human traits such as pride, cynicism and prejudice are central to the novel. Both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are disliked at separate points for their pride and prejudice. For example Darcy is described in the earlier part of the novel as the "proudest, most disagreeable man in the world."(PAP: 1960:9) At another point in the novel Miss Bingley says to Darcy about Elizabeth that he should "endeavour to check that little something, bordering on conceit and impertinence, which your lady possesses."(PAP, 1960:56) She is referred to as having an "abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum" (PAP, 1960:37); her manners are described by Miss Bingley as "very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence..." (PAP, 1960:37) And yet Elizabeth is the main character, the one we are to identify with and the only one who seems to have any self-respect. Mr. Bennett is a character who is throughout seen as a person who takes life and its problems with cynicism. He treats all with scepticism and disregards the social norms of a host, father and husband. The characters still remain as life-like as ever for the reader as the author portrays those human traits which are universal in nature and can be found in all societies. Present-day readers can process these qualities which can be

seen by them in their own families, neighbourhoods etc. Other examples of the human qualities of pride and prejudice can be seen as being embodied in Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth when the former confesses his love for Elizabeth and his disappointment at her inferior social status; "Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?".(PAP, 1960:211) "Elizabeth retaliates, 'You are mistaken Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner'". (PAP, 1960:211) This same exclamation of prejudice haunts Elizabeth after Darcy tells her the truth about Wickham and Bingley and explains how prejudiced she was with her quick baseless judgements. Realizing that she had been "wretchedly blind", Elizabeth "grew absolutely ashamed of herself. - Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd".(PAP,1960:229)

### 3) Hierarchical social status:

The key feature of eighteenth-century English society was that it was arranged as a status hierarchy, not as a class society. In the sense that a historian or sociologist can assign the people he or she is studying to predetermined pigeonholes called "classes," then all societies are and have been class societies. But in the historically more important sense of how people actually related to each other and identified themselves in their social order, then eighteenth-century English men and women ordered themselves in a status hierarchy. The basic sets of relationships should be envisioned as vertical, not horizontal. Each person was thought to have been ascribed at birth a position in the natural-indeed, divinely established order and each felt that his or her loyalty was to social superiors, not to fellow workers. Hence the social structure was like a status ladder, or rather a number of parallel ladders, each rung being a status gradation with its own generally accepted duties and privileges. If a person moved up or down the ladder, it was off one rung and onto another, the ladder itself remaining unchanged. Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great man of letters, remarked that the English people were set in their hierarchical places "by the fixed, invariable rules of distinction of rank, which create no jealousy, since they are held to be accidental."<sup>1</sup> By the late 20th century, a new status system evolved which was different as it was born out of late capitalism and the mass media, and its dynamics reflected the conditions of the modern era. Nevertheless a status system does exist and the members of the high-status group still expect obsequious deference, and lay claim to certain privileges,

as aristocratic and caste elites did in earlier centuries. (Kurzman et al: 2007.Web)  
An analysis of the following examples from the text reveal the manner in which the concept of a status hierarchy operated in Austen's time and the manner in which it is relevant to present-day readers.

- 3.1) "But it must very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world," replied Darcy." (PAP, 1960:38)
- 3.2) "Elizabeth, having rather expected to affront him, was amazed at his gallantry; but there was a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner which made it difficult for her to affront anybody; and Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger." (Elizabeth and Darcy, PAP, 1960:55)

An in-depth study of the characters' behaviour and conversations in the text reveals that in Austen's society, manners were associated with social class and accordingly with the quality of a person's character. Thus members of the aristocracy, such as Darcy or Lady Catherine De Bourgh, are perceived as justifiably proud in their manners because of their high status in society. The Bingley sisters, who aspire to a higher level in the hierarchy of social status, are also proud and careful in their manners and scrupulously differentiate between those with whom they associate from amongst the members of the Bennet family. This discrimination is based on manners and so Jane and Elizabeth, who display correctness and decorum in their behaviour, are acceptable, whereas Mrs. Bennet, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia, who speak and act on whims with no thought for propriety, are rejected. The differences in the Bennet girls' manners could be viewed as being indicative of the differences in their parents' class and social status: Jane and Elizabeth are more closely associated with their father, a land-owning gentleman, whereas Mary, Kitty, and Lydia emulate their mother, the daughter of a lawyer. However, the author's sense of irony comes through as she plays with this traditional societal perception of class and manners. Throughout the novel, she satirizes the manners of all classes, exposing people who have excessive pride as rude and often foolish, regardless of wealth or station. In the text, Austen uses Mr. Collins as an extreme example of how ill-conceived and baseless pride can affect one's manners. Mr. Collins prides himself on his sense of respectability, his profession, and his association with Lady Catherine. As a result, he behaves in an absurd manner, going so far as to break one of society's rules and introduces himself to Darcy rather than waiting for Darcy to acknowledge him. Similarly, Mrs. Bennet appears absurd as she ignores decorum and talks

unrestrainedly to all and sundry about Jane's prospective marriage to Bingley. With both Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth acts as the voice of propriety, explaining to her unreceptive relations the proper way to behave. Readers today can relate to the social construct of class and the ensuing status portrayed by Austen in her novel with ease. As mentioned earlier, social status and a hierarchy based upon it is not difficult to imagine by the present day readers as remnants of it though, in a different form, may be found even today. The desire and aspiration to move up the status hierarchy is not uncommon even in the modern era and the depiction of characters like the Bingley sisters who aspire to be elite by imitating the manners and style of the upper class continue to be relevant. The author's satirizing the construct of class acts as a further ostensive stimulus for the readers and they can process it with little effort because class hierarchy still exists even as the struggle against this hierarchy continue.

To conclude, this paper has examined *Pride and Prejudice* in order to explicate and explain the timeless appeal it has had for generations of readers. This has been done through the analysis of text examples under three categories of gender, human traits and class. This Relevance theoretic analysis of the examples also provides the ground for the overall interpretation of the novel as well as the author's sustained popularity. Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* is still relevant in today's world because she dealt with constructs that are not only relevant but to a certain extent also timeless. Moreover, she is a 'social' novelist as for Austen and her contemporaries literature was an important vehicle for social and cultural significance and the novel in particular played a vital role in creating an image of middle-class identity; indeed, the novel was a product of middle-class society, and catered to its interests and tastes. It was also seen as relevant to contemporary issues, and, since these issues were unusually deep and clear-cut they can be explained with the help of a theory of cognition and communication such as the Relevance Theory. The theory helps in explaining its value by foregrounding the fact that all the social and human traits highlighted by Austen in the novel are prevalent in present-day society in some form or the other. This, in turn, facilitates maintaining the 'mutual cognitive environment', providing optimal relevance for the reader and decreasing the processing effort in its interpretation. Thus, the author with her constructs of women in a patriarchal society, human traits of pride and prejudice, and social status in her novel, creates an understanding between herself and the reader which transcends a gap of two centuries and which accounts for an effect and appeal which is timeless.

## Notes

1 Website <[lyceumbooks.com/pdf/PeoplesBritishIslesII\\_Chapter\\_03.pdf](http://lyceumbooks.com/pdf/PeoplesBritishIslesII_Chapter_03.pdf)>

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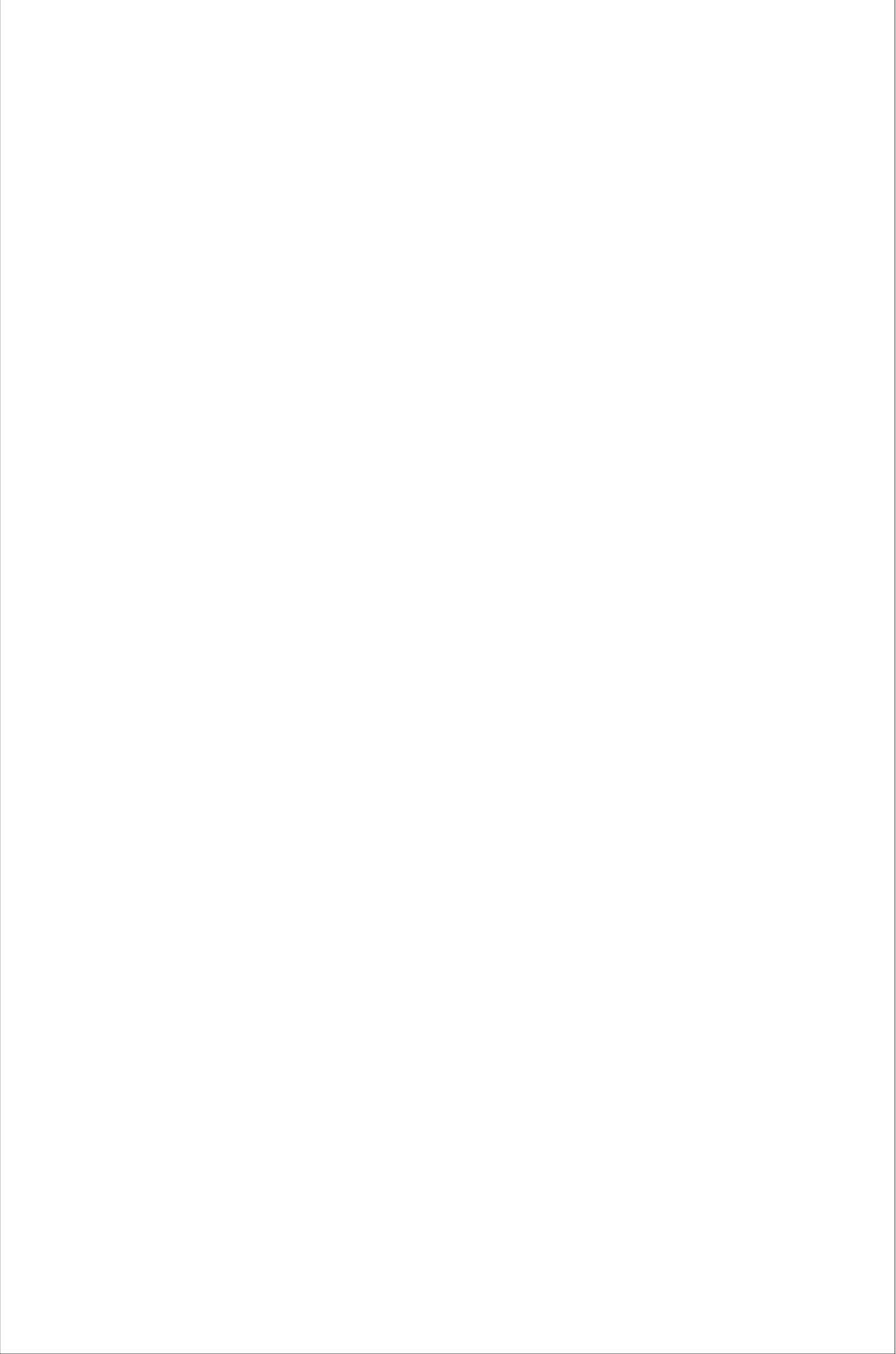
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