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## RECLAIMING THE OTHER

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### *Negotiating Femininity, Moulding a Nation in Difficult Daughters by Manju Kapur*

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Born in Amristar in 1948, educated both in her country of origin and abroad, Manju Kapur was in her early forties when she decided to pursue a literary career, which she began to develop while teaching English at Miranda House University College for Women (Delhi).<sup>1</sup> Writing her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, was a laborious and painstaking process, involving five years of scholarly research at Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, in order to become thoroughly acquainted with the historical events eventually featured in her narrative. Moreover, as the author has pointed out in a recent interview, the story underwent several stages of editing before reaching its final form: "I had to rewrite the book eight times over seven years. And each time I thought I had finished the book" (Kumar 2002: 2). Publishing the volume was not an easy task either: unable to find an Indian publisher willing to support her first endeavour, she approached Faber and Faber, who accepted the manuscript after the requested changes were made (Shaikh 2006: 101). Released in June 1998, reprinted by Penguin India in the same year, *Difficult Daughters* proved to be an extremely successful and highly acclaimed novel and, in 1999, it was awarded the prestigious *Commonwealth Writers' Prize*, in the 'best first published book' category, for the Eurasian region, besides being shortlisted for the *Crossword Book Award* in India.

Narrated from the point of view of Ida, the daughter of Virmati (the central character of the story), the plot unravels following the vicissitudes of three generations of women, in the time span between the late 1930s and the present. The protagonists' constant struggle with one another, their different, opposing perceptions of femininity (ranging from the traditional role of women as nurturers, homemakers, carers and life-givers to a new, still faltering model of intellectual, emancipated womanhood), as well as the frequent breakdowns of communication between mothers and daughters seem to perfectly justify the title. Besides, Manju Kapur's narrative has an evident autobiographical slant<sup>2</sup>; while she viewed herself as a *difficult daughter*,<sup>3</sup> Virmati was openly inspired by her own mother: "I based my first novel on her. I admire her fighting spirit, her generosity, her capacity to endure. She irritated me when she was alive, but now I see these things more clearly. I think of her every day" (Kahlon 2011: 4).

Nonetheless, as it will be shown in the present study, the scope of the novel is much broader and deeper than the mere portrayal of generation gaps and value conflicts: the writer did not simply aim at exploring family relationships and women's issues in a male-dominated society. It should not pass unnoticed that the story is set against the background of the events leading to the Independence of India, scrupulously depicted by the writer. Strikingly enough, the original title of the volume was *Partition*: the publisher

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<sup>1</sup> She left her position a few years ago, being now on "an indefinite sabbatical": "Having had a few books published, I'm more confident with my writing now, and it had become difficult to write and work at the same time" (<http://jaiarjun.blogspot.it/2008/08/meeting-with-manju-kapur.html>).

<sup>2</sup> As Ruby Milhoutra (2005: 169) has elucidated, "*Difficult Daughters* has undeniably an autobiographical tinge and touch"; in fact, like Virmati, Manju Kapur was born in Amristar, she used to teach in a college, and her family was a victim of the Partition.

<sup>3</sup> "[C]onflict between mother and daughter is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter" (Kahlon 2011: 3).

suggested changing it to *Difficult Daughters* for marketing reasons, to enthrall potential readers with the alluring prospect of an intricate and engaging family saga (Chakravarty 2010: 1006, Kindle location). Furthermore, the novel was published about fifty years after the end of the *Raj* when, in the words of Bashabi Fraser (2008: 1), following a long period of silence, “[t]here [was] a notable surge of interest in the Partition of India [...it was] a time to reflect, look back and weigh what India gained or lost as a result of decolonization”. Many important collections of oral histories and short stories were actually released around that time: just to mention a few, remarkable examples, Alok Bhalla’s groundbreaking three-volume *Stories about the Partition of India* (1994), Mushirul Hasan’s anthology in two volumes entitled *India Partitioned, the Other Face of Freedom* (1995), and Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998).<sup>4</sup> Finally, as Om Dwivedi (2010: 681 Kindle location) has noticed, since it describes Virmati’s advancement from childhood to maturity, the novel falls under the category of “a female *Bildungsroman* novel”, a genre often employed by postcolonial writers as a means of “explor[ing] the problems of retaining roots and preserving a cultural belonging in the aftermath of colonial rule” (Tickell 2007: 4), as well as “connecting the political with the individual and allegorizing the struggle for independence and the growth of the newly independent nation in the personal progress of a central protagonist” (ibid.).

Given what has been argued so far, therefore, this paper sets out to demonstrate that the subtler purpose of *Difficult Daughters* (much more forcefully expressed through its working title *Partition*) is to establish a tight parallelism between the protagonist’s struggle for liberty, her longing to break free of the constraints of unwritten rules and conventions, her self doubt and painful negotiation of her femininity (through conflicts, adjustments, and setbacks), and the equally uncertain and ambiguous awakening of the writer’s mother-country to political, cultural, and social freedom, culminating in the 1947 Independence, gained at the cost of bloodshed, misery, and the Partition. Virmati’s development as a woman torn between tradition and modernity, her restless search for identity emblematically mirror the history of Mother India.

Before delving into the analysis of the main character and her uncertain, doubtful evolution, it will be necessary to briefly outline the plot of *Difficult Daughters*. After Virmati’s funeral in Delhi, her middle-aged daughter Ida decides to visit her long-neglected relatives in Amristar, to piece together (through their accounts and memories) the elusive and obscure story of her mother’s youth which, up until that moment, had remained shrouded in silence. Hence, the core of the novel is focused on Virmati’s life, starting from the time she was a ten-year-old girl, the eldest daughter of a highly reputable and traditional Punjabi couple, who had been blessed with eleven children. Responsible for her younger siblings, constantly reminded of her domestic chores and moral duties towards her family (especially towards her ever-pregnant, sickly mother Kasturi), Virmati is not given the affection and the attention she craves for. When she is thirteen, she meets her unmarried, well-educated, independent cousin Shakuntala, who encourages her to take her studies more seriously. Nevertheless, despite her efforts, at seventeen Virmati fails her F.A. exam, but she is successful in the second attempt, when she is eventually granted the possibility to concentrate on her books. Stimulated by her achievements, she wishes to further enhance her education but, ignoring her hopes, her

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<sup>4</sup> Bhalla’s introductory remarks to his first volume deserve to be quoted, in order to fully grasp the importance attached by editors and anthologists to their literary efforts: “I have to put together this anthology of stories about the Partition not in order to exorcise the past, but in the hope of initiating an ethical inquiry into the history of my age and place” (1994: x). The same urge is expressed by Urvashi Butalia who, fifty years after the end of the *Raj*, “began to realize that Partition was not, even in [her] family, a closed chapter of history” (1998: 6)

parents arrange her marriage with a canal engineer, a perfectly suitable match in their view. Due to a loss in the prospective groom's family, the wedding is postponed and, while waiting for the end of the mourning period, Virmati enjoys the extraordinary opportunity to go to college. She eagerly attends the lectures of *the professor*, Harish Chandra, who is also a tenant in her aunt's portion of the mansion where the girl lives. Even though he is already married to Ganga (an illiterate, but compliant and submissive partner), Harish develops a boundless passion for Virmati, who fully reciprocates his feelings and cherishes every word he utters, placing him on a pedestal. Aware of the difficulties in fulfilling her love, in open rebellion against tradition, family bonds, and the marriage plan hatched by her parents, she attempts suicide by drowning, only to be fortuitously rescued by some of her relatives and immediately locked in a godown. To save appearances, her sister ties the knot with the canal engineer and, trying to rectify Virmati's tarnished image, the *difficult* (and dishonourable) *daughter* is sent away from the household, to Lahore – "the Oxford of the East" (Kapur 5) –, for higher studies. Meanwhile, the liaison with the professor continues. She conceives a child and, not to interfere with her lover's life, she painfully decides to have an abortion. After completing her B.T., because of her outstanding qualifications, she has the uncommon chance of filling the prestigious position of principal in a women's college in Nahan, in the hill state of Sirmaur. Even in the new context, however, the professor's frequent nocturnal visits undermine her reputation, thus causing her abrupt dismissal from the post. On her way to Shantinetan she stops in Delhi, where she meets a friend of Harish's, who finally succeeds in persuading him to put an end to their five-year illicit affair and take Virmati as a second wife. The newly-wed woman leads a wretched existence in her husband's house: Ganga and her children treat her with deep scorn; besides, her family still ostracizes her, preventing her from even participating in the funeral ceremonies of her own father, killed during one of the frequent riots involving Muslims and Hindus. After a physically and psychologically excruciating miscarriage, Virmati's life takes a sudden turn. The political and social turmoil of those days prompts Harish to send Ganga and her offspring to Kapur, a safer place. The professor and Virmati move to Delhi and, just when the country is finally gaining its independence, the woman gives birth to a baby-girl, Ida, the narrator of the book, destined to grow into another *difficult daughter*, who disappoints her parents with her "refusal" to be bright (Kapur 278), an abortion, and a divorce.

The first element connecting Manju Kapur's novel to the body of "Partition literature" (Didur 2006: 4) is the narrative incident that triggers the flash-back account of Virmati's life, namely Ida's quest for her mother's legacy, her craving to grasp her real story, beyond scant, vague, almost unutterable words. When Virmati was alive, in fact, "her eyes looked confused and her face went blank whenever her daughter demanded a story about her Lahore days" (Kapur 256); "she never talked much about herself [...] when [Ida] asked her anything, she would say she remembered nothing" (223). Likewise, as already noticed, for nearly fifty years, the tragic events in 1947 were merely "sanitized into numbers and statistics in the pages of history books" (Butalia 1998:11), while the collective and individual traumas stemming from them remained unspoken. As Sravasti Guha Thakurta (2011: 56) has elucidated, "silence was possibly the only way known to the victims of Partition to start life afresh and contain bitterness, a way of re-establishing community life and interpersonal trust". Silence was also the strategy employed by Virmati to heal the wounds in her memory and carry on with her existence as normally as possible. What's more, oral histories of the Partition experience related by aged eyewitnesses, as well as short stories stemming from them were among the first documents to be saved from oblivion, and then collected and published around 1997; similarly, acting as an editor, Ida based her reconstruction of Virmati's past on orality, interviewing

elderly relatives and old friends in Amristar<sup>5</sup> with the aim of recomposing the fragments of her mother's partitioned identity.

Virmati's yearning for self-determination is aroused by Shakuntala<sup>6</sup>, a "vibrant and intelligent" (Kapur 16) lady with a M.Sc. in chemistry, who has "a life of her own" (16), never doubts herself, is happily *unmarried*, and does not look around for approval every time she speaks or acts. For the first time in the novel, in Shakuntala's ominous words, the fate of Mother India and women's (clearly Virmati's) destiny are compared and entwined: "These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry and nothing else" (17). Notwithstanding the dilemmas and the insecurity that constantly afflict Virmati's conscience ("I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever" (18)), the attractive and glamorous vision conjured up by Shakuntala's words (a life of travelling, following the work of fellow-scholars, reading papers, and attending seminars, as well as conducting political meetings and joining demonstrations) "plant[s] the seeds of aspiration" (19) in her young mind. She decides to devote her life to studying, thus breaking the patriarchal mould, and resisting her mother's pressure to marry and abandon (as Kasturi herself had done)<sup>7</sup> any foolish dream of liberty and education because, as it is widely known, "a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings" (111).

Virmati's hesitant awakening to autonomy and self-rule, however, proves to be illusory: in the course of the novel, she will simply shift from a stifling and repressive home environment to a tighter prison, constructed out of her infatuation for the professor. In their asymmetrical relationship, Manju Kapur seems to subtly reproduce the parameters and the schemes of the colonial intercourse between Great Britain and the Indian Sub-continent. Harish is introduced as an intellectual who, given his mother's poor health conditions, had reluctantly returned to India from Oxford, where he had "left his heart" (36), "bringing as much of England as he could" (36). Ganga, his first wife, is treated like a colonial subject: as a severe master, he shows irritation and anger if the food is not cooked to perfection and the house is "carelessly managed" (40). She is not allowed to be away from home for long and she is forbidden to wear blue, a colour he dislikes (42). She is not entitled to feel satisfied in her own life: besides caring for her family, her only other source of "vicarious pleasure" (45) is her husband's popularity. Harish married

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<sup>5</sup> Remarkably enough, this is the same procedure the writer herself used to investigate the Partition as a historical trauma: "It was very difficult to tackle the Partition. No words could do its horror justice, and yet words were needed. I tried to introduce Partition in many ways but everything I wrote seemed to trivialise it. Eventually I felt that to use the words of those I interviewed was the best way. I used memories, single and collective, to tackle the incident obliquely. Partition is still a very raw subject, those who lived through it were reluctant to talk, yet they also felt their experiences should not be lost. I found Ashok Bhalla's three volume collection of stories related to Partition very moving" (<http://smritidaniel.wordpress.com/2011/12/07/manju-kapur-keeping-it-in-the-family/>).

<sup>6</sup> As Christopher Rollason (2010: 188 Kindle location) has pointed out, hers is a revealing name, reminding of the powerful heroine of *The Recognition of Shakuntala* by Kalidasa, "the young girl who, abandoned by her husband, the king, finally obtains recognition of her rights and proper treatment". Nevertheless, even Shakuntala is not a faultless character; she shows her dull, biased attitude towards Muslims when she quickly dismisses them as incapable of learning: "those people don't like to study" (119).

<sup>7</sup> The character of Kasturi is emblematic of traditional women's resignation (not necessarily a passive resignation, but certainly unavoidable) to their *biological mission*. When she was young, she had tried "a tentative assault on learning" (Kapur 62), but her father had made sure she did not nurture *dangerous* dreams of emancipation: "Her head remained modestly bent over her work. No questions, no assertion. She learned reading, writing, balancing household accounts and sewing" (62). Growing up, reading became her "clandestine activity" (63). Even as an adult, she unsuccessfully tried to have an abortion, having spent seventeen years of her life pregnant: "she had filled the house as her in-laws had wanted, but with another child there would be nothing left of her. [...] 'I will die if I have another child,' said Kasturi desperately" (7-8).

her perfectly knowing that she could not read or write; yet, he never misses the opportunity to pass sarcastic remarks on her illiteracy and intellectual limitations. On the other hand, the professor chooses Virmati because he recognizes in her an ideal pupil: her mind is ductile, easy to manipulate and mould according to his wishes (he stares at her “with the eyes of a Pygmalion” (126)). At college, she used to sit on the floor before his desk “looking up at him with her large eyes. The Professor drank in the symbolism of her posture greedily” (46). Bewitching him with her dreamy gaze (far from being a seductive enchantress, the girl is actually myopic), she had unwarily stirred his “desire to possess” (47) her, and had soon surrendered to it.

Throughout the narrative, Virmati’s willpower progressively weakens: she never emancipates herself from the lesser (and passive) role of pupil, who has to be told by Harish “what to look for, what to admire, what to criticize,” (130) since he is “older and so much more refined and civilized. He kn[ows]” (130). Being a staunch supporter of anything British, the professor is sceptical about the possibility of independence for India (“perhaps the British were right in declaring us too immature for independence” (95)), as well as the peaceful coexistence of different religions in the same territory. Hence, not to disappoint him, Virmati slowly withdraws from the political arena she had previously approached thanks to Shakuntala and Swarna, her fellow-student in Lahore, who felt it her duty and privilege to fight against any artificial barrier or partition, and give herself “to the unity of [her] country. Not only to the unity between rich and poor, but between Muslim and Hindu, between Sikh and Christian” (145). “I am not like these women,” she mutters, “they are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love” (142). The very marriage she had so sternly refused at seventeen turns into her obsession, into her “stale dream” (151), in Swarna’s sensible words. When she eventually obtains the much longed-for status of second wife, she delusively “believe[s] herself happy” (207): “this was the way it should be, and she was pleased to finally detect a recognizable path in her life” (207). Ironically enough, her numerous academic qualifications, however, do not enable her to wash her husband’s clothes, a much coveted occupation for a committed and dedicated spouse: this will always remain Ganga’s prerogative.

Urvashi Butalia (2009: 2) has acutely highlighted the paradoxical nature of the Independence of India: the long-awaited birth of the nation coincided with the dismembering of its body through the Partition. Even in Virmati’s case, the fulfilment of her marital ambition – which she regards as the only, real achievement of her existence – is coupled with loss: “though married, she was dispossessed” (212). Her body, a terrain Harish had already conquered and seized whenever pleased him, a fertile ground from which her first, unwanted child had been brutally eradicated, with bitter regret, shame, and sorrow, is confined to the few, suffocating rooms in the professor’s house she is entitled to inhabit. When she gets pregnant, her mother-in-law deprives her of any authority over herself: Virmati becomes a mere container for the baby-boy she is supposed to carry, “a personless carrier of her husband’s seed” (243). Without consulting her, the old lady decides Virmati will have to leave her nuptial bed to sleep with her, so that she may be under constant supervision. She carefully plans the diet the young woman will have to observe until delivery. She massages her body and she decides the expectant mother will be regularly given enemas of milk and ghee, for the sake of purification and cleanliness, whether she thinks she needs them or not. Virmati is regressed to a forced infancy, passively manipulated, her orifices are invaded. Her gruesome miscarriage, after three months of pregnancy, is described with the same imagery that, a few pages later, Manju Kapur uses to picture the horrors of the Partition: blood, spasms, slaughter. “One abortion and one miscarriage [...] Years of penetration, years of her insides churning with

pregnant beginnings” (246): this is the way Virmati woefully summarizes her life, after her recovery.

The final part of the novel is mostly devoted to the description of the turmoil following the Independence: cruel aggressions, months of gloomy confinement (“we were prisoners in our own homes” (268)), merciless rapes and violent massacres. As Om Dwivedi (2010: 736 Kindle location) has elucidated, “such riots represent Virmati’s enhanced personal trauma”, as well as the story of her own life, one might be tempted to add. As Gopinath (one of Ida’s uncles) explains, “we didn’t want freedom, if this is what it meant. But we were forced to accept Partition and suffering along with Independence, as a package deal” (Kapur 268).

While Virmati is actively engaged in helping the community and offering support to the refugees streaming across the newly drawn border, her baby-girl is born. When it comes to deciding her name, Virmati suggests Bharati, meaning *Mother India*, to commemorate the birth of their country; the name Bharati is also associated with Saraswati (Dogra and Dogra 2008: 50), the goddess of learning and knowledge. Harish objects to her choice, since he does not want their daughter to be tainted with the memory of collective madness, fights and killings. The parents, therefore, opt for *Ida*, which, for them, indicates “a new slate and a blank beginning” (Kapur 277). Pallavi Rastogi (2003:123) has pointed out that *Ida* is just “two letters short of India” and, in Om Dwivedi’s (2010: 691 Kindle location) words, “the two missing letters symbolically represent the division of the country into parts – India and Pakistan”. The name *Ida* is also connected with the goddess of speech (Dogra and Dogra 2008:100) and, possibly, this is one of the reasons why she is endowed with the faculty of telling Virmati’s silenced story.

According to Nadia Ahmad (2005: 202), “the purpose of partition literature can be seen as steps towards conflict resolution”. At the end of the narrative, therefore, *Ida* (the emblem of modern-day India), who had opened the novel with a confrontational statement – “the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother” (Kapur 1) – can eventually come to terms with her own past and, through Virmati’s story, overcome the traumas of history: “This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me any more”(280).

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### **Post-Postcolonial Issues and Identities in Zadie Smith's N-W**

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*N-W*, the latest novel by British-born Zadie Smith, first published by Hamish Hamilton in 2012, is representative of the need emphasized by Peter Childs and Patrick Williams to revise post-colonial frameworks by engaging directly with the question raised by Caribbean poet Lorna Goodison: "When is postcoloniality going to end?", "How long does the postcolonial continue?" (Childs and Williams 1997: 7). As a contemporary "Black British" novel, *NW* is in line with the urge emphasized by the New Labour government, that came to power in 1997, to contribute to a redefinition of Britishness in the terms of Britain's diverse and multifarious population, and it provides substantial elements to elaborate on Goodison's questions.

The young generation of dynamic writers known as "Black British writers", mostly born and bred in England to exiled parents within diaspora communities, has been defined by critics with a series of "post-" labels: "post-ethnic", "post-diaspora", "post-postcolonial" – all terms implying a beyond and a bypassed condition. But as Homi Bhabha underlines in *The Location of Culture* (1994:6), the prefix "post-" has a meaning only if it embodies "restless and revisionary energy" that "transforms the present into an expanded and excentric site of experience and empowerment". And indeed these writers have actually gone beyond the alienated condition of their migrant parents, showing in their novels the transformations and appropriations of excentric conditions of empowerment. As Mark Stein observes, unlike their parents' generation, they are no more

self-consciously postcolonial; in their novels ethnicity is just displayed and not evaded, which means that the ethnic/racial background of their multicultural cast of characters is taken for granted and considered within the broader context of the whole community's social and economic problems and of intergenerational conflicts (Stein 2004:113). The burden of representation of marginal identities that was the main target of the early postcolonial novel is now perceived, as Sara Upstone (2012:6) puts it, as a pressure "placed on ethnic authors not only to write about certain themes, but also to present them in a particular light". So, what really distinguishes the literary production of these British-born writers from the first-generation immigrants' works is not so much the issues they deal with, but the perspective from which these issues are viewed. They work through the expectations laid on so-called ethnic writing, but they go beyond them and defy them often by means of parody and irony (Stein 2004:112).

Writers like Zadie Smith do not 'write back' to the centre but from the centre in order to 'de-centre' the site of experience and empowerment mentioned by Bhabha. And by so doing, they represent what Hanif Kureishi (1986: 8) had envisaged some thirty years ago as "a new way of being British" that should reject archaic notions of Britishness and employ a new approach to hybridized, blurred identities to be considered within a wider context of problems and ambiguities, afflicting the whole contemporary society in which they live and not only the ethnic communities they are identified with. This change of approach is necessary because, as Kureishi (1985: 26) again points out, "if contemporary writing which emerges from oppressed groups ignores the central concerns and major conflicts of the larger society, it will automatically designate itself as minor, as a sub-genre."

An important aspect reflecting the above mentioned decentring and restless energy in these post-postcolonial works is the issue of hybridity as a social and cultural, but also stylistic and formal process. In contemporary British fiction, hybridity does not only feature as subject matter, but as part of the creative act of writing itself (Lane et al. 2003:143): hybrid forms of writing, genres that cannot be contained into a specific generic category, a hybridized language are all reflections of a condition of discontinuity and dispersal that challenges a central and fixed idea of Britishness. As Philip Tew (2004:162) underlines, "Britishness itself, as a communal or intersubjective series of identities, is both historically inscribed and is historically being reformulated as a ground for a reflection of a more general cultural multiplicity". But the emphasis laid on a context and a process of identity formation characterized indeed by dispersal, hybridity, multiplicity also shifts the focus of 21<sup>st</sup> century novels on the individual in order to represent, as Dominic Head (2002:48) points out, the particularity of individual voices in a society comprised of disparate groups.

Deeply set in the above sketched cultural and literary background, *NW* tackles matters that imply the multicultural roots of multi-voiced people without being bound by them. Here ambiguous identities and ethnicity are not so much the novel's core of interest, they are just there to give evidence of a community of "born and bred Londoners", a definition almost obsessively adopted in the novel by various characters whose cultural complexity is given not only by their different and hybrid origins, but also by the language they speak - a pure London English, enriched with slang expressions taken from the jargon of young people, with the typical cadences of North-West London where the action is centred (hence the title *NW*), and with hard-won colloquialisms that are said to be the "treasure of any migrant". The social, economic, religious picture depicted in the novel is very colourfully nuanced: there is Michel who is from Marseilles, of African descent, but has "been here forever", Leah who is half English and half Irish, Shar who is second generation subcontinental, but English to listen to, Natalie whose parents are Jamaican. There is Felix, an Afro-Caribbean "London born and bred", his

girlfriend Grace who is half Jamaican, half Nigerian, Natalie's husband who is half Italian, half Trinidadian. Leah's work mates arrive from St Kitts, Trinidad, Barbados, Grenada, Jamaica, India, Pakistan and the nurses who take care of her father are Ukrainian. The parish congregation of Willesden is Polish, Indian, African, Caribbean and the shop windows display a series of international news: Polish papers, Turkish papers, Arabic, Irish, French, Russian, Spanish, News of the World.

The list is much longer and it would appear to celebrate the exuberant hybridization and liveliness of north-west neighbourhoods, if it wasn't that the novel doesn't strictly focus on ethnic authenticity and awareness (all of these people are 'local' anyway and in a very post-postcolonial attitude they are mostly unconscious of their hybrid identity), but rather on social inequalities, on the consequences of poverty in suburban life, on the emotional and material privations of those who live on the margins in northwest London. And, indeed, something in this multicoloured picture remains colourless, or is at least pervaded by a shade of Dickensian grey: in the narrative economy of the novel, these are mainly "faces without names", whose anonymity is enhanced by economic powerlessness, frustrated ambitions and fake satisfactions, by the hopelessness of drug and alcohol addiction. Like modern versions of Sam Selvon's "lonely Londoners" (only more Londoners, but not less lonely), they are nobodies who struggle to survive in the claustrophobic and alienating context of council estates like Caldwell, the public housing project where most of the novel's characters grew up and where their personalities have been formed and transformed, the place that has determined their lives and fortunes, because no matter how hard they tried to climb the ladder, they remain trapped in a destiny of social or personal failure. As Lynn Wells (2013: 99-100) observes, "the characters in *NW* [...] play dual roles as representations of certain aspects of the multicultural reality of contemporary urban Britain and as manifestations of the ethical danger of reducing others to essentialized identities based on race or other factors while denying their uniqueness".

But if the place in this novel moulds the characters' personalities, it also makes the novel itself: the setting is indeed the real protagonist of *NW*, a choral novel considering the range of characters involved in the plot, but still closely focussed on the individual, on the peculiarities, weaknesses, fallacies, secrets and perversions of every single character, because each of them represents, to use Peter Brooker's words, "the decentred mentalities of the now thoroughly decentred capital city" (Brooker 2002, 89). Indeed, London is no more the centre first generation migrants were attracted to and longed for, it is an agglomerate of different and unequal geographical, social, ethnic neighbourhoods, it is made of disparate (and often desperate) worlds apart, each one having its own centre. London is reduced to a suburbia, a periphery, the northwest indeed – Willesden, Kilburn, Camden are sort of 'inner cities', internal colonies of an advanced capitalist society settled in another part of the city, in Mayfair, in Marylebone, in Soho, where posh people eat fancy Japanese-Italian food on their houses' terraces and take photographs to be put on their blog.

The different areas of the city in which different kinds of Londoners live appear to be closed-in microcosms, unknown worlds to those who live elsewhere. When Felix, the protagonist of the second part, is trying to explain to Tom, a well-off guy based in Mayfair who is about to sell him a car, where his garage is, Tom is not able to locate Kilburn: "That's sort of Notting Hill way, isn't it?" (Smith 2012:120) he asks, showing his ignorance of the North West. Kilburn is completely decentred from Tom's mental map of the city, just as much as Oxford Circus is for Felix, who, in spite of being a life-long Londoner, looking at the tube map like a tourist, has to admit that: "It did not express his reality. The centre was not 'Oxford Circus' but the bright lights of Kilburn High Road. 'Wimbledon' was the countryside, 'Pimlico' pure science fiction. He put his

right index finger over Pimlico's blue bar. It was nowhere. Who lived there? Who even passed through it?" (Smith 2012:163).

In a very postcolonial rejection of the geographical centrality imposed by maps, Felix tries to recuperate his own centre, his own belonging, which appears to be threatened in this unfamiliar part of London, but this can happen only when he gets back to North West London. In a well-constructed metaphorical passage, when the underground train is taking him back to Kilburn, his cell phone, as if coming back to life, starts beeping to register a missed call only when the train runs over ground at Finchley Road. Just like his phone, Felix too seems to be brought back to his emotional life only while approaching his own place; at this stage, memories of his family are conjured up, revealing loss and existential confusion: drug addiction, a brother in jail, a mother who abandoned her children to be free. Nevertheless, when Felix gets off in Kilburn, the plot takes an unexpected turn: he is robbed and killed by two petty criminals whom he doesn't know, but whose faces are somehow local, familiar. Kilburn is his own centre, the place of life and the place of death, the place where he belongs, his 'mother country' that takes him back to her womb and puts an end to his chaotic life.

The chaos, fragmentation and unruliness in which all the characters of *NW* live are also suggested by metaphorical devices: images of objects breaking, glasses splintering, dishes going to pieces are juxtaposed to scenes of human relationships collapsing, friendships ending and people breaking down, but the aimlessness and contradictions of these lives are above all transmitted by the modernist structure of the novel, told in five stylistically different and inconsequential sections which compose an episodic and fractured narrative as a mirror of the characters' anguish and despair, of their isolation within a community, of their loss of identities. Some characters, like Annie or Lloyd, appear only for a brief narrative fragment, claiming potentially important roles, but then they disappear into nothingness; others like Pauline or Marcia are just figures in the background who never emerge but keep haunting the narration. Felix, who is given more extensive space and psychological introspection, even in the one-day but eventful peregrination (very much in the wake of Joyce) in which the narration follows him, is abruptly taken off scene leaving the reader with a sense of puzzlement and precariousness, as if he were indeed walking in the streets of a degraded periphery. Central to this disjointed plot are the characters of Leah and Natalie, caught in their adult, married and dissatisfied lives. Their childhood friendship is sketched out: first in Leah's mostly stream-of-consciousness section, in which past memories, present anxieties and future expectations are swallowed up in a dazzling narrative spiral, and dialogues are presented, again in a Joycean-like style, without inverted commas; then in the three parts of Natalie's instalment, where the events of her youth and formative years are given in an inconsequential series of 185 short sections that make up a sort of postmodern composite *Bildungsroman*, in which Natalie's identity is precariously put together by the fragments that compose it.

The narration itself, therefore, seems to implode by means of a highly experimental and fragmentary writing that rejects the traditional conventions of plot and character coherence, for reasons that are to be found in an essay that Zadie Smith published in 2008 in the *New York Review of Books*, titled "Two Paths for the Novel". Here Smith challenges the kind of lyrical Realism drawing back to Balzac and Flaubert that she sees as affecting the contemporary Anglophone novel and that she admits having contributed to. Although critiques of this form, Smith argues, have a long tradition that has questioned the capacity of language to describe the world with accuracy, they have now been relegated to a safe corner of literary history, to be studied in postmodernity modules and dismissed as a failure. Smith is sceptical in this essay in particular of the three main credos upon which this kind of realism is based: "the transcendent importance of form,

the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self". And, she wonders, "is this really Realism? Do selves always seek their good, in the end? Are they never perverse? Do they always want meaning? Do they not sometimes want its opposite? And is this how memory works? Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical reveries?" (Smith 2008).

The answers to these rhetorical questions are actually in *NW*. If the novel rejects form, coherence, fullness and continuity, it is indeed to the aim of giving a realistic picture, because life on the streets of north-west London, where people are killed for a phone and twenty pounds, does not have either form or meaning, and because people who have grown up in a context of family dispersal, cultural conflicts, ethnic ambiguities and social divides cannot have developed a full and continuous self. The characters of this novel are somehow all connected to each other since childhood, having grown up in Caldwell public houses and been educated in Brayton comprehensive school, but in the meantime, they are disconnected to themselves and to their own dissatisfied adult lives, because, no matter what they have (or have not) been able to do with their futures, they haven't come to terms yet with their incoherent childhood and with the ghosts it still hides.

For Natalie Blake, to whom most part of the novel is devoted, the ghost is her rejected ethnic identity. Born Keisha into a poor but proud family of Jamaican descent, she studies and works hard to become a barrister and to be accepted in the posh world of London's elite lawyers. At some point in her life, she changes her name into a more European one (Natalie, indeed), marries up and gives birth to two children, and has an apparent perfect control over her professional and family life. But success is gained at the high price of denying her origins, of killing her own self and escaping from her background in order to be free from parental legacy, cultural constrictions, wrong expectations. In the end she doesn't get any freedom, she is trapped into a fake identity doomed to collapse, she becomes alienated from herself and from her husband and, in order to annihilate the person she has become, she falls into sexual encounters with unknown people she chats up on the internet.

Natalie is a victim of the post-postcolonial burden, forced upon the young black British-born generation, to become somebody, to make something good out of their parents' efforts and sacrifices, as if they had to become what their grandparents and parents did not have the opportunity to be. As Theodora explains to younger Natalie: "The first generation does what the second doesn't want to do. The third is free to do what it likes. How fortunate you are." (Smith 2012: 239). A sort of postcolonial revenge of the 'black man's burden', but still a burden of oppressive expectations inevitably let down in by the end. At a university party, after taking a pill of ecstasy, Natalie hears a beat going on in her head: "I will be a lawyer and you will be a doctor and he will be a teacher and she will be a banker and we will be artists and they will be soldiers, and I will be the first black woman and you will be the first Arab and she will be the first Chinese and everyone will be friends, everyone will understand each other" (Smith 2012: 213). A sort of collective interior monologue drafting a future of harmony and success, of fulfilment and pride. But a future that will never be present, unless under the effect of drugs.

No one seems to be really free to choose his/her own destiny in *NW*. In a passage of the novel Leah wants to write out on the back of a magazine the line of a song that is being played on the radio that says "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me", but significantly enough the pencil does not leave any mark on the glossy magazine page, as if to imply that nobody can be the author of who he or she is. People are not the masters of their own lives; destinies are determined by the place where they live. The

myth of the self-made man (or woman) embodied by Natalie is indeed only a myth, what is real is the condition of being trapped into a destiny one cannot escape.

None of these characters is really able to get far from the place where he/she was born: Leah remains an estate girl who, in spite of a philosophy degree, works at a charity just a few blocks away from where she grew up. Felix is killed in Kilburn not far from his home. Natalie refuses her husband's house in Marylebone and buys one in Kilburn, on the posh side of Queen's Park, but still not far from Caldwell. Then, when her marriage breaks up, she walks out of her home and of her well-off life and makes her way across north London. It is a long walk that covers the whole fourth section of the novel and that represents her descent into hell, but also a cathartic, centripetal journey that brings her back to the place where she belongs and to her core, essential identity: "She had no name, no biography, no characteristics. They had all fled into paradox" (Smith 2012: 300). Significantly enough, she is accompanied in this journey by a school friend, Nathan Bogle, who turns out to be Felix's murderer and who represents the dark side of Natalie's dream, the ghost (a "bogle" like his surname, indeed) of what she might have become if she had remained in the same context of racial and socioeconomic privations. When Natalie finally gets to Hornsey Lane Bridge, known as "suicide bridge", her intentions appear clear, but on the top of the bridge she abandons the prospect of suicide, she looks for the house of her family and is overwhelmed by a sense of appeasement: "Natalie Blake looked out and down. She tried to locate the house, somewhere back down the hill, west of here. Rows of identical redbrick chimneys, stretching to the suburbs [...] She had the sense of being in the country" (Smith 2012: 319). The bridge becomes for her a metaphorical site of connection between life and death, past and present, rupture and reconstruction. She leaves Nathan behind and finally comes to terms with her true self, with the ghost she had hidden under a mask of efficiency and respectability and, above all, with the feeling of shame that pervades her. This brings about her re-birth, the recovery of her abused identity, and, by the end of the novel, Natalie disappears and Keisha takes her place back.

Shame is a feeling that is recurrently referred to in the novel by several characters in various circumstances, but it is with Leah that it becomes a prominent issue. Leah is literally consumed by a complicated sense of shame that assaults her after a brief encounter with a young woman who cheats her to get some money. Leah soon finds out that the woman is a drug-addict and from this moment she keeps seeing her everywhere and thinking of her obsessively. Only at the end of the novel, prey of [?]to a nervous breakdown, does she give voice to this shame as a result of a devouring sense of guilt for having had a better life than other people: "I just don't understand why I have this life" she confesses to Natalie, "You, me, all of us. Why that girl and not us. Why that poor bastard on Albert Road. It doesn't make sense to me" (Smith 2012: 331). Leah is confronted with the concept of shame, explained by Timothy Bewes (2011: 3) as "an event of incommensurability: a profound disorientation of the subject by the confrontation with an object it cannot comprehend, an object that renders incoherent every form available to the subject". And indeed Leah's question remains painfully unanswered, because there is no definitive response, no easy solution to the unfair social divide and unequal economic disparity; there is no sensible reason for the different destinies reserved to human beings, no rational explanation to the wrongs of history. The characters in the post-postcolonial world of *NW* who, in a sort of historical determinism, are stuck in a present that is the consequence of someone else's past can find no cure for its bite, no recovery from its consequences, even though this past seems to be very far away. What remains is, as for Leah, an unbearable sense of shame and the consciousness that, as Bewes again observes, in a postcolonial world (but even in a post-postcolonial

one) there is no position from which to write that is not itself implicated in the history of colonial inequality.

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### **The Tibetan-English Novel: A Post-Buddhist Form?**

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Although most Tibetans who have chosen English as a language of literary expression are poets (e.g. Chögyam Trungpa, Tenzin Tsundue, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, Bhuchung Sonam), there is also a slowly growing number of Tibetans writing narrative fiction in English. This paper discusses how the four Tibetan-English novels written so far engage the Tibetan Buddhist heritage in a new and hybrid context. The novels in question are Tsewang Pemba's *Idols on the Path* (1966), Jamyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999), Thubten Samphel's *Falling Through the Roof* (2008) and Tsering Namgyal Khortsa's *The Tibetan Suitcase* (2013). However, due to the length of this paper, I shall deal with only the first two and older novels in depth, making some marginal references to *Falling Through the Roof* and *The Tibetan Suitcase*, but not fully engaging in their analysis.

To this day, little or no literary criticism has been produced about these four works of fiction. The only exception is perhaps *The Mandala*, which has been read by Venturino (2008: 316-317) as a “postmodern rewriting” of the “[British] archives of imperial governance”. Analogously, one of the very few references to Pemba's work presents him writing back to Western expectations as an author “sensitive to the Western idea of Tibetan primitiveness” (Winks and Rush 1990:97). Not unlike many other post-colonial works, the interpretive (and small) body of work that analyses Tibetan-English fiction focuses more on how Tibetan-English writers interact with the narratives of their colonisers or proxy colonisers, rather than on how they engage and re-interpret their own

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<sup>1</sup> See Trungpa (2004), Tsundue (2008), Dhompa (2003) and Sonam (2002)

pre-colonial heritage. To counterbalance this bias, I approach Tibetan-English fiction primarily from the angle of how the Tibetan Buddhist heritage is engaged in a “post-Buddhist” manner.

Post-Buddhism is a term of my invention that covers various re-appropriations of Buddhist narratives in Asian diasporas in general, and in the Tibetan diaspora in particular, applied to literary contexts that are not strictly Buddhist, soteriological or even religious. Thus, post-Buddhism does not imply a rejection or overcoming of Buddhism, but an often contestive appropriation of some of its motifs, much in the vein of the terms post-colonial and post-modern. Such a project is very popular among the new generations of Tibetan-English writers, who tend to take political and cultural stances by dis-embedding and re-embedding Buddhist narrative formulas. This process can be appreciated both thematically and formally, since the four novels are hybrid incarnations of Tibetan / Buddhist narratives and the Western novel. In this way Tibetan-English novels and their authors introduce contestation, reformulation and innovation by reinterpreting their cultural heritage.

The tersest example of how Tibetan and Buddhist narratives are being reincarnated through the bodies of the novel might be found in Jamyang Norbu’s *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*, a historiographically metafictional rewriting of the English classic in a Tibetan context. Towards the end of the novel, Holmes is told that he is not just a British detective involved in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan politics, but the reincarnation of a Tibetan Lama. Lama Yonten addresses the British character:

Mr. Holmes, Mr. Holmes. Listen to me. You are not Sherlock Holmes! You are the renowned Gangsar Tulku, former abbot of White Garuda Monastery, one of the greatest adepts of the occult sciences. The Dark One slew you eighteen years ago but just before your life-force left your body we were able to transfer it –by the yoga of *Pho-wa*- to another body far away. (242)

Thus Holmes transcends his position as a foreigner helping Tibet to fend off the threat of Chinese imperialism and becomes an insider, a Tibetan lama returned to his fatherland in a strange body.

This appropriation of Holmes as sympathetic to the Tibetan cause and as essentially Tibetan is done in a typically Tibetan Buddhist fashion. The motif of the reincarnating lama who comes back to help his former disciples and relatives, a narrative exclusive to Tibetan Buddhism, is used for claiming a British character for the Tibetan archive, or, in other words, for Tibetanising Holmes. Leaving aside its clear post-Buddhist flavour for the moment, this episode is a useful metaphor for the Tibetan-English novel as a genre. This new genre could be compared to the white English body of Holmes, who in *The Mandala* expresses a Tibetan spirit of cultural and political resistance. However, Holmes’ body is hardly white or British anymore. The novel has undergone many processes of hybridization, by being re-appropriated by colonial subjects all over the English-speaking world, before being used by the Tibetans. Analogously, the literary form Tibetan exiled writers inherit is hardly “western” or “English” in any uncomplicated fashion, since they draw substantial inspiration from colonial British writers like Rudyard Kipling or post-colonial South Asian authors like Salman Rushdie or Pico Iyer<sup>2</sup>. Tibetan-English writers enter the already hybrid space of post-colonial South Asia and further hybridize it by Tibetanising many of its narratives.

Although the narrative of reincarnation often features in these novels as a playful way of reclaiming non-Tibetan characters like Holmes or establishing links with the

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<sup>2</sup> These three authors are mentioned by Tsering Namgyal (Khortsas) in his non-fiction book *Little Lhasa* as examples of non-Tibetan writers who, in writing about Tibet and the Tibetan exile, have provided a reference point for Tibetan-English writers.

Tibetan past, much in the legitimating spirit of the Tibetan lineages of reincarnated lamas, there is another narrative pattern that pervades the Tibetan-English novels in an even more fundamental way: that of the *gter ma* or treasure-texts. By the same time that the idea of personalized and recognizable reincarnation appears in Tibet in order to solve issues of succession and power (12<sup>th</sup> century), the *gter ma* tradition emerges as another form of retrospectively claiming textual and religious authority. Granting that the boundaries of both traditions are blurred and they often intermingle, they originally represented two different responses to an emerging social order. Whereas reincarnation was the strategy deployed by monastic institutions in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in order to keep political power in the hands of monk-kings (who were celibate and therefore could not produce descendants)<sup>3</sup>, the *gter ma* writers (from now on *gter ston*), who are also “male but very few are monks” (Samuel 1993: 296), re-appropriate the authority associated with Buddhist teachers and kings from former times by claiming to have composed or “discovered” texts originally written or inspired by them<sup>4</sup>. The *gter ma* tradition is thus a visionary strategy for presenting new texts and ideas arising from the imagined golden age of Tibetan history.

This golden age comprises the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the Tibetan Empire reached its maximum expansion under the rule of Songtsen Gampo (617-649) and Buddhism was firmly established as the official religion under his descendant, Emperor Trisong Detsen (742-800) (Schweiger 2013:73). In fact, not only *gter ston* use this age as their legitimizing figment of the past; the tradition of monk-kings claims it as well in order to substantiate their authority. Therefore, the Dalai Lama is not only considered to be the reincarnation of all the previous Dalai Lamas and an emanation of Chenrezik (Skt. Avalokitesvara), the Bodhisattva of Compassion, but a manifestation of Songtsen Gampo, the greatest of Tibetan Emperors<sup>5</sup>. Thus the past is used in analogous ways by the monastic monarchs and by the *gter ston*, who often lived independent and freer lifestyles outside the great monastic institutions<sup>6</sup>.

The question of agency in the process of *gter ma* writing is a complex one, since, as Gyatso (1998:145-153) has discussed at length, the *gter ston* is neither a mere empty channel possessed by the spirit of a past lama, nor is he said to be contriving the whole process through his own efforts. The *gter ma* tradition was and remains a highly ingenious form of not only introducing novelty within tradition, but also setting up alternative sources of spiritual and scriptural authority. The constant renovation offered by the *gter ma* represented an alternative to the more lineal, conservative and hierarchical authority embodied by monastic institutions. Although *gter ston* were also part of smaller institutions and they claim authority for themselves, they are often unconventional figures who stay away from the centres of power and sometimes challenge their structures, though very rarely in an openly subversive manner<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of how the institution of reincarnation develops as a necessity for the ruling monasteries of 12<sup>th</sup> century Tibet see Stein (2013: 200-206).

<sup>4</sup> For a brief introduction to the *gter ma*, both as historical and liturgical genre see Gyatso (1996:147-155).

<sup>5</sup> As Schweiger (2013: 74) points out: “The Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngwang Lozang Gyatso (1617-82) was the most successful in claiming the Avalokitesvara concept for himself, by embedding it, in word and deed, in a general concept of Tibetan history”. Moreover, “by establishing the Potala at precisely the spot where the ruined palace of King Songtsen Gampo was said to have stood in the past, he [the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama] claimed the position of the ancient Tibetan kings” (Ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel (1993: 296) characterizes the *gter ston* as standing at “the ‘wildest’ and most ‘shamanic’ end of Tibetan Buddhist practice” and although “Tertön [*gter ston*] are not necessarily unconventional in their behaviour [...] unusual or bizarre activity is a frequent part of the *tertön* role”.

<sup>7</sup> Gyatso (1998 227-229) analyzes some of the potentially and implicitly subversive aspects of the *gter ston* Jigme Lingpa’s (1729-1798) work in terms of “personal uniqueness”, “independence” and “autonomy” (1998 227-229).

Parallel dynamics can be appreciated in Tibetan-English fiction, which also aims to present the innovative (e.g. writing in English, Tibetan exiled hybrid identities) aligned and legitimized through the aura of some previous period (e.g. the thirty-seven years of de facto Tibetan independence, The Tibetan Empire)<sup>8</sup>. These modern day *gter ston* are also offering alternative readings of Tibetan history in so far as they retell the story of the Tibetan exodus in ways that differ and dissent from that of the, also monastic and hierarchical, exiled leadership. The four Tibetan-English novels written so far replay in various ways the stories working as a legitimating framework for the *gter ma* tradition. Furthermore, the authors or narrators sometimes deny their authorship and present the text as a treasure discovered accidentally (e.g. *The Mandala*, *The Tibetan*) and some of its characters engage in quests and revelations that owe much to the adventurous tales of *gter ston* (e.g. *Falling Through*, *Idols*). However, these new “treasures” do not aim to refresh the Buddhist message in a dark spiritual age, but aim to spread a new, more political and proactive, consciousness among the new generations of English-speaking Tibetans. In these post-Buddhist tales, the legitimizing golden era is often shifted to the time immediately preceding the Chinese occupation, in which Tibet enjoyed *de facto*, though internationally unrecognized, political independence (1913-1951) (e.g. *Idols* or *The Mandala*), although the more classical period of the Tibetan Empire is also engaged (e.g. *Falling Through*).

Pemba’s *Idols on the Path* might be said to be the novel that engages the *gter ma* model less explicitly, even if the book has a strong revisionist intent aimed at Tibet’s immediate past. Although Pemba (1932-2011) was by no means supportive of the Chinese invasion, describing its cruelty with gruesome detail towards the end of the novel (199-210), he is very critical of the mores and customs of pre-communist Tibet. The first part of the book presents life in a remote valley of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Tibet as dominated by superstition and the tyrannical rule of local (partly monastic and partly secular) authorities (3-43). Pemba is almost allegorical in his treatment of characters and the narrative progression of *Idols* might be regarded as the personalized history of various Tibetan social classes from the time immediately preceding the Younghusband expedition (1903) up to the escape and settling of the first Tibetan refugees in India (early 1950s).

*Idols on the Path* resembles more the 19<sup>th</sup> century European conception of the novel as social critique than any Tibetan literary genre. Not surprisingly, Pemba belongs to a privileged group of Tibetans who received a British education, being the Tibetan doctor in Western medicine and graduating from University College Hospital (1955). He also treated most of the top lamas of the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages along with the Royal Family of Bhutan. He can also be considered to be one of the pioneers of Tibetan modernity; his revision of Tibet, while never falling into a colonial sense of inferiority, is that of a modern and enlightened man. He harshly exposes the brutality of the Tibetan hierarchical system<sup>9</sup>, maintained through uncompromising physical coercion and legitimated through a worldview he regards as incoherent and superstitious<sup>10</sup>. However, he celebrates Tibetan spiritual heroes like Milarepa (c. 1052-c.1135) and regards lay and

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<sup>8</sup> For contrasting approaches on the 37 years of Tibetan independence, see McKay (1997) and Goldstein (1991).

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 20 (111-117) describes in detail how Tibetan aristocrats abused their serfs, a situation summarised by Pemba as “the age-old beating of the Tibetan social heart, the few aristocrats at the top swollen with wealth and privileges, and the rest of the country poor and oppressed” (111-112)

<sup>10</sup> Pemba opens *Idols* with a macabre episode that combines both superstition and brutality: the killing of a *chilinga* (foreigner, generally European) (10-22). The foreigner is imagined to be a devil because of his unusual physical appearance and is subsequently whipped to death to the sound of prayer-flags flapping in the wind which ironically “carried into the vast beyond the prayers of that valley and the messages of mercy, tolerance and compassion” (20).

monastic Tibetan Buddhist practice as having departed from the original message of the Buddha and the great masters of the past<sup>11</sup>. In this sense he can be said to be a modern *ger ston* who feels the need to introduce new teachings that will help revitalize the degenerate state of Buddhism. Nonetheless, Pemba's concern is not so much the state of the Dharma (i.e. the Buddha's teaching) but that of the nation: Tibet.

His description of the despotic Tibetan ruling classes (whipping and raping their serves in the name of the Dalai Lama's government, 111-117), the almost humorous and poor condition of the Tibetan army (33-43) and the corruption of monastic institutions like Sera (turned into great centres of power, favour-exchanges and sexual abuse, 83-85) correspond to a description of a socio-political dark age that necessitates a reintroduction to its past splendor. However, the answer to Tibet's problem is not imagined to be a re-connection with its past, but the acknowledgement of its limitations and the moving forward towards a Tibetan modernity. These two movements are embodied in the characters Kunga and Rinzing. Whereas Kunga has embarked, against his young will, on the monastic path and becomes an unconventional Buddhist monk, Rinzing studies medicine in British India and becomes one of the first Tibetan modern doctors, like Pemba himself. Despite following different paths, the two old friends come to an analogous realization about the shortcomings of Tibetan society. While Rinzing reflects about healthcare and social issues, Kunga focuses on Buddhist philosophy and practice. Kunga aims to formulate a Buddhism that goes beyond Buddhism, an endeavour that could be called post-Buddhist.

Kunga's thought begins with the realization that Buddhism might not be a closed definite system; in his own words:

We realized that we had arrived at the end of a blind alley. We both arrived at the conclusion, which was appalling, that even the Buddha had not found the answer. [...] We knew that if we followed the path we were travelling on, it would go on infinitely. We had not yet discovered that one should avoid all paths." (246)

This discovery leads on to another one: a manuscript once hidden in caves and then buried among the many treatises of Sera's library. This *ger ma*-like text, re-discovered by the disappointed monk acquires a new meaning, since its highly relativistic and transition-based philosophy speaks to his predicament and that of Tibet. The ultimacy of change and the injunction to not consider one's current state as definite do not only urge Kunga to reconsider and reformulate his Buddhism (beyond any fixed ideas or rituals) but also anticipate the Tibetan exodus.

*Idols on the Path* finishes with a conversation between Kunga and Rinzing, in which this philosophy of instability is fully revealed. Rinzing is the embodiment of what Kunga has theorized through years of study and meditation. In fact, Kunga's wish to make Rinzing the heir of his manuscript confirms the latter as somebody open enough to accept Kunga's heretical ideas. Kunga's post-Buddhist ideas, which consist of taking Buddhist principles to their last consequences, thus destroying what most of his fellow monks and countrymen consider to be "Buddhism" – the idols on the path, echo Rinzing's approach to Tibetan modernity. Rinzing does not reject Tibetanness or become westernized (like some other characters who are ridiculed for their mimicry of Anglo-American ways)<sup>12</sup>, but takes whatever is useful from modernity (e.g. medical skills) in

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<sup>11</sup> This view is voiced in the novel by a monk, Geshe Chodra, who explains how "Nowadays that [the Buddha's] central message is forgotten. We are caught in an intricate system of rites and rituals, idols and gods, traditions and dogmas. Becoming a monk has turned into a profession. The road to salvations has become empty." (75)

<sup>12</sup> This is instantiated by how Lodrol / George is presented as a negative stereotype of the Tibetan who is ashamed of his culture and mimics American ways. Rinzing, Pemba's avatar in the novel, quietly disapproves

order to improve the living conditions of his people. Pemba exposes the hypocrisies and downfalls of Tibetan society without rejecting Tibetan values altogether. Selecting and reformulating aspects from the Tibetan milieu and wedding them to modern knowledge and science is Pemba's prescription for the Tibetan exiled condition. What need to be left behind are all the "idols" and even the "path" they signal, accepting infinite potentiality and constant change with discriminative openness. In this respect, Pemba is equally opposed to an uncritical rejection as he is to an uncritical acceptance of either Tibetan traditional values or modern Western ones<sup>13</sup>.

A similar re-appropriation of Buddhist ideas and Tibetan values is very much at the core of *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*, which explicitly presents itself as a *gter ma*. From its very first page, the author, Jamyang Norbu, (dis)qualifies his authorship by adding after his name that the novel is "Based on the reminiscences of Hurree Chunder Mookerjee", followed by a long list of Hurree's titles, merits and achievements. The character from Kipling's *Kim* thus appears as the narrator of *The Mandala*, which was allegedly committed to a manuscript, in turn discovered by Norbu in 1988 in a strongly *gter ma*-like fashion. Norbu frames his rewriting of Holmes and Hurree through a preface and an epilogue that constitute the legitimating narrative for his peculiar *gter ma* text. Norbu (1949) begins by describing his privileged childhood as the son of a prosperous Lhasa merchant who sent him, in the early 1950's, to receive "a modern education" at "a Jesuit school at hill station of Darjeeling in British India" (x). He then discovered with fascination the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and was to be haunted for the rest of his life by a line in *The Empty House* which briefly stated that Holmes had stayed in Tibet under the pretense of being a Norwegian explorer. After many years of enquiries both in Tibet and in exile, Norbu stumbled upon a descendant of Hurree Babu residing in Darjeeling and eventually found a manuscript containing the account of Holmes' and Hurree's Tibetan adventures.

However, the value of the manuscript goes beyond fulfilling Norbu's childhood dream; it is charged with political meaning. The text contains plenty of historical information that serves to challenge current Chinese propaganda and thus Norbu finishes his preface with a vindication of the text: "Tibet may lie crushed beneath the dead weight of Chinese tyranny, but the truth about Tibet cannot be so easily buried; and even such a strange fragment of history as this, may contribute to nailing at least a few lies of the tyrants" (xv-xvi). The dark ages are identified with the bleak reality of Chinese occupation and the purpose of this treasure text is to spread knowledge about another golden age, that of short-lived Tibetan independence under the rule of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Like any other *gter ma*, this revelation aims to challenge and re-order the present. The intent of Norbu's text is similar to that of *gter ma* (i.e. to challenge and re-order the present), and the way in which authorship is deferred, at once negating and vindicating the author, makes Norbu a post-modern and post-Buddhist *gter ston*. For Norbu, the solutions to the Tibetan question is not selecting and combining tradition and modernity, but turning towards a historical period in which tradition and modernity danced with each other in a successfully independent Tibet (1913-1950).

This account of the past reflects back on the present as an injunction for action; it is not a mere act of resistance to "Chinese lies", both past and present, but an invitation to reinstate the golden era. However, Norbu is far more playful and humorous (while also being more politically committed and assertive) in his treatment of the *gter ma* structure

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of George's smoking, drinking and self-indulgent lifestyle as a betrayal to his roots, but he tolerates it and remains on amicable terms with him (107-110 and 233-239).

<sup>13</sup> The issue of combining Tibetan traditions with non-Tibetan modernities to create a genuinely Tibetan modernity is a constant concern for both Rinzing and Pemba. Pemba expresses his view in a more overt and explicit way in a short essay entitled "The Lure of Modernism" (1957: 166-172).

than Pemba. He is contesting “Chinese lies”, but he is doing so through a number of lies (i.e. assuming the existence of Holmes and Hurree as historical characters that interact with actual Tibetan historical figures like the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama or the Amban). Norbu does not only undermine Chinese authority, but also his own as a reliable narrator, becoming yet another semi-fictional character in the historiographically metafictional universe that is *The Mandala*. This playful self-irony does not compromise Norbu’s political intent, clearly expressed through the framing narrative and a clear distinction between good and bad characters, depending on whether they are fighting for or against Tibet. Although Pemba’s social critique is far more insightful than Norbu’s nationalistic and militant view, Norbu’s treatment of Tibetan hybridities is far more complex and nuanced.

Pemba falls into a simplistic dichotomy when classifying the good Tibetan hybrid subjects as those who retain the essentials of their culture, but try to improve it through selective interaction with modernity, and the bad ones as those who reject things Tibetan altogether and adopt a ‘foreign’ lifestyle. However, Norbu, also writing thirty years later, presents a far more complex picture. A good example is the character of Holmes, who does not only turn out to be the reincarnation of a Tibetan lama, but who is said to have been further reincarnated in a Tibetan exiled lama Norbu meets in Dharamsala in 1988. The ending of *The Mandala*’s epilogue blurs Holmes and this younger Tibetan exiled lama when the latter “commenced to laugh softly in a peculiar noiseless fashion” (265). The lama also shows Norbu the objects he identified as a child before being enthroned as a reincarnation of his predecessor: “a chipped magnifying glass, and a battered old cherry-wood pipe” (264). Through the playful inclusion of Holmes in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, Norbu articulates a Tibetan identity that is hybrid and dialogic and yet resistant to Chinese oppression. This is done in a post-Buddhist and post-modern fashion, by appropriating Buddhist motifs and structures from the Tibetan tradition and re-deploying them in a new context with renewed significance.

To conclude, the birth of the Tibetan-English novel bears witness to the fluid and dialogic nature of Tibetan exilic modernities. Written over a period of almost fifty years, these four novels do not only deal with issues of displacement, change and hybridity, but constitute a hybrid genre in itself. In order to understand the hybrid dynamics of the Tibetan-English novel, it is essential to take into consideration the notion of post-Buddhism as an articulating factor of Tibetan modernities. It is through re-appropriating motifs and narratives from the past that these four contemporary Tibetan novelists negotiate an argumentative, humorous and critical alignment with their Buddhist heritage.

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***Configuring Identity through Memory of Siege:  
The Rock and the Barbary Macaque in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Gibraltarian Fiction in English***

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**Preamble**

Like many human communities in the modern world, Gibraltar represents an anomaly - in Gibraltar's case a colonial history that has yet to end and a degree of autonomy that in recent decades has permitted many of its citizens to start to discuss and define an identity of their own, especially in relation to Iberia as a whole, the Mediterranean, the African continent, and Gibraltar's status with regard to both the past and the future. The present article may be read as a very cursory attempt (by an outsider) to participate in that discussion from perspectives afforded by postcolonial and transcultural studies.

**Mythologizing Gibraltar**

If one were to ask any number of people for their impressions of the most populous of the 14 remaining British colonies – Gibraltar – the response of the vast majority would undoubtedly be “the Rock.” This observation might then be augmented by many individuals referring to the iconic Macaque Apes or monkeys,<sup>1</sup> whilst others might also add some comment concerning the geographical location of Gibraltar at the western end of the Mediterranean. A few might even allude to the largeness of Gibraltar's historical significance set against the diminutive size of the peninsula itself – it extends to only a few square kilometres – 6.8 sq. km., to be precise – with a population of some 30,000<sup>2</sup> -- whilst others might recall the current spate of stand-offs at the frontier between the Spanish authorities and the British colonial representatives, unpredictably (albeit not

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the replenishment, at Churchill's behest, of the much-depleted monkey population during the Second World War– ironically, at a time when the human civilian population had been evacuated to the “safety” of London and other locations further afield. Popular mythology held (and still holds) that if the monkeys were to disappear entirely, Gibraltar would revert to Spanish control.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the British occupation of 1704, controversially ratified by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Colonization has been gradual and sporadic, with the population undergoing four major transformations, its Jewish element the most stable and enduring. See Stephen Constantine (2009: *passim*).

absolutely) restricting the freedom of human movement across the otherwise typical spatial constraints represented by the frontier.

It would, then, be a commonplace to state that, as educated observers of the world, in a real sense almost all of us could thus claim that we “know” Gibraltar. With perhaps no personal experience of place, we have constructed “memories” of Gibraltar, whether topographical or historical, or both. Until recently, however, it can be said that – from a literary perspective – only a marginal Gibraltarian literary voice, in large part Spanish, has been detectable, although numerous allusions to Gibraltar occur in literary works by outsiders working in English and other languages<sup>3</sup> – most famously, despite the author’s probable failure to visit Gibraltar while en route to Trieste, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in the long and impassioned soliloquy given to Molly Bloom in its closing pages.<sup>4</sup> Yes. In a wealth of other (largely “popular”) literary texts produced over the past two centuries by British and other writers, much has been made of the highly politicized and militarized status of Gibraltar and its people.<sup>5</sup> Gibraltar has also attracted the attention of well-known travel writers from overseas, not all of whose views accord well with historical realities. Paul Theroux (1995: 16), for example, has observed that “[t]here was a strong sense of community in Gibraltar, which made it odder for me to reflect that I was in a place that was both a racial hotchpotch (sic) and also deeply paranoid about admitting aliens. It was partly a result of Gibraltar’s insularity – the Rock is significantly an island (sic).<sup>6</sup> But tribalism and xenophobia were also Mediterranean character traits (sic).” In 1987, Caryl Phillips similarly denied Gibraltarians an identity of their own by optimistically predicting the end of Gibraltar’s British colonial status as a result of Spanish accession to the European Union in 1986 and once the cross-border traffic arrangements of the European Union came into full operation.

Thus, Gibraltar, it would seem, has attracted a wide diversity of interpretations. As Stephen Constantine, the author of a recent scholarly study of the historical formation of modern Gibraltar,<sup>7</sup> has pointed out, it is in particular the “very *physicality* of the Rock itself” (2009: 294, my emphasis) that impresses most individuals: “[w]hether arriving by sea, by air or overland from Spain, the limestone uplift of Gibraltar and the spectacular views from the summit have an undeniable capacity to impress, as a space quite unlike the south of Spain, which it appears, lion-like, to face” (ibid.). Inevitably, I would claim, a significant part of this impression – this impressiveness – has also come to bear on those who may never have visited Gibraltar in person: a sense of physical strength that has been reinforced over the centuries by the ability of its historical inhabitants and armed forces to survive extensive periods of military siege.

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<sup>3</sup> M. G. (Mark) Sanchez has published a useful anthology of earlier writing on Gibraltar: *Writing the Rock of Gibraltar: An Anthology of Literary Texts, 1720-1890*. Dewsbury, UK: Rock Scorpion Books, 2006, 264 pp.

<sup>4</sup> “...I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.”

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Burgess’s *A Vision of Battlements* (1965), set in the postwar period of the British military garrison, is the most “literary” of the bunch, which typically includes historical and contemporary Cold War thrillers such as Reg V. Reynolds’s *The Revenge of Tom Dollar* (2001) and *The Gibraltar Factor*, by Matthew Hunter (1991), not to mention Barry Perowne’s pastiche Raffles novel *Raffles’ Crime in Gibraltar* (1937), written and set in the late 1930s, and *Scorpion Heart: A Story of Love and Betrayal in Wartime Gibraltar* (1996), a composite popular romance by male American writers, James Burrill and Douglas White, writing as Burrill White. Although produced at a moment of high suspicion of Franco’s imperatives for the colony, Barry Wynne’s *The Day Gibraltar Fell* (1969) combines technological sophistication with a high respect for the Spanish military counterpart to the British defenders of the status quo.

<sup>6</sup> Despite its enthusiastic participation in the biennial Island Games organized by the International Island Games Association, Gibraltar remains a peninsula rather than a true island (see “Island Games,” *Wikipedia*).

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 2.

Darren Fa and Clive Finlayson (2006: 9-10) (and others<sup>8</sup>) have usefully documented the susceptibility of the Rock to siege, tracing a historically irregular series of sieges dating back to the first, in 1309. The final and most extensive of the fourteen definable sieges, the so-called Great Siege, lasted from 1779-1783. Tellingly, however, the political and economic blockade imposed in 1969 by the Spanish whilst still under General Franco's rule has come to be regarded as a fifteenth siege, thus restoring a part of the Gibraltarian siege imaginary that had been dormant for almost two centuries. It should also be noted, however, that the blockade endured in part, surprisingly, for a further 10 years beyond Franco's death in 1975 and the restoration of parliamentary democracy in Spain (the frontier itself was re-opened in 1982). As a consequence, Constantine (2009: 410) suggests that "[Gibraltarian] hostility on the scale experienced generated a degree of resentment and anti-Spanish feeling without equal since the days of the Great Siege", thus precipitating a Gibraltarian consciousness not only of the ancient sequence of sieges but also of the potential of their communal "difference" from their Iberian neighbours to the north (411).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and much of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as Constantine (2009) repeatedly points out, the main internal conflict within the colony remained the strong emphasis on the function of Gibraltar firstly as a British imperial fortress and only secondarily as a civilian colonial location. Hence, where academic and popular attention has been paid to Gibraltar, it has focused overwhelmingly on the military history and status of the Rock. It is perhaps unsurprising, however, that perceptions of the strategic military strength of Gibraltar have been fading with the decline of European empires in the post-WW2 period – as long ago as in 1952 the *Sydney Morning Herald* could, under the headline "Gibraltar's Fading Strategic Value," declare that "In the days of simple wars, a popular simile was 'as strong as the Rock of Gibraltar.' The Rock's military strength, however, was more sentimental than secure."<sup>9</sup>

Given this generalized, amorphous process of "knowing" Gibraltar, it can then be claimed that we have all, willingly or not, participated in the construction of the "place-myth" of Gibraltar. The concept of "place-myth" would appear to be almost self-explanatory, but it is perhaps worthwhile to trace its outlines in an explanation published in 1991 by the human geographer Rob Shields. Shield's approach is straightforward: starting with the notion of "place-images," Shields suggests that "cultural place-images are [...] left behind in the litter of historical popular cultures: postcards, advertising images, song lyrics, and in the *settings of novels*" (2013: 47, my emphasis). In the course of time, such images of place may even be regarded as "signifiers" of the places themselves – none of us would have any difficulty in applying the concept to a wealth of locations, especially as evidenced in fictional settings. Because of the tendency of images to over- or understate reality, stereotyping of this kind, Shields continues, may result in remarkably inaccurate images of place: stereotypes of all kinds become stereotypes precisely through their relatively stable acceptance as preferred images, and they form in consequence what he terms a "discursive economy" (60-61).

Shields then shifts to a second phase in the process: "collectively [he suggests] a set of place-images forms a place-myth" (61). Such myths are in some ways contradictory to their composite images, since place-myths are subject to a constant shift and change in their composition, as images move in and in of popular fashion. Most interestingly for my present discussion of Gibraltar, Shields also suggests that "opposed groups may succeed in generating antithetical place-myths" (61) – Shields alludes to the contrasting

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<sup>8</sup> For a more conventional history, by a former Governor of Gibraltar, see William G. F. Jackson, while Chris Grocott and Gareth Stockey (2012) provide a concise scholarly account.

<sup>9</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 Feb. 1952, 2.

experiences of different social classes and to the conflicting visions of conquerors and the conquered, but it is easy to extend the applicability of the idea to politically or ideologically divided communities such as Belfast, or the dual naming of Londonderry/Derry, or the monozygotic origins of the dual Cold War versions of the city of Berlin, each of them striving to separate one from the other.

Most striking in the case of Gibraltar since the end of the Second World War is the completeness with which its shifting and fluctuating multicultural population has come to identify itself wholly with the spatial or territorial confines of the peninsula itself. In several referenda designed to test the citizens' desire to unite in some way with the larger mass of Spanish society and Spanish norms, the outcomes have been overwhelmingly in favour of maintaining the dichotomy. Whilst the politically minded may argue that this political voice represents simply a desire to remain "British," the reality is undoubtedly very much more complex. As long ago as in 1948, a British Professor Hayek (qtd in Constantine 2009: 312) noted with some perspicuity that "the town of Gibraltar is little more than the commercial centre an urban agglomeration of nearly 100,000 inhabitants, whose working class suburbs are situated in [the cross-border town of La Línea] Spain." As Constantine has also noted, the curiosity of being "Gibraltarian" resides not only in the constitutional, political, and everyday cultural differences from Spain, but also in the sameness. People live their daily lives within the place-myth expressed by the idea that "we know who we are because we know who we are not," while overlooking their obvious mutual dependence, evidenced by simple facts such as the need for the Gibraltarian at times to live in cheaper accommodation on the other side of the frontier in the Spanish town of La Línea, or the simple economy-driven image of the middle-aged women of La Línea striving to survive abject poverty by smuggling cigarettes beneath their voluminous skirts across the border, from Gibraltar to Spain.<sup>10</sup>

### Remembering Siege in Recent Fiction

It must be emphasized here that there is, as yet, no identifiable canon of Gibraltarian writing in either English or Spanish, or indeed the local *llanito* creole, and, with very few exceptions, there appears to be no formally published anglophone Gibraltarian writing from before the start of the present century.<sup>11</sup> The number of presently active writers can indeed be counted on the fingers of a single hand: Sam Benady and Mary Chiappe's collaborative series of romantic historical "Giovanni Bresciano" crime novels set in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Gibraltar; a collection of allegorical short stories, *The Night Gibraltar Disappeared and Other Stories*, subtitled "(A fictional journey through the void)" (2008), by Francis[co] Oliva; and a growing collection of short and long fiction, by M. (Mark) G. Sanchez. Only Sanchez's work may be seen to be informed by a detailed awareness of colonial and postcolonial literary practices.

All of these writers display an understanding of the potential for siege, but it is, in particular, in the second of Benady and Chiappe's *Bresciano* crime fictions, *Fall of a Sparrow* (2010b),<sup>12</sup> that the authors place their murder mystery within the historical setting of the Great Siege of 1779-1783. The authors display a keen awareness of the harsh realities occasioned by the siege: food shortages and unjust distribution, military brutality, and the brevity of lives endured in colonial poverty, the existence of the military

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Walter Mayr, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Tragic Decline of Gibraltar's Spanish Neighbor," *Der Spiegel*, online English edition, 27 June 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Sam Benady's short story pastiche, *Sherlock Holmes in Gibraltar: The True Solution to the Mystery of the Mary Celeste and the Singular Affair of the Duke of Connaught* (Grendon, UK: Gibraltar Books, 1990) would appear to be one of the exceptions.

<sup>12</sup> Slightly confusingly, this second *Bresciano* fiction, set initially in 1779, is subtitled "Bresciano's first case", while the first novel in the series, *The Murder in Whirligig Lane* (2010), set in 1813, is subtitled "The First Bresciano Mystery."

taking priority over that of the civilian population. The heart of the novel, however, resides in the characterization of the young military recruit Giovanni Bresciano, whose identity is shaped by his hybridity – the son of an English mother and a Gibraltarian father notably of Italian, rather than Spanish, descent. Bresciano's involvement in both spheres of ordinary Gibraltarian life provides him with a view of otherwise inaccessible aspects of his social environment, a duality of vision that the reader willingly engages in and shares. That the choice of time-setting is during the Great Siege is fortuitous, with its focus on the threats to survival facing the British and their colonial subjects, the Gibraltarians, at a mythopoeic moment in their common imperial history.

Benady and Chiappe's remembrance of siege is straightforwardly based in fictional realism, but restricted by the formulaicness of the realist murder mystery plot. In contrast, I would argue – though at greater length than permissible here – Sanchez's deployment in his first volume of stories, *Rock Black: Ten Gibraltarian Stories* (2008),<sup>13</sup> of the memory of siege is far less formulaic, consisting as it does not of his characters' memory of siege so much as of their forgetting, despite their fictional proximity to the end of the recent Francoist blockade. Cognate with Sanchez's own experience of the period, although not immediately autobiographical, the ten stories portray a Gibraltar emerging into a world where border-crossing has become a normality. Gibraltarian identity and security is now imbued with the various protagonists' sense of living as individuals under siege, unsure of their Gibraltarianness, and unable to deal adequately with the openness of the frontier. Thus, in the second story in the sequence, Harry Pozo joins a group of friends on a car-trip across the frontier on a quest to enjoy the cross-border sexuality offered by the brothels of Marbella. For Harry, however, unlike his friends, the quest is fraught with unanswerable questions, his physical existence threatened by leukaemia at the same time as his masculinity is challenged by his sexual inexperience. Another protagonist, Peter Rodriguez, in the seventh story, "Shrink," suffers from depression and makes a cross-border visit to an Algeciras psychiatrist. His treatment, however, is rewarded only with drug-induced forgetfulness: his individual past, besieged by anxieties stimulated by a complexity of personal and communal, deserves no memorialization.

Much of Sanchez's writing is concerned with attempts at breaking out from the severe constraints of a colonial experience that is above all under siege,<sup>14</sup> a besiegement so severe that his protagonists suffer both psychological and physical claustrophobias. What his fictions seem to imply is that the Gibraltarian existing in his (or her?) native domicile will undergo a contradictory process of desiring both security and freedom, a colonial identity that seeks to deny itself by breaking through the historical memory of siege and melding, impossibly, with its other.

Of overriding significance, however, seems to be the extent to which Gibraltarians and (their) others continue to accept and foster the place-myth of Gibraltar as a citadel under siege. In addition to the popularized historical memory of the fourteen (or fifteen) states of siege undergone by Gibraltar since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it may be speculated that siege as such may represent the prevention of border-crossing, a frustration and non-fulfilment of the desire to encounter and interact with alternative locations – or, in the case of Gibraltar and La Línea – with rather similar ways of living and being: after all, a large majority of Gibraltarians speak a localized variety of Andalusian Spanish as their domestic language, and trace their personal origins in terms of migration across the shared frontier. Thus, siege may be easily projected as a highly confusing, and indeed

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<sup>13</sup> The volume first appeared in the form of a fragmented novel and with a slightly different sequence of chapters/stories: *Rock Black 0-10: A Gibraltarian Fiction* (Dewsbury, UK: Rock Scorpion Books, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> See Sanchez's first published novel, *The Escape Artist: A Gibraltarian Novel* (Huntingdon, UK: Rock Scorpion Books, 2013): "a novel about loneliness and broken friendship and what it means to be a Gibraltarian in a rapidly changing world" (cover blurb).

incomprehensible, act of attempted violation of the self, of the home community, and in consequence a stimulator of personal and collective trauma.

As the detail of this article has attempted briefly to suggest, fictional allusions to the historical sieges of Gibraltar may be regarded as symptomatic of a collective, communal state of mind. Most striking, in terms of the popular mythologization of Gibraltar, is the extent to which the historical “facts” of besiegement all (with a recent exception) occurred within a historical period lasting some five hundred years, but ending more than 200 years ago, with the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Equally striking may be the observation that the formal reiteration of that “memory” of siege has only recently begun to acquire a new medium, that of imaginative fiction created by native Gibraltarians who – as Mark Sanchez has emphasized to me in interview – have their own story yet to tell.<sup>15</sup>

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## BETWEEN EXPERIMENT AND TRADITION

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### *The Modernity of the Augustans\**

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My title may sound unduly provocative since the Augustans looked backward rather than forward, sought their models in the literature of Rome, and grounded their standards in the tried values of the past. Yet I do not intend to deal in paradoxes; my purpose is to show how much the Augustans have to say to us that is relevant to our time. One of my motivations for choosing this subject is my surprise at finding many undergraduates reluctant to turn to these writers, though I must add that when they do turn to them, they usually find them of absorbing interest. Their initial reluctance may be due to the persistence in secondary-school textbooks of those prejudices against the eighteenth century which were still shared by some college teachers when I was a student in the 1930s. When labeled “the Age of Reason,” the period seemed to promise few delights to twentieth century readers, whose confidence in *animal rationale* had been shattered by

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Sanchez, Interview with the author, London, 12 May 2012.