‘Unsettled’ and ‘Unsettling’ Women: Migrant Voices after the War

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This essay is concerned with the migrant voices of Phyllis Shand Allfrey, Rumer Godden,

Attia Hosain, Doris Lessing and Kamala Markandaya in the late 1940s and the 1950s.

The 1950s is often viewed as an inauspicious time in English letters with the narrowness or

contraction of English literary culture loosely corresponding to Britain’s diminishing status

as a world power after the Second World War. High Modernism had ended with the death

of Woolf (1941) and Yeats (1939) but many of the critically acclaimed works of postmodern

ism were still to come. Authors such as Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and John Wain chose to

accentuate their Englishness and the interest in cosmopolitan and European ideas, in Africa

and the ‘primitive’ which had characterised literary modernism earlier in the century went

out of fashion. Indeed Jed Esty talks of ‘the inner logic and stylistic contours of a

major literary culture caught in the act of becoming minor’ (2004, p.3) and John Updike

refers to the reputation of the British novel of this time as ‘winsomely trivial’: ‘If the Post

-War British novel features on the International stage as winsomely trivial, Kingsley Amis

must bear part of the blame.’ (1998, p.293) As Marina Mackay and Lyndsey Stonebridge

put it, ‘By the time that England had shrunk to the size of a campus novel, the novel (much

like Britain itself) was in dire need of rescue from its own parochialism.’(2007, p.1).

Even though Britain had escaped the public purges of the left under Joseph McCarthy

in the United States, the country experienced the cultural dimensions of the Cold War and

these were inseparable from its political ramifications. Scepticism was widespread. So was

the suspicion of all modes of intense feeling, idealism or commitment, whether religious or

secular. Many writers and intellectuals consciously refused to repeat what they saw as the

mistakes of the 1930s (usually equating such mistakes with Auden and the poets of his cir

cle who had publicly disowned their pre-war radicalism) and refused to espouse ‘causes’.

As Sylvia Townsend Warner, who still adhered to her socialist political convictions after the

war and wrote her last novel, *The Flint Anchor* in 1954, put it, ‘We had fought, we had re

treated, we were betrayed, and are now misinterpreted.’ (1978, quoted in Rattenbury,

1982, p. 47).

But this is not the whole picture. In her autobiography *Walking in The Shade* Doris

Lessing vividly recollects her early days as a young writer in Bohemian London and

the late 1940s and 1950s as a time of idealism, hope and willingness to accept personal

responsibility for the state of the world on the part of colonial writers like herself who had

either brought their political radicalism with them from overseas or were politicised by the

radical networks they encountered in the metropole. While these ‘unsettled’ artists and

intellectuals differ, they shared the desire to turn their backs on the philistinism and

repressiveness, of their country of origin and to find a metropolitan reading public for

their work. As Susheila Nasta suggests, escape was ‘frequently seen as an important step

in the process of decolonisation, exile not beginning but ending with departure and

representing a turning-point in what had previously been a negative cycle of fragmentation

and diaspora’ (2005, p.574). Lessing writes; the ‘essence of this journey was that it was

away from her[Lessing’s mother – my insertion], from the family, and from that dreadful

provincial country Southern Rhodesia.’(1997, p.3).

Like Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, Nancy Cunard and Sylvia Townsend Warner,

who were all still writing in the 1940s and 1950s, but whose politics had fallen out of

favour, several of the women writers I discuss were politically on the left. Lessing had joined

the Communist Party in Africa and made immediate contact with other socialists in London.

Attia Hosain was influenced by the left-wing socialists in the Congress Party who supported

the Communist Party of India and was closely associated with radicals such as the novelist

Mulk Raj Anand of the Indian Progressive Writers Association, which influenced aspiring

new authors in India. In London Phyllis Shand Allfrey had worked as personal secretary for

Naomi Mitchison, joined the Labour Party, campaigned against Franco’s Spain, writing for

the left wing weekly *Tribune*, between 1941 and 1944. *Tribune* published her story,

‘Uncle Rufus’ (1942, p.18).

Kamala Markandaya and Rumer Godden were liberal politically and strong upholders

of freedom of speech and human rights. Though much of their subject matter, exilic

childhood for example, was unfamiliar to the British readers, their writing was often

traditional and naturalistic. Lessing, for one, was a staunch admirer of nineteenth-century

realism (1974, pp.3-21): ‘I was writing Martha Quest, a conventional novel, though the

demand then was for experimental novels.’(1998, p.32) Allfrey, Lessing, Markandaya, and

Hosain depicted fictional worlds that separate and conjoin the colonial past and

metropolitan present. The relationship between colony and metropole was essentially

symbiotic. Lessing, Hosain and Markandaya, not only experienced different ways of living

in London but helped to broaden the nation’s cultural horizons through their writing,

imaginative and discursive. Hosain’s *Cooking the Indian Way* (1967), for example, was

an instant best seller encouraging the British to cook with unfamiliar ingredients and to

venture beyond their traditionally insular cuisine.

Lessing grew up in Southern Rhodesia**,** a self-governing British Crown colony. After a

childhood on the veldt, a modicum of formal education, and a short disastrous early mar

riage, Lessing left her first husband and their children to marry a German Marxist, Gottfried

Lessing. In 1948 she moved to England with the manuscript of her first novel in her luggage.

In addition to *The Grass is Singing* (1950) Lessing published three volumes of short stories

set in Africa; *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* (1951*), The Sun Between Their Feet* (1954)and

*The Habit of Loving* (1957) as well as the first volume of her *Children of Violence* sequence:

*Martha Quest,* (1953) and the sequels, *A Proper Marriage* (1954) *and Landlocked*

(1958) in the 1950s.

Lessing’s achievement in her ‘African period’ is to illuminate the cracks and fissures of a dehumanising social system and to show the consequences of economic injustice and racism in the colonies to a white readership in Britain largely ignorant about racial segregation abroad; ‘Indignation about the colour bar in Africa had not yet become part of the furniture of the progressive conscience’ (Lessing, 1973, p.9). *The Grass is Singing*, ‘execrated in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia’(1977, p.3) dramatizes the deteriorating state of mind of a poor white woman, Mary Turner, whose isolation, emotional desperation, and increasing physical and mental dependency on a black houseboy culminate in a nervous breakdown.

Lessing’s African writings explore the tensions between rich and impoverished settlers and between the Afrikaners and the English; liberals and racists, black servants and white masters, young and old, educated and illiterate are all depicted in socio economic systems over which they have little understanding or control: ‘Africa belongs to the Africans; The sooner they take it back, the better. But -- a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it’, she wrote in 1956. (1956, p.11) As the title *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* intimates, much of her short fiction is concerned with how Europeans can live in the African veldt while acknowledging the rights of the indigenous peoples. Stories are sometimes told from the perspective of adolescents who occupy a marginal position in the adult world. Their lack of adult prejudice allows the author to develop a critical distance through her control of the child’s shifting point of view. The news that the huts where Chief Mshlanga lived have been demolished, his proud people moved to a government reservation, and their fertile land reserved for white settlement, is related from the point of a view of a shocked observer in mourning for their loss in ‘The Old Chief Mshlanga’. Yet it was preconceptions derived from English reading books that initially prevented this same child-narrator from developing a healthy life enhancing-response to the natural African landscape around her: ‘Because of this, for many years, it was the veld that seemed unreal; the sun was a foreign sun, and the wind spoke a strange language. The black people on the farm were as remote as the trees and the rocks’ (1951, p.8). In ‘No Witchcraft for Sale’ the menial status of a kitchen-boy contrasts with the remarkable powers he holds as a traditional healer. When he refuses to disclose the whereabouts of a plant that can heal venomous snake bites to a representative of a pharmaceutical company he demonstrates the importance of ancestral knowledge that is not 'for sale' to the white man.

*Martha Quest* is a feminist coming-of-age story about a young woman defined by her rebelliousness and questioning intelligence. Lessing situates her protagonist’s many predicaments carefully in their social and political context emphasising from the outset that Martha’s restlessness is symptomatic of her age, nationality, time, and gender: ‘She was adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy; British, and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and, therefore inescapably beset with problems of race and class; female, and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past.’ (Lessing, 1952, p.20)

The London to which Lessing, Markandaya, Hosain, and Godden in the first instance, migrated after the war was a grim bomb-damaged city wreathed in heavy fog whose residents were experiencing chronic shortages of essential goods and rationing. Some areas of the city were in ruins. Lessing remembers there were ‘No cafes. No good restaurants. Clothes were still “austerity” from the war, dismal and ugly. Everyone was indoors by ten, and the streets were empty’ (1998, pp.4-5). Postwar Britain was learning to adjust to the loss of its pre-war status as a major world power. While the Festival of Britain and the reconstruction of Coventry Cathedral symbolized the revival of the nation’s intellectual and cultural life economic recovery was slow and heavily reliant on The Marshall Plan and massive loans from United States.

Yet the attractions of London for the aspirant writer far outweighed the drabness of the physical ambience. While the market for new poetry and fiction in their own countries was severely restricted, public curiosity about the new migrants and the colonial past was fuelled by Britain’s thriving postwar publishing industry and by perspicacious literary agents with promising debut novelists on their lists. Many books by authors from the Commonwealth were issued by prestigious London publishing houses such as Michael Joseph who published Lessing, Macmillan (Rumer Godden), and Chatto and Windus, (Attia Hosain). *A Morning at the Office* (1950) by the unknown Guyanese writer, Edgar Mittelholze**r** was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press. In her memoir S*tet* Diana Athill writes that ‘For a time during the fifties and early sixties, it was it was probably easier for a black writer to get his book accepted by a London publisher, and kindly reviewed thereafter, than it was for a young white person’ (2000, p.103).

The position of London as a social and cultural haven for English speaking exiles and émigrés questions the extent to which it is possible to separate English literature from the rest of the world as early twentieth-century globalization destabilized, deterritoralised, and decolonised Englishness. The worldwide influence of the BBC with its Home, Third and Eastern Services drawing upon Commonwealth contributors (its mission: ‘nation shall speak peace unto nation’)broke down distinctionsbetween metropole and periphery andenabled black and Asian voices to resonate simultaneously in Britain and transnationally. ‘Caribbean Voices’, first broadcast in 1943, which Una Marson was instrumental in getting on the airwaves, acted as a cultural magnet for West Indian poets and novelists. As Laurence Breiner puts it, ‘the existence of the program implied not only the respectability of writing by West Indians, but the respectability of their spoken language as well’ (1998, p.91).

Elspeth Huxley, whose best-selling memoir *The Flame Trees of Tikha* (1959) was based on her life among white settlers on her father’s coffee plantation in Kenya. Huxley worked for the BBC's war propaganda department and became the liaison officer between the BBC and the Colonial Office. From 1952 to 1959 she served on the BBC's General Advisory Council. The Eastern Service of the BBC, later integrated into the BBC World Service, was an important forum for South Asian and British journalists, writers and intellectuals to collaborate on programmes such as ‘Through Eastern Eyes and ‘Open Letters’. Both Kamala Markandaya and Attia Hosain found work in broadcast journalism. Markandaya was scheduled to chair ‘Asian Club’, a radio discussion programme. Hosain presented a woman's programme for the Indian Section of the Eastern Service of the BBC from 1949. She was involved with the English regional service which broadcast to India, Ceylon and Pakistan and with programmes made in Urdu in Pakistan and in Hindi for the Indian civil service.

In 1948 the SS *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury carrying some 500 passengers including Jamaicans who had served in the war. Many settled in London and the Midlands taking jobs essential to Britain’s postwar recovery and initiating the mass wave of postwar immigration from the Commonwealth. As James Proctor puts it, ‘it is important to distinguish between 1948 as an *initiatory* rather than an *originatory* moment, in terms of black settlement in Britain’ (2000, p.3). since this erases the Black British presence beforehand, and privileges Jamaican male settlement, as well as concealing other contradictory narratives of migration from the Caribbean. Anna Snaith has recently discussed the critical neglect of two published poets and political activists: the Indian Sarojini Naidu and Una Marson, the pioneering Jamaican writer who moved to London in 1932. Marson worked for the BBC and produced the first black theatrical play in London in 1936 (Snaith, 2014, p.).

Jean Rhys, living in obscurity until rediscovered in 1958, had been part of the modernist avant-garde presence in Paris and London in the 1930s. Her novel *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) had dramatized the ‘voyage in’ of Anna Morgan a young white immigrant from the Caribbean.  *Voyage in the Dark* (1934). Her magnum opus, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) was still to come. Women’s voices were a structuring absence in the literature produced by the ‘first generation’ of migrants from the Caribbean in the 1940s and 1950s. The fiction of George Lamming and Edward Kamau Brathwaite from Barbados, Samuel Selvon, C.L.R James, and V.S Naipaul from Trinidad, and Wilson Harris from Guyana lacked a strong focus on domestic interiors, gendered and family relationships. Beryl Gilroy, although living and teaching in England in the 1950s, had yet to publish. Much later, Andrea Levy, the daughter of a Windrush immigrant, was to have an international best seller with *Small Island* (2004). *Small Island* dramatizes the postwar immigrant experience in the relationships between Hortense, a teacher with great expectations of the ‘motherland’, her Jamaican husband, Gilbert, an ex-serviceman, their English landlady Queenie, and her husband, Bernard, who returns from the war in the east to find unwelcome strangers living in his house.

Like Rhys, whom she first met in England in 1936, and corresponded with intermittently, Phyllis Shand Allfrey was of white descent, born on the French speaking Caribbean island of Dominica. Allfrey’s father, Francis Byam Berkeley Shand, was the Crown Attorney. Her family, whose descendants included the Empress Josephine and Thomas Warner, who landed in St Kitts in 1624, belonged to the island’s slave owning plantocracy. Allfrey left Dominica for Britain, marrying an Englishman, Robert Allfrey in 1930.

Allfrey wrote *The Orchid House* in Sussex and published it in 1953 in Dominica. In the novel three sisters return to their island home to care for their enfeebled father whose drug-induced physical and mental deterioration is indicative of more general decline of the white elite. In his prolonged absence the women derive strength from their mother: ‘But with or without men they were Madam’s daughters and that means to say they could be sufficient unto themselves’ (1953, p.12). The character most resembling Allfrey is Joan, who returns from England determined to tackle the power and corruption of the press, the landowners, and the Catholic Church. Working closely with Baptiste, son of her mother’s black servant, Joan launches a scheme to start a new political alliance for the starving unemployed labourers of the island. The conservatism and fatalism of the black first-person narrator, Lally, the family nursemaid and confidante, countermands Joan’s desire for radical change: ‘The gentlemen over in Whitehall believed that they were governing our island. This was not the case. Father Toussaint and Marse Rufus were the real rulers. People challenged them now and again, but those people always lost’ (1953, p.194). The novel is centred on that rare figure in English fiction, a politicised woman: *The Orchid House* depicts the idealistic attempts of black and white characters to work on a basis of equality: ‘I wish you wouldn’t walk three paces behind me, and keep on saying, ‘“Yes, Miss Joan”, in that reverent way, ’(1953, p.153). Joan admonishes Baptiste. The newspaper sub-editor, Uncle Rufus, is based on a Ralph Nicholls, who, having fathered seven black babies and married their mother, espoused the cause of the tropical fruit labourers: ‘And after all’, writes Allfrey, ‘white liberal-minded people merely talked against the colour bar, Uncle Rufus had taken practical steps to break it down’(1953, p.143).

Two years after *The Orchid House* was published, Allfrey and the black trade unionist E.C. Loblack jointly founded the island’s first organised political party, the Dominica Labour Party.Allfrey, then one of the most powerful women on the island, was sent to Trinidad in 1958 where she was Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in the short-lived Federal Government of the West Indies. However, Allfrey fell out of favour as the mood on the island changed, eventually being expelled from the party she had helped to found, and dying in relative obscurity. As David Dabydeen suggests, the ‘substantial reason for her invisibility is her whiteness’ (2016). Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out that Allfrey herself ‘began to acknowledge whiteness as a problem’ for the first time, troubled by the emphasis on ‘blackness as the only possible source of West Indian literary authenticity’ in cultural exchanges (1996, p.255). She quotes Allfrey as saying; ‘“I sigh thinking how during Federal days I believed that West Indies could be the best small nation of *mixed* people in the world. After all, I have been here for 365 years since Thomas Warner came. *Then* I strolled to the Trinidad Library and found my one novel on a shelf for ‘white people’s fiction’” (1996, p.255).

The Partition of India created the two independent states of India and Pakistan. As Attia Hosain notes; ‘In 1947, earlier than expected, and perhaps accelerated by the momentum of the war itself, came Independence and the Partition of the subcontinent of India. Together with the raising of the national flags and celebrations came the enforced migrations of more millions than ever before, of massacres and infinite loss’ (2001, p.194). Trekking to safety across newly delineated borders; Hindus and Sikhs seeking refuge in India and Muslims fleeing from Hindu-dominated India into Pakistan, fugitives of all religious faiths and none found themselves caught up in scenes of communal violence, rapes, looting, arson, vendettas, abductions and forced conversions. For many exiles like Hosain, being ‘in London did not lessen the anguish. It sharpened it. There was no family from which to draw strength, no advice beyond rumour and cold definition of statistics’ (2001, p.194). As Homi Bhabha argues, ‘literature haunts history’s more public face, forcing it to reflect on itself in the displacing, even distorting, image of art’(1997, p.454). Both Markandaya and Hosain write of the Partition in their fiction, sometimes elliptically, but Hosain’s only novel, the elegaic *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) set in a Taluqdar family home in the undivided India of her formative years, speaks plangently of the sense of loss. As Annette Burton puts it, this novel is ‘in short, a historical argument about the impossibility of dwelling comfortably at home in the wake of the unspeakable violence of the past’(2003, p.106).

Rumer Godden was born in Sussex but had grew up in Narayanganj, a town on the Brahmaputra river in Bengal where her father managed a steamship company. Godden dramatized the British retreat from India in a sequence of novels *Black Narcissus* (1939), *Breakfast with the Nikolides* (1942), *The River* (1946) and *Kingfishers Catch Fire* (1953). From her first and most successful, *Black Narcissus,* Godden makes clear the futility of transposing alien Christian ideas to India in the ill-fated attempt of a few English nuns to establish a convent and school in a disused palace. When a wealthy young Indian the nuns have befriended seduces a convent educated nubile young peasant girl, the erotically suffused ambience of the convent where the lovers meet intimates the nuns’ transience. They prepare to depart and the monsoon rains wash away all traces of their existence. Godden’s semi-autobiographical *Kingfisher’s Catch Fire* is concerned with the reception of European values and practices more generally. Her liberal idealistic heroine, Sophie Barrington Moore abandons the well- intentioned plans to set up house in the snow-capped mountains of Kashmir. The simple good taste of her home is lost on the local inhabitants and a litany of misunderstandings with both the Hindus and Moslems culminates in a failed attempt to poison her food by a disaffected family retainer.

Godden was at pains to distance herself from the insularity and narrow-mindedness of the Anglo Indian community. But even those writers who regarded themselves as progressive in English domestic politics like George Orwell, or E.M. Forster, whom Godden admired, found it difficult to envisage or a time when their presence in India would be neither necessary nor welcome. Godden is no exception. The sense of time running out for the British in India was inescapable by 1946. But Godden is not an explicitly political writer. There is no mention of the impending Partition in *The River;* no sense of foreboding, unrest, or threat. Instead, the river with its ‘tides and weather warnings, with steamers, launches, flats, motor-boats, any kind of boats ’(2012, p.xi) carries the metaphorical freight of departure. The family friend, Captain John, has been ‘unbearably hurt’ as a POW but there is only one fleeing reference to the Second World War in the novel (‘they had not been sent away out of the tropics because there was a war; this war, the last war, any war, it does not matter which war’ (2012, p.xi). But as her biographer, Anne Chisolm notes, ‘it is impossible to read *The River* now without relating its theme to the realization among countless British families that their life in India was over, that the ever-rolling stream of time was carrying them away’(1998, p.198).

Godden’s focus is on the contradictions and tensions in the daily lives of the English for whom India is home. She was a multiculturist *avant la lettre* and the characters in her Indian fictions, her children in particular, often grope for an alternative perception of what being English in India might be like. The adolescent girls through whom *The River* and *Breakfast with the Nikolides* are focalised, share the author’s fascination in multi-faith dialogue, Indian spirituality and mysticism. In *The River* Harriet and her brothers and sisters ‘kept Diwali because it is an irresistible festival and no one could live in the country in which it is held and not be touched by it’ (1946, p.10).

The themes of her Indian ‘coming of age’ narratives are the loss of innocence, the European’s expulsion from Eden, and the duplicitous behaviour of adults. Godden’s vulnerable, questioningadolescent girls; *Emily in Breakfast with the Nicolides,* Harriet in *The River* and Sophie’s daughter, Theresa in *Kingfishers Catch Fire,*  must live with the effects of adult sexuality, self-centredness and self-delusion upon their own lives. Children are habituated to the beauty and lushness of the Indian landscape but also exposed to the dangers of cobra stings and rabied dogs. The natural world that envelopes them is depicted knowingly and without sentiment: ‘Birds are little live landmarks and more truthful than flowers; they cannot be transplanted, nor grafted, nor turned blue and pink’ (2012, p.31).

Like Lessing’s child-narrator in her story, ‘The Old Chief Mshlnga’ or the adolescent Martha Quest, Godden’s girls are endowed with discernment beyond their years. As the chilling reasons for her parent’s estrangement (domestic violence and marital rape) are revealed, Emily is sent to their neighbours, the Nikolides, returning home to discover that that her pet dog has been killed by her emotionally distant mother in a thinly veiled revenge upon the country she detests and the daughter with whom she has little rapport. In *The River* Harriet is stymied by Latin nouns and verbs: ‘It is strange that the first Latin declension and conjugation should be of love and war’ (2012,p.3). ‘War and love. How many children, wondered Harriet, yawning had had to learn those’(2012, p.7). When Bogey, her little brother, is killed by a cobra, and a grieving Harriet -- guilt-stricken because she kept her knowledge of the serpent in the garden to herself -- is inexorably and inappropriately drawn to Captain John, physically and emotionally, the lessons of love and war are learned and childhood innocence is destroyed forever.

In common with Lessing and Allfrey, Godden cannot be extricated from a history of white privilege. To understand the lacunae in her Indian writing she needs to be situated in a political and literary context in which support of the British presence in India had prevailed across the entire political, literary and cultural spectrum for centuries. Stephen Slemon describes white women colonial writers as ‘unsettled’ or ‘unsettling women,’ whose problematic speaking position textualizes the inescapable contradictions of complicity and resistance: ‘The Second-World writer, the Second-World text, that is, have always been complicit in colonialism’s territorial appropriation of land and voice, and agency, and this has been their inescapable condition even at those moments when they have promulgated their most strident and most spectacular figures of post-colonial dissent’(1990, p. 38). As Phyllis Lassner puts it, their ‘in-between’ state enables the white woman writer to ‘see English political and social culture from a critical distance’ while ‘sometimes struggling and then failing to find a place for themselves within it or outside’ (2004, p.12). The ability to describe and critique European privilege and folly situates these women between the Scylla of their failure to represent the consciousness of the colonised majority and the Charybdis that to do so would inevitably serve their own purposes as white women.

Nayantara Saghal, Attia Hosain and Kamala Markandaya were member of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, educated, widely-travelled Indian elite. Hosain was accepted and welcomed in the citadels of English culture such as the West-End Theatre, and by the London intelligentsia, inviting friends such as Leonard Woolf, Henry Green and William Sansom to her home. Her work as a respected cultural commentator committed to improving cross cultural understanding took her to the heart of established English institutions such as the British Council and the BBC. Sahgal, author of the memoir, *P*r*ison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), belonged to the Nehru-Ghandi dynasty. Her uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, was India’s first Prime Minister, her cousin, Indira, the third. Her mother was Vijaya Lakshami Pandit, Ambassador to the UN, and supported until his death in Lucknow prison in 1944 by Sahgal’s father, Ranjit Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, a classical scholar whose temper was aroused by the ‘“purdah mentality”’ or ‘any view which countenanced the seclusion or repression of women or denial of privileges to them’(1954, p.43). Mahatma Ghandi, ‘Bapu’ or ‘Gandhiji’, with whose assassination *Prison and Chocolate Cake* ends, was a loved, if infrequent, presence in the family home.

*Prison and Chocolate Cake* is an account of growing up with both parents committed to the Ghandian ideals of non-violent civil disobedience during India’s freedom struggle in the 1940s: ‘Our growing up was India’s growing up into India’s political maturity – a different kind of political maturity from any that the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace’(1954, p.32). The ‘Quit India’ movement (1942) when anti-British feeling was at its height also forms the backdrop of Markandaya’s second novel, *Some Inner Fury* (1955) centred on Mira, a young middle class Indian journalist who becomes politicised during the nationalist struggle and falls in love with an English civil servant.

Born a Brahman, the highest caste of Indian society, Markandaya accompanied her father, an official on the Indian railways, on his travels around India, England and Europe before reading History at Madras University. Like Mira, in *Some Inner Fury* she worked in India as a journalist. In 1948 she migrated to London and married an Englishman, Bernard Taylor. Less well known than Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K.Narayan, Markandaya was among the first Indian novelists to write in English about life in southern India - for British readers very different from the more familiar India of the Raj. She also writes about the plight of the rural peasantry, and the conflict between tradition and modernity at a time of rapid industrialisation and economic change. Marriage is the context in which Markandaya explores differing attitudes to western rationalism and Indian mysticism and the underlying causes of marital disharmony in *A Silence of Desire* (1960). Suspecting his wife of infidelity, Dandeker, an anglicised government clerk, uncovers Sarojini’s clandestine visits to a ‘Swami’ or Hindu faith healer whom he initially believes to be a charlatan. But when the gynaecological operation to which Sarojini eventually agrees is successful, he undergoes a change of heart, realizing the importance that faith and spirituality exert in his wife’s physical wellbeing.

Markandaya’s first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) was a global best seller, translated into seventeen languages (Benson, 2005 p.965). With its focalization on an intelligent impoverished mother-figure, it provides an unusually sympathetic woman-centred perspective on the feminization of rural poverty. Issues such as desertion, childcare, illegitimacy, domestic violence and infertility confront Rukmani and her daughter Irawaddy, for whom prostitution is depicted as a considered response to destitution.

*Nectar in a Sieve* is narrated retrospectively in the first-person by the long suffering child-bride of a tenant farmer whose traditional way of life is destroyed by the arrival of a tannery which transforms the village socially and economically. Her two oldest sons obtain work in the tannery but are dismissed for inciting industrial unrest and take flight to Ceylon. Her fourth is murdered by the tannery guards for the alleged theft of an animal hide. Abandoned by her husband because of her childlessness, Irawaddy returns home, opting for prostitution to feed the family.

The peasant life that Markandaya depicts *In Nectar in the Sieve* life is an unbroken cycle of hunger, toil, and deprivation. Embodying the traditional virtues of wifely patience and fortitude, idealised by the Goddess Sita, whose selfless devotion led her voluntarily to share her husband’s many years in exile, Rukmani accepts her lot: ‘Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons of the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?’(1954, p.153).

As a vegetable seller and letter-writer Rukmani contributes to the economic wherewithal of the large and at times fractious family. Her six sons are ironically of little help to her; absent when needed in her old age. After the monsoon rains have destroyed their rice harvest the starving husband and wife depart for the city but fall prey to robbers and thieves in the temple where they seek shelter. Returning to the village the landless Nathan dies leaving Rukmani dependent on a street urchin and Dr Kenny, the one European outsider in the village whose presence is essentially benevolent.

In contrast to Samuel Selvon, who was admired for the naïve authenticity of his West Indian peasants’ uses of the vernacular on the streets of the capital city in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Markandaya depicts her uneducated Indian peasants with a sophistication that does not self-consciously draw attention to the novelty of their spoken language and owes much to the influence of English Romanticism. The title *Nectar in a Sieve* comes from the last two lines of the sonnet ’Work without Hope’ (1825) by the Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge: ‘Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,/ And hope without an object cannot live.’

*Nectar in a Sieve* critiques the industrialization which is synonymous with westernisation. The tannery bring harm and dissension with its noise and pollution, pushing up prices of foodstuffs, driving peasants off the land, and disrupting conventional hierarchies: its managers are conspicuous outsiders in their European dress. At the same time, the overflowing cities provide little refuge for the landless, the desperate, and the deracinated. In the fate of Rukmani and Nathan Markandaya illustrates the hopelessness of placing one’s faith in honest toil in a capitalist society with little social justice or respect for workers’ rights and where globalisation is shown to work massively to the benefit of some but not others.

Like all diasporic groups the Indian diaspora was riven with hierarchies that intersect in complicated fashion with the host and homeland cultures. As *women* Hosain and Markandaya were living on the margins of their societies (in India as well as England) in relation to their race and expectations about the behavior of their sex. Both defied Indian convention and contracted marriages for love; Hosain to her first cousin Ali Bahadur ‘Sonny’ Habibullah and Markandaya to an Englishman, Bernard Taylor. Cosmopolitan, educated to degree level, and to some extent anglicised, they nonetheless remained closely attuned to the politics of the Indian subcontinent, to which they returned on occasion, writing sensitively about the sensibilities and subjectivities of women in India and Pakistan; whether the simple child brides in Hosain’s stories ‘The Street of the Moon’ and ‘The Daughter –in-Law’ or the stylish women from India’s expanding urban professional middle classes, for example, the journalist Roshan in *Some Inner Fury*.

Hosain, a feminist committed to equal rights, who attended the 1933 All-Indian Women's Conference, was particularly sympathetic to women who have modernity thrust upon them involuntarily, like the perplexed young bride in ‘The First Party’. Markandaya’s depiction of a literate loyal resourceful peasant woman in *Nectar in a Sieve* has acquired the status of a literary classic. Their repossessing the idea of India as home while living in London threw the old models of metropolitan core and imperial periphery into crisis. As Simon Gikandi contends, *Englishness*, Englishness emerges in the space between metropole and colony, between the centre and the periphery, and in response to difference.(1996, p.x, xii) ‘Colonials, the children or grandchildren of the far-flung Empire, arrived in England with expectations created by literature’(Lessing, 1997,p.22). But migrant writing revitalised British writing, reshaped its contours, and transformed the imperial capital’s sense of its identity. Susheila Nasta suggests that ‘Ironically, perhaps, it was through the encounter with London that it became possible to inscribe a more fully realised picture of the world back home – to depict the complex background to a history of racial admixture, cultural dislocation and economic exploitation’(2005, p.574).

Hosain was born in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh where her English educated aristocratic Muslim family had lauded over vast feudal estates for generations. Her father, Sheikh Shahid Husain Kidwai, was a close associate of Motilal Nehru, father of Jawahral. Hosain, a secular intellectual, became the first woman from a Taluqdar family to graduate from the University of Lucknow. A secular intellectual, she chose to live in England largely because she found it impossible to contemplate living in the Islamic republic of Pakistan. *Phoenix Fled and Other Short Stories,* in which she deals suggestively with the violence of the Partition, in both the title story and ‘After the Storm’, was published by Chattto and Windus in 1953. As Lakshmi Holmström notes, the ‘influence of The Progressive Writers is everywhere’, apparent, in Hosain’s preoccupation with the wretched of the earth, poverty and exploitation. ‘But almost equally, the perspective of the responsible *taluqdar* broods over the work, highlighting certain (inherited) obligations and responsibilities’ (1999, p.19).

In her introduction to the Virago edition, Anita Desai suggests that Hosain is ‘reproducing whether consciously or not, the Persian literary style and mannerism she was taught when young and reading her prose brings one as close as it is possible, in the English language to the Urdu origins and Persian inspiration’(1988, pp.xiv-xv). As Desai notes, the stories are often concerned with traditional notions of *Izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame). In ‘Gossamer Thread’ an unnamed husband who prides himself on his books and progressive politics refuses shelter to a Marxist friend seeking refuge from the police. Sanctuary is offered to the fugitive by his simple uneducated wife who demonstrates that honour and decency matter more than protestations of progressive ideals. In ‘Time is Unredeemable’ Bano contracts a hurriedly arranged marriage with a reluctant husband about to sail to England. In pleasurable anticipation of his return she invests in the trappings of modernity, acquires a new coat, make- up, and English lessons to find that the consequences of his long absence abroad is dissatisfaction with her naïve attempts to please. ‘The First Party’ is concerned with ‘laija’or modesty. A young bride kept in purdah is taken to a party where she feels a ‘sick horror at the way the men held the women, at the closeness of their bodies, their vulgar suggestive movements’ (1953, p.21). The realization that her husband is one of the violators of her own sense of modesty reinforces her belief in the rightness of what she has been taught to hold dear while her understanding that her life is inseparable from his reduces her to confusion and despair.

The Nationality Act of 1948 extended rights of residence to colonials and London became a mecca for the poor and dispossessed fleeing from poverty in the Caribbean and escaping the human consequences of the Partition. Writing in the *Independent* in 1988, Hosain recollects the terrible ‘stories of massacres and migration, of tragedies and sorrows’ heard from afar. The ‘highest wall, even if invisible, divided my brothers, my relations, my friends. Only in England could they meet’. .. The realities of exile were harsh. Protective layers of privilege, of family name and relationships nurtured through generations were stripped away’(1988). Yet for all the political and economic troubles in the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent, and even the rigid racial divisions in Southern Africa, which Lessing’s prose eloquently evokes, the socially privileged women I have discussed lived in Britain by choice rather than necessity, sheltered by their elite status; anchored to their adoptive country by husbands, children, and lovers, sustained by the cultural and literary networks they helped to create.

These women were enabled to participate fully in British cultural and intellectual life because they were part of the postwar globalization of the economy, communications, transportation, education, and culture, not rebels against it. While the reality of diasporic living could be loneliness, separation and exile, the metropole also represented new horizons, new freedoms, and new opportunities for professional recognition and fulfilment.

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